

Signing up: interest in teaching babies to communicate with their hands has increased

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Arleen Garner, left, of Newark, teaches Isabel Bair, 1, right, of South Orange, the American sign language word for "milk" at the Learning Experience in Livingston, while Rohan Lala, 1, of Livingston waits his turn in the background. Garner teaches the language to children as young as 6 months.

While 10 other infants slept soundly in their cribs, Arleen Garner played with one who wasn't ready for nap time quite yet.

"Sleepy," Garner said as she brushed her palm from baby Isabella's forehead to her chin. "Sleepy." One-year-old Isabella shook with giggles at the peek-a-boo type routine, unaware the sign stood for a word.

"At first, it's just mimicking, but then they start to understand, to place the motions with the feelings — sleepy, hungry, milk, more," said Garner who's been working for a year at the Learning Experience in Livingston, teaching infants as young as 6 months American Sign Language.

Baby sign language is not a new phenomenon. The trend largely began with mothers interested in communicating with their babies before verbal skills developed.

"Who wouldn't want to be able to speak to their child before he or she can talk?" said Christina DePrima of the Learning Experience, "To know why she's crying or if she's hungry."

The practice has grown and is now a staple at many early childhood care centers, where sign language is part of the curriculum for all students ages 6 months to 6 years.

New Jersey has more than 100 locations that offer baby sign language; some are dedicated just to sign and others incorporate the language into an everyday routine, as with the 38 Learning

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Experience centers in New Jersey.

The trend is widely supported by groups such as the American Society of Pediatrics. A recent study funded by the National Institute of Health found that 24-month-olds who had been exposed to sign language scored higher than average on a wide variety of cognitive measurements, and that the lessons did not hinder their verbal development, a common concern of parents.

Laura Hoffman, 48, who teaches in Montclair for "My Smart Hands," a baby sign language system based out of Canada, said the lessons actually increase verbal communication.

"We're not just signing, we're saying the word and signing," Hoffman said. "So what you're giving them is language exposure of both kinds."

Hoffman is a nationally certified sign language interpreter in her second year teaching baby sign language classes. Last year, she had just two mothers come in with their infants, but this year 12 are already signed up for the fall. She even got a request from a pregnant mom who hopes to take the class before her delivery date.

"Babies don't start signing back until between 6 and 12 months, so what we're actually doing is teaching the parents," Hoffman said.

Hoffman's daughter, Laura, 7, began babbling and signing at about seven months. She could sign "milk," "more," "tired" and "wet." At 12 months, she knew three times as many words.

Hoffman recalled one afternoon when Laura was eating Cheerios and signed "more."

"I gave her more Cheerios and then she threw them down and signed 'cheese.' That was pretty complex for a 1-year-old to communicate. 'I don't want Cheerios, I want cheese.' "

Along with sign language, foreign language classes and yoga are also increasingly offered at early childhood day cares and as stand-alone classes.

"Parents do seem more helicoptery these days," Hoffman said. "They want to send their kid to the best places with the most possible offerings so they'll get into Yale someday."

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