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## What We Have Learned from Research!

**The Deaf Community:** American Sign Language (ASL) is the third most widely used language in the United States and is an official “foreign language” that is being taught at many high schools. The history of “sign language” includes the first manual alphabet, written by Juan Pablo de Bonet in 1620; in 1755 Abbé Charles-Michel de l’Épée began the first public education for the deaf in France; and in 1816 Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet convinced the Frenchman Laurent Clerc to travel from France to become the first deaf sign-language teacher in America. In short, sign language has been a highly-effective communication system in America for almost 200 years, and was developed by deaf people to enable the deaf community to communicate with each other. However, ASL was not considered to be a true language until 1960 when William Stokoe published his book titled *Sign Language Structure*.

**A Proven Communication System for Hearing Students with Special Needs:** Educators believed (*and have found to be true*) that sign language can increase the communication skills of hearing children with particular pathologies such as Downs Syndrome, various forms of developmental delays, and more recently autism and other forms of communication disorders. In 1981, in a research study where sign language was taught to nonverbal children (Wills, 1981), it showed that 92% of those children acquired some communication skills. It was also shown that when both the teachers and parents used the signs that the children learned during their signing lessons, that the children were more likely to generalize the use of those signs in other settings. Following the success of the deaf community, children with special needs were the next group to have garnered the benefits from learning sign language.

**An Early Communication System for Infants:** For the past few years the new “buzz” has been that infants can learn to “talk through sign language” before actually learning to “talk!” Between the ages of 9 and 30 months a baby’s desire to talk usually exceeds his ability to speak. Recent research has documented (Acredolo, 1996) that not only can infants learn to sign (*use gestural symbols*) to express words, but that infants who are taught to sign can demonstrate an increased process of learning to speak, and that it provides intellectual stimulation, and more importantly, it has been shown to strengthen the bond between parent and baby.

**An Accelerated Communication Strategy for Children Who Are Learning English:** Some of the latest research has focused on understanding the effect that learning sign language has on the developing language skills of English language learners. The first studies were conducted almost accidentally. It was observed that hearing children of deaf parents were able to acquire sign language and spoken language at the same time. These children often showed rapid language development and very quickly became bilingual. In another study (Daniels, 1993), it was shown that bilingual children receiving sign language instruction scored higher on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) than their peers who did not receive any signing instruction. This provides evidence that ASL has a positive effect on young children’s acquisition of English.

**The Effect of ASL on Increasing the Language and Literacy Skills of Young Hearing Children:** The most exciting research currently being conducted is focused on documenting the effects that learning sign language has on the development of language and literacy skills of young hearing children. In two different studies (Capirci, 1998) ASL was taught in context to children during their first and second grade years. The children in both studies who received the instruction scored higher on tests in visual discrimination and spatial memory than did the groups of children who did not receive any signing instruction. Additional studies (Daniels, 1994) have consistently found that young hearing children of hearing parents who learned ASL in a school context, demonstrated a greater understanding of English vocabulary and achieved higher scores on the PPVT than their peers who did not receive any instruction.

It has also been documented that when young children are ready to learn how to read, that the learning of sign language can strengthen and increase oral language and literacy skills. It was observed that hearing children of deaf parents were often reading before they began school because their parents had fingerspelled with them. The researchers concluded that these children were able to make the connection between the manual letters of fingerspelling and the printed letters on a page. We have also learned a great deal about multiple intelligences from Howard Gardner– and the importance of understanding and identifying the wide variety of individual learning styles as well as the importance of multi-sensory teaching. Sign language involves seeing, hearing, and movement. This is the perfect combination of how young children learn best. Using the multi-sensory approaches of sign language, children are able to use both sides of the brain, thus creating multiple pathways which can strengthen memory and build connections for further learning.

**In Conclusion,** teaching sign language has incredible benefits for all young children. Its multi-sensory approach increases and builds language and literacy skills, motivates young learners through their natural desire for constant movement, and provides an atmosphere of play and fun! Sounds like the perfect learning tool!