

COMMUNICATING WITH BABY USING ASL

BY NANCY LOMBARDI

What if there was a way to communicate with baby using sign language before baby can speak? There is a growing movement that shows that babies can (and are) being taught American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate with parents before they develop language skills. Learning a few simple gestures can make it easier for babies to be understood by parents—possibly cutting down on tantrums.

Baby Einstein, which is owned by Disney, is perhaps the most popular direct-to-home entertainment (DHE) series for new parents. The company is scheduled to release its 21st DVD, *Baby's Favorite Places*, this July. This DVD comes on the heels of the summer 2005 release of *Baby Wordsworth*, which was designed to teach babies, ages 9 months and up, first words.

Both *Baby's Favorite Places* and *Baby Wordsworth* are part of a series created with actress Marlee Matlin, who demonstrates ASL on both DVDs. In this new release, designed for ages 1 and up, babies discover the vocabulary of places around town. It starts at home, then there

Fitzgerald, says the company worked with Baby Signs, Inc., to ensure the content was appropriate; this information will be explained to parents on the product's packaging. She adds that the reason for incorporating sign language into V-Smile Baby is "teaching babies to sign aligns with VTech's mission to provide lifelong learning."

The Baby Signs Program is "the result of two decades of research, much of it

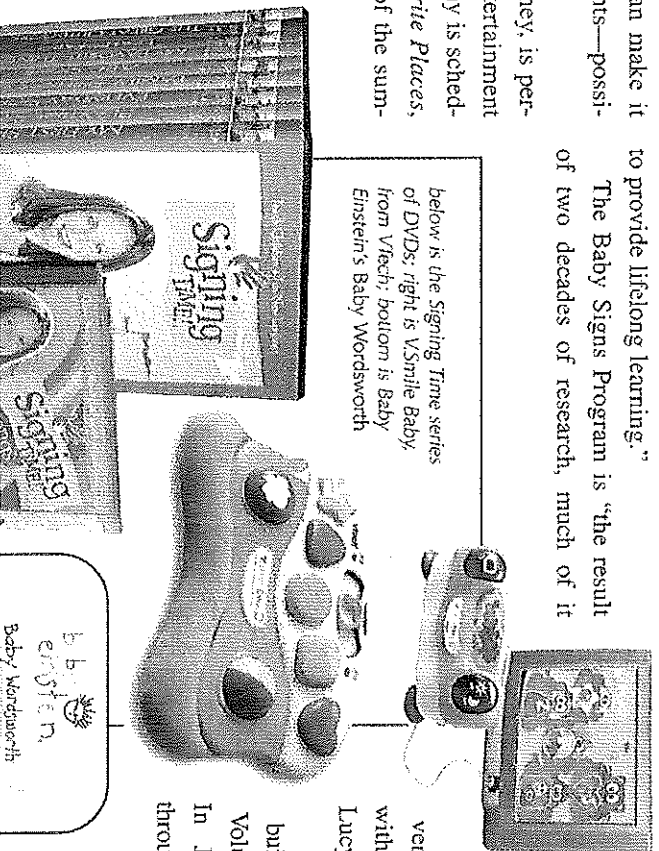
Coleman discovered she was profoundly deaf. A few years later, Lucy was born with spina bifida and cerebral palsy. It was thought she would never be able to speak, let alone sign to communicate with her sister.

Coleman and Brown learned up to create the series and in May 2002 the first volume of *Signing Time* launched. The goal is to teach those who can hear to communicate through signing. It helps hearing members of Leah's family communicate with her. It also helps hearing parents and children communicate before the child develops verbal skills. It was also discovered that children with disabilities—in this case, Lucy—benefitted. Lucy learned to sign as well as speak.

There are currently nine ASL-vocabulary-building volumes of *Signing Time* on DVD/VHS. Volumes 10–13 are scheduled for release this year. In January, 13 episodes began broadcasting throughout the U.S. on public TV stations.

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below is the *Signing Time* series of DVDs; right is V-Smile Baby from VTech; bottom is Baby Einstein's *Baby Wordsworth*



which was designed to teach babies, ages 9 months and up, first words.

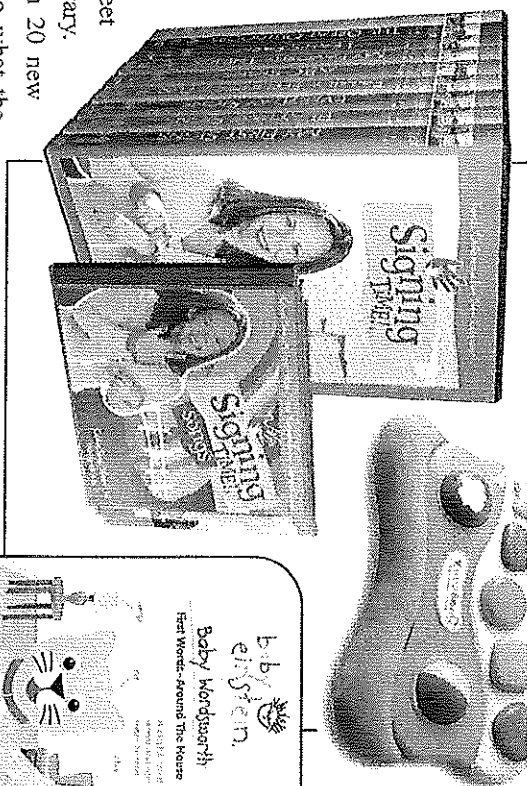
Both *Baby's Favorite Places* and *Baby Wordsworth* are part of a series created with actress Marlee Matlin, who demonstrates ASL on both DVDs. In this new release, designed for ages 1 and up, babies discover the vocabulary of places around town. It starts at home, then there is a trip to the park where children are introduced to the pond and the playground. The journey ends at Main Street where children see a cafe, school, and library.

Baby's Favorite Places shows children 20 new words in multiple forms exposing them to what the word looks like visually, how to sign it, and then how it sounds. The written word is then shown next to the object. Then Matlin signs the word. Finally, it is said aloud for children to hear. Children are encouraged to try signing the word. The DVD also incorporates puppet shows, real-world images, and classical music, all of which are hallmarks of the Baby Einstein series.

In addition to being featured in the DHE series, Matlin hosts bonus features where she signs the ASL alphabet, demonstrates common phrases using sign language, and shows various storytelling features. Baby Einstein says the sign-language feature is a combination of ASL and other hand gestures to communicate words and concepts.

At this year's Toy Fair, VTech introduced the V/Smile Baby Development System. Scheduled for release this fall, the system is designed for ages 9–36 months and features three play modes. In the watch-and-learn mode, babies watch and interact with sign language, among other elements.

VTech's, vice-president of marketing, Julia



funded by the National Institutes of Health, by Drs. Acredolo and

Goodwyn that shows signing has dramatic benefits, including decreasing frustration for babies and parents, enriching the parent-child bond, boosting emotional development, helping babies talk sooner—even raising IQ,” according to the program’s website.

The doctors say that babies have the mental capacity to communicate long before they can say words. Teaching signs is no different from teaching a child to wave or nod “yes” or “no.” The doctors say teaching babies to sign makes it easier for them to learn to talk. They explain that signing is to talking as crawling is to walking—a natural step in baby’s development.

Pediatrician, Dr. Lisa Palmieri, agrees. She and her daughter learned sign language using the Signing Time line of DHE.

The Signing Time line was created by Rachel Coleman and her sister, Emilie Brown. When Coleman’s daughter, Leah, was 14 months old, the

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Dr. Palmieri, a supporter of the series, says the it helped clarify communication before her daughter was able to speak. Both parent and child learned to sign from the series. Although her daughter can now speak, Dr. Palmieri still uses the skill to calm her daughter at night. She says that when her daughter is fussy they sign a story together to settle down for bedtime.

In addition, she recommends the series to parents in her practice whose children are speech delayed, are autistic, or have Down’s syndrome.

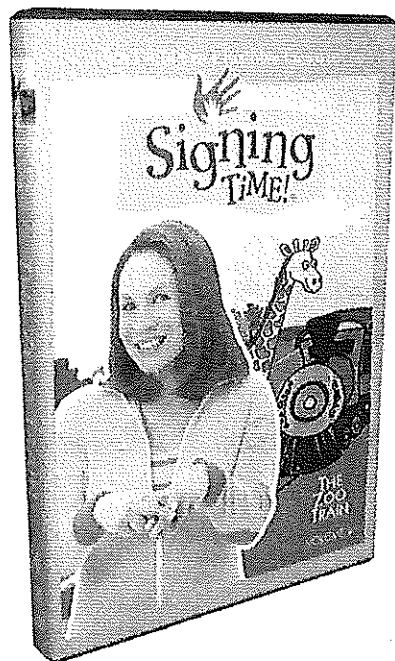
The doctor says babies have the ability to learn to sign around 9 months old because, by that time, they are able to make other hand gestures.

Each of the items listed here incorporate ASL to help children communicate. In addition, children gain a better understanding of the non-hearing community as well as those with disabilities.

But, perhaps the most important factor when using these products is that parents must interact with their children in order for it to be a success.

“Any time spent between baby and parent is valuable time,” says Jack Jason, ASL instructor, sign language consultant, and Marlee Matlin’s manager. “Signing with your baby is not only a great one-on-one tool but it can also be an educational tool as well. Babies can learn to express their feelings that they otherwise wouldn’t be able to. Parents get an insight into what their baby might want, whether it’s ‘more,’ or ‘all done.’”

Home Entertainment

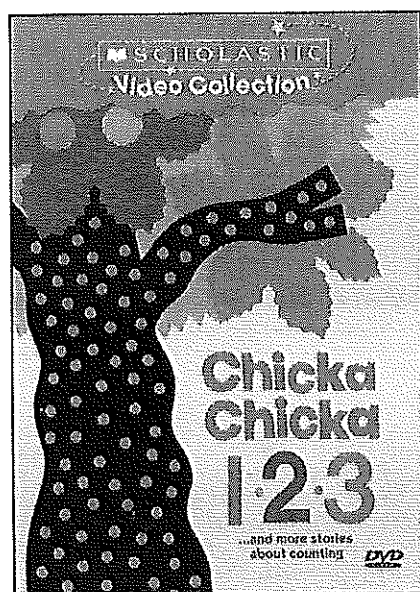


It's Signing Time

Signing Time! is a DVD series from Two Little Hands Productions designed to teach babies, toddlers, and young children how to communicate using American Sign Language (ASL). Each DVD has an approximate running time of 30 minutes and features Rachel Coleman; her daughter Leah, who is hearing impaired; Leah's cousin Alex, who can hear; and their animated pet frog Hopkins on adventures that introduce hundreds of ASL vocabulary-building signs that are useful in daily life. The latest additions to the series are *Leah's Farm*, *The Great Outdoors*, and *The Zoo Train*.

This spring the *Signing Time!* series will be shown on select local American Public Television stations.

CIRCLE READER SERVICE NO. 34



Scholastic Counts on Chicka

One hundred and one numbers race each other up the apple tree; suddenly bad bumblebees come buzzing. Which number will save the day? *Chicka Chicka 123*, new from the Scholastic Video Collection, answers the question. The release was adapted from the original book by Bill Martin, Jr. and Michael Sampson and features animations of Lois Ehlert's original illustrations. The story-on-video includes new music with vocals by Crystal Taliefero.

Two other stories about counting fill out the disc. *If You Made a Million* and *How Much is a Million?* were both written by David M. Schwartz and illustrated by Stephen Kellogg. DVD extras include a read-along feature, auto-play, and a bonus story.

CIRCLE READER SERVICE NO. 35