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Signing With Your Baby: Signing and Babysitters

By Monica Beyer

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Imagine this: You come to pick up your baby from her day-care after a long day at work or after a quick run to the store. Expecting to find a delighted baby, you're greeted by your child's frustrated caregiver and your fussy infant. "What does this mean?" the babysitter asks, rotating her fists. You unhappily realize that your baby has been trying to ask for a changed diaper for the last hour and her caregiver didn't understand the sign she was using.

Some parents who sign with their babies are stay-at-home-mothers, while some moms work outside the home. Working presents a unique situation because your baby likely goes to a babysitter for a certain amount of time during the day and he or she may not be aware that you sign with your baby. Even SAHM's can understand the problems that may arise when they leave their babies in the care of a grandmother or favorite aunt for a night out or a baby-free grocery-shopping event.

My husband cares for the children during the day while I'm at school, and he works at night while I'm home. So, I am not intimately familiar with the concerns of those who use outside help on a full-time basis. I do, however, understand how it can be a big concern for those trying to establish signing with the baby and are unsure of how daycare will affect their efforts.

Michelle, located in the UK, put her daughter Rio into full-time day-care at the age of 8 months. "I had mentioned from day one that I was teaching her to sign," she said. "The nursery were very interested in what I was doing and Rio's two main carers borrowed the book and video to watch before she started there full time so that they had an insight into what she was doing." Her experience was a positive one because she had caregivers who were open-minded and positive about baby signing. "On the whole I found that there was a growing interest and very positive approach to baby signing," she said.

Gill, also from the UK, is getting ready to put her 2-year-old daughter Meadow in a day-care setting two days a week. As Meadow is an established signer and no longer a young baby, her concerns are less about the care providers using signs with Meadow and more about Meadow communicating with other children. "We've decided that we won't show the nursery anything more than HELP and a couple of other important signs," she said. "She's 2 years old now and will be in a group of 2- and 3-year-olds

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who she will interact with, but they won't be using signs."

Hints for consistency between home and day-care:

Let your sitter know from the very beginning that you are signing with your baby.

Demonstrate the signs your baby is likely to use.

Bring along a sign language book or something similar that you can leave with the sitter each day for reference (the SWYB quick reference guide is great for this).

Let your sitter know which signs you're working on and tell her how to use them so your baby can learn new signs at the sitter's too.

Keep the lines of communication open between you and your child's care giver, and invite questions at every opportunity.

With these ideas in mind, baby sitters and care givers will be an added benefit in your child's sign language communication.

Monica Beyer is the mother of two sons and has been signing with her younger son for over 1 year. Visit her website at <http://www.signingbaby.com> or email her at monica@signingbaby.com

Signing With Your Baby: Helpful Hints

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While there aren't any solid rules regarding signing with your baby, I've had enough experience signing with my own child that I can pass along some helpful hints.

Be consistent. Use the sign the same way every time for the same action or object. This will help your baby become familiar with the sign and she will be able to sign it back to you sooner.

Be happy. Frowning and bored voices will not make a baby eager to sign.

Be open to interpretation. Babies will not always make a sign correctly the first time they sign it, just like they won't speak a word correctly the first time they speak it. Keep signing the word the correct way and your baby will soon grow more accurate.

Be open to suggestion. Sometimes a baby will create a sign for herself. Feel free to continue using it, and applaud her creativity.

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Be praising. Act excited when the baby uses a sign correctly, and let your baby know how wonderful you think he is.

Be expressive. Use your face and body in addition to your hands. You can also say the word as you sign it.

Be patient. Babies can take weeks or even months before they make their first sign.

Most importantly, don't think of signing as a skill that has to be mastered. Instead, think of it as what it is intended to be – a bridge of communication before your baby can talk!

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