

## Enhancing Parent and Child Communication: Using Makaton Signing for Babies

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### Introduction

There has been a recent surge of interest in using signing with all babies and young children, not just those with special needs. This can be viewed as positive in terms of making signing more acceptable and supporting integration. This paper will look at some of the research into the use of signing and report on findings from pilot studies carried out in 2005 by the Makaton Vocabulary Development Project (MVDP), which have demonstrated the benefits of using Makaton signing to enhance communication between parents and their babies.

### What is Makaton?

Makaton was developed in the 1970's by Margaret Walker, a Speech and Language Therapist, working in a long stay hospital. A small number of signs were introduced to a group of deaf adults who also had severe learning disabilities. It was found that all members of the group were able to learn and use the signs. The same signs were then taught to an adult population of hearing individuals with severe learning disabilities and later children, with the same success. Today, Makaton is used by a wide range of users of different ages and abilities both as an alternative and augmentative mode of communication.

The signs used with the Makaton Language Programme are all taken from natural sign languages. In the UK the signs used are from British Sign Language (BSL). In Germany, for example, the signs are all from German Sign Language (DGS). Natural sign languages also contain regional dialects, so there may be a number of different signs for the same word. Makaton selects one version of the sign according to how iconic it is, how easy to produce and how distinguishable it is from other signs that are used. The selected sign is then used across the whole country. The aim of Makaton is to support spoken language so the signs are used with speech in spoken word order.

Initially Makaton focussed on the use of signs with speech to support communication. In the mid 1980's graphic symbols were introduced, offering a more concrete reference to facilitate understanding, aid memory and as a mode of communication for those people who do not use speech or signing.

There are approximately 450 concepts in the Makaton Core Vocabulary and importantly, for every sign there is a corresponding symbol. Makaton also has a Resource Vocabulary of over 7,000 concepts.

In recent years, the wider mainstream population has shown an increased interest in Makaton. The BBC programme, 'Something Special' uses Makaton and is now in the top three most popular mainstream children's programmes.

The popularity of signing, particularly Makaton, has coincided with a new trend for baby signing in the UK.

The MVDP was contacted by a number of Makaton users, parents, carers and professionals who were concerned about claims that signing could help children talk earlier and make them more intelligent. There was also concern that the various baby signing programmes available were actually causing confusion and not supporting integration.

## **Research**

Interest in signing with babies developed following two research programmes which were carried out simultaneously in Canada and America in the 1990's by Joseph Garcia, Linda Acredolo and Susan Goodwyn.

Garcia found that children whose first language was sign language, i.e. those born to deaf parents, communicated earlier with signs than those whose first language was spoken. He also noticed that hearing children who signed had better vocabularies and used words more effectively than non-signing children of a similar age. As a result, Garcia conducted research which demonstrated that American Sign Language could be used with hearing children of hearing parents as method of communication and for aiding spoken language acquisition.

Acredolo and Goodwyn conducted their research in the United States and found that babies who used symbolic gestures early, learned to speak more readily than babies who did not. They devised a system of gestures based on their observations which they called 'baby signs'. During their research they encouraged a group of families to use baby signs and compared them with another group who were not using baby signs.

The results suggested that signing babies:

- Scored higher in intelligence tests;
- Understood more words;
- Had larger vocabularies;
- Engaged in more sophisticated play.

Parents also reported increased communication, decreased frustration and an 'enriched parent-infant bond'. These positive findings created a vast amount of interest and the phenomenon of baby signing was born.

These findings support earlier research on the use of signing to encourage communication as carried out by Walker, and Bonvillian et al.

In the 1980's Bonvillian and his colleagues followed a group of deaf children and noticed that they began to use recognised signs at 8.5 months on average, earlier than the age at which hearing babies develop spoken language. There was also evidence that their vocabularies grew faster than that of hearing babies. Bonvillian also identified that non-verbal individuals, including those on the autistic spectrum could process information better through visual rather than auditory channels and could learn signs when they had been unable to learn speech.

It became apparent that a programme of research was needed to look at the benefits of using UK signs. As a leading UK charity specialising in communication and learning disabilities, the MVDP decided to undertake the research.

## **Pilot Studies**

The MVDP organised two Makaton Signing for Babies pilot groups. The first was in Northumberland, (North of England), in a Sure Start setting. Sure Start was founded in 1999 to provide support for pre-school children and their parents. The group had ten children aged between three and ten months and was led by a Speech and Language Therapist.

The second group was held in Hastings (South of England). This was a Post-Natal group with seven children aged between eight and twelve months and was led by a Makaton Senior Tutor.

A mini-pilot was conducted with an organisation called 'Young Mums To Be', based in the Midlands, led by a Makaton Regional Tutor.

It was apparent that the Makaton Signing for Babies training had to be for all babies, no baby should be excluded. In any post-natal group there is likely to be a child with special needs. Children may not have identified needs at such an early age but can be identified as likely to be at risk of developing communication or learning disabilities.

Each pilot ran for six sessions, once a week for one hour.

The sessions contained information for parents such as what is signing, how it may help, important skills to look out for in babies like eye contact, turn-taking, imitation, pointing, vocalising and practical hints and tips like how to hold a baby and sign at the same time.

### **The Vocabulary**

The MVDP contacted the Makaton users, parents, carers and professionals who had previously contacted Makaton about signing with babies and young children, to ask which vocabulary they thought was necessary for any baby signing training. The vocabulary requests were large and varied but throughout there was a common vocabulary. Interestingly, many of these words and signs were already in the first two stages of the Makaton Core Vocabulary, which reinforced the universality of a core vocabulary.

### **Results**

As expected, not all the children started speaking and/or signing during the training. There was no evidence that the children started speaking earlier than expected. However, a number of other positive developments took place in both the parents and the babies, including:

- Parents – growth in confidence in communicating with their babies;
- Parents – increased skills as communicators and interactors;
- Parents – increased amount of time spent interacting with their children;
- Parents – increased awareness of their own communication skills and their baby's;
- Babies – skills such as eye contact, attention and concentration were obvious;
- Babies – pointing became an important part of developing communication.

The pilot studies were followed-up with a questionnaire which was sent out six months after the training ended. The questionnaire contained ten questions and space for further comments. Ten from seventeen questionnaires were completed and returned.

The responses showed that:

- Participants agreed that the information given about how, why and when the signs could be used was helpful;
- As well as talking this through in the sessions, handouts were given to parents as reminders;
- The signs had been shown at the sessions and there had been repetition throughout the training which had helped to build confidence;
- All participants were still using signs;
- All participants had tried to encourage other family members or friends to sign;
- Fathers did not generally attend the training so it was interesting to see that fathers were involved in the signing too;
- The involvement of siblings was very positive and is something the MVDP are trying to encourage;
- The vocabulary was right for the parents and their child.

Parents reported that it had:

- Eased frustration for their child;
  - Helped them as parents to understand their child's needs;
  - Been 'a pleasure' and they had 'happier children' and were happier parents;
  - Given them a sense of achievement;
  - The children were more attentive and focussed.
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- The majority of the families had not used symbols. Makaton symbols were introduced in this training and not covered in depth. However, one family was using symbols alongside pictures and another family reported that they were planning to use symbols to support potty training.
  - All participants confirmed that they would continue to use Makaton.
  - Four parents stated that they definitely would continue using Makaton with one mum wanting to train as a trainer. For the others, they felt that now was not the time for more training but they may in the future. Some wanted to meet regularly to practice and others felt that various resources in the form of books and videos/DVDs were sufficient.

### **Summary**

Baby signing is a new phenomenon and there is currently little quantitative or qualitative research and no long-term research related specifically to signing for babies. We hope that at some point there will be but in the meantime we are collating anecdotal evidence and observations, but, even from these, clear patterns are beginning to emerge.

At no stage have the MVDP assessed intelligence as carried out in some of the research in America. However, our studies have shown that, following the training, parents were interacting more often and more confidently with their child, and were more aware of their child's needs. The children were more attentive, more confident and having fun, all important skills for learning.

The MVDP is committed to continuing to develop this programme and is considering conducting more formal long-term research into the benefits of using signing with babies. In the meantime however, we can see the value that Makaton Signing for Babies has in supporting inclusion and enhancing parent and child communication.

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