



# SIMPLE SIGNING



with Young Children

A Guide for Infant, Toddler,  
and Preschool Teachers

Revised

Carol Garboden Murray





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# Introduction

## What's New?

One of the things I have learned in the past ten years, since the original publication of my book, is that as simple as signing can be, early childhood teachers are sometimes intimidated to use it or feel overwhelmed by the prospect of learning yet another teaching strategy. Let's face it—signing involves using your hands, and if you are caring for and teaching young children, your hands are already very full. I am happy that *Simple Signing with Young Children*, revised, starts with a section called Let's Get Started, which outlines just a few beginning signs to get you signing right away. I believe that if you start with just one or two signs, you will see and feel immediately that signing is a fun and motivating tool for children and that it offers ease and elegance for your teaching practice. Once you embed just one or two signs into your day, you will be motivated to learn more. This book offers all the information you will need to do so.

In this revised edition, you will find additional activities and new research regarding the amazing potential of sign language. This new edition of *Simple Signing with Young Children* includes current evidence about the benefits of using American Sign Language (ASL) with young children, as well as new research about how ASL supports a child's literacy skills, executive functioning, and symbolic thinking. This book also includes a template that aligns ASL with state early learning standards in all curriculum domains.

Another exciting feature of the new edition is the emphasis on reflective teaching, which has been inspired by the practical questions that educators have asked me during my workshops. There are ten reflective teaching columns placed throughout the book. The reflections and questions come directly from the field, from conversations with early childhood teachers like you! The reflective teaching columns include significant points for you to ponder, supporting resources for further study, and thought-provoking exercises that will promote thinking, inquiry, and reflection. This book is more than a how-to book, because we know that teaching is complicated, dynamic work. To integrate a new practice, that practice must be intrinsically motivating and hold personal value. The reflective teaching practices are designed to empower you to integrate sign language into your teaching practice and make it your own.

## Benefits of Signing with Young Children in Early Childhood Settings

I first learned to use a few key signs from a speech-language pathologist in the classroom while we were teaching hearing children with learning disabilities, including children with language delays, Down syndrome, and autism. Later, while teaching a small group of children with autism spectrum disorders—some of whom spoke Arabic or Japanese—I learned that sign language is a great way to create a common classroom language for children who struggle with spoken language or who speak languages other than English. Later, while teaching in integrated settings, I found that most children are motivated by signs and love talking with their hands. Creative storytelling and singing has always been an important part of my teaching practice, and I explored sign language as a way to be more expressive, make stories and songs come alive, and invite children to interact during language games and literacy activities.

When we teach children to sign, they can see, feel, and hear language. It is children's inborn natural inquisitiveness and drive to connect that motivates them to learn this new code. Sign language is a natural tool for boosting a child's communication, symbolic thinking, early literacy, self-esteem, engagement, and attention. At the important stage of early childhood when children are learning how to express emotions, make friends and read social cues, sign language offers immediate expressive reinforcement for prosocial behavior as well as reduced social frustration.

I believe that teaching is an expressive art, and I know that sign language can make you a more effective teacher. Sign language is a classroom-management tool that allows you to create a peaceful classroom environment and to become more attuned to the power of total communication and the importance of the auditory environment. Most importantly, we know that the key to quality early education lies in trusting relationships; sign language is a beautiful way to make connections. My hope is that this book will enhance the good work you do with young children.



# Chapter 1

## Let's Get Started with Beginning Signs

### Beginning Signs for Preschoolers

#### Thank You

The best way to practice sign language is to use it naturally throughout the day just as you use words. Below is the sign for *thank you*. Start with this one sign and practice it every day, several times a day, for a week or so to help you and the children warm up to the idea of using signs in your preschool class.



#### THANK YOU

The hand starts at the lip and moves outward as if blowing a kiss.  
The sign means both *good* and *thank you*.

Sometimes it feels a little awkward to sign in the beginning, but once you get in the habit, it becomes a natural part of your communication. You should start by saying the word out loud and simultaneously signing it. Ask all the teachers on your team to practice signing *thank you*. Smile when you say *thank you*, and pause and look others in the eye when you say it. As you incorporate this sign into your day, reflect upon the importance of your voice as a teaching tool and begin to think about all the ways we communicate that do not involve speaking words.



## Stop and Go

Next, add the signs for *stop* and *go* to your repertoire. You can introduce these signs during group games and circle time.



**STOP**

Chop down quickly with an action hand into a flat base hand. Imagine something coming to an abrupt stop.



**GO**

Point your index fingers, and make a swift movement forward.

Although the best way to use and practice signs is during the course of the day embedded in daily routines and meaningful communication, the *stop* and *go* signs can also be taught explicitly at group gatherings through modulation games. The easiest way to start is to play Freeze Dance with children. Play some music and encourage the children to dance. Abruptly stop the music, and use the *stop* sign to signal the children to freeze in place. Restart the music, and use the *go* sign to signal for them to dance.



It's also great to add a few printed *stop* and *go* signs to the classroom for the children to have this additional visual reference. We have found we use the tangible visual signs like these in meaningful ways throughout the day. For example, we use them to indicate whether an area of the room is open or closed. Sometimes the children want to make signs for the block corner and they look for these signs as models when they ask, "How do you spell stop?" so we add these signs to our word basket in the writing center.

# Beginning Signs for Babies and Toddlers

## More and All Done

You don't need to take a sign language class to begin using signs with babies and toddlers. *More* and *all done* (or *finished*) are the best beginning signs for this age. Use the signs consistently throughout the day. With them, you can go miles in supporting communication and language development; they reduce communication frustration. Perfect opportunities for these signs occur naturally all day long at meals, playtime, and through caring rituals. *More* and *all done* allow babies and toddlers to express two basic needs that come up all day.

Use *more* as a general positive sign for every time the baby or toddler wants to express "I like that," "Do it again," "Give it to me," or "I want more!"



**MORE**

**Bring the hands together and gently tap fingertips.**

Use *all done* every time the baby or toddler indicates, through cries, turning away, pushing away, or other body language, "No," "Stop it," "I am finished," "I don't want another bite," or "I don't like it." Also, when playtime is over or when you need to put something away, use this sign to indicate the transition is coming. For example, use it as you say, "I am all done changing your diaper. I am going to pick you up now," or to communicate, "We need to go back inside. It's time to be all done with the swing."



**ALL DONE**

**Move open hands outward as if finishing something or pushing something away.**

# Reflective Teaching: Awareness of Teacher's Voice

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The voice is part of us much as our physical appearance is, and the customs that we have, the way we use our bodies. We each have a sound.  
—Alice Parker, composer, conductor, and teacher

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Goals for this reflective teaching practice:

- Listen and develop self-awareness of your voice as a teaching tool.
- Become aware of your voice volume and tone and how it affects the classroom environment.
- Practice modulating your voice volume and tone to fit the needs of the children.
- Begin to replace a few words with signs.

Teachers, like actors, are professional voice users. Incorporating sign language into your teaching practice is a way to make you a more artful and effective communicator. While you are learning signs, it is a good time to become more aware of your voice as a teaching tool.

## Listen

This reflective exercise invites you to listen to yourself throughout the day as you teach and guide children. As teachers, we are usually in the role of talking, but in this exercise it is important to stop talking so much and listen more. Our goal is to create a more peaceful auditory learning environment. A pleasant auditory environment is one where children practice independence, where we hear the voices of children predominantly (rather than teacher commands), and where teacher voices are reserved for genuine interaction and relationship building. Sign language can help with these goals, but it starts with listening and developing self-awareness that will allow you to be intentional about the way you communicate.

## Volume

You can begin to practice modulating volume as you practice beginning signs. Start by doing the sign and saying the word aloud simultaneously, then gradually reduce the volume of your voice to a whisper as you sign. Finally, sign a word with no voice at all (you could silently mouth the word with the sign).

As teachers, we feel the responsibility of being in charge, and most of us talk more than we need to and speak more loudly than we realize. When teachers talk in loud tones, the entire classroom volume escalates. Becoming aware of your role as a leader of voice volume allows you to model a quieter volume.

Hearing a calm, quiet voice is effective in getting students' attention. Being whispered to catches a child's ear. Become artful about turning up and down the volume of our own voice throughout the day. Notice how children respond to your exclamations, whispers, and silent gestures and signs.

There are times when speaking in a big, strong voice is important, but becoming aware of using your voice as a tool and modulating the volume of your voice throughout the day, depending upon the needs of the children, is an intentional practice you can cultivate.

## Tone

The tone of our voice is just as important as the volume. Children are much more likely to listen to a voice that carries warmth and encouragement than one that is scolding or

judgmental. Make a practice of reflecting upon your teaching voice. Appreciate the unique rhythm, texture, and tone of your voice. Tone of teacher voice helps create a pleasant auditory environment. Teachers set the tone for respectful listening in a preschool classroom through the tones they model.

Tips for becoming self-aware of your voice and appreciating it as a teaching tool:

- Be intentional about listening more and talking less.
- Begin to pay attention to the auditory environment, and ask whether it is a pleasant or chaotic soundscape.
- Notice how often you might be able to replace words with gestures, glances, and signs.
- Notice whether there is a balance of teacher voices and children's voices.
- Begin to practice turning up and down the volume of your voice to match the needs of the children.
- Notice and appreciate your unique tone of voice.
- Cultivate a teaching tone that is encouraging and demonstrates your respect for children.

# REDUCE FRUSTRATION AND HELP CHILDREN COMMUNICATE MORE EASILY.

Updated with the latest research, *Simple Signing with Young Children: A Guide for Infant, Toddler, and Preschool Teachers, Revised*, is the perfect introduction to teaching young children to communicate through signing.

Because their oral motor skills and vocabularies haven't yet caught up with their thoughts and emotions, babies, toddlers, and preschoolers often struggle to communicate. Sign language can give children the tools to help them express themselves effectively—with fewer emotional outbursts caused by frustration!

With easy-to-follow instructions and photos, *Simple Signing with Young Children, Revised*, will help teachers and caregivers use sign language to:

- enhance classroom management and ease transitions,
- support positive social behavior,
- teach language and literacy,
- help children learn impulse control,
- assist children in expressing emotions and needs, and
- create peaceful learning communities.

Praise for the first edition of  
*Simple Signing with Young Children*:

"Carol Garboden Murray draws upon her years of experience and expertise to write a thoroughly user-friendly instruction manual for parents, teachers, and caregivers to teach very young children how to communicate through sign language... Comprehensive, authoritative, and superbly organized...very highly recommended..."

—MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carol Garboden Murray, MEd, has worked with young children, families, and teachers for many years as a preschool and toddler teacher, kindergarten and first grade inclusion teacher, early interventionist, director of programs, and early learning trainer. She holds a master's degree in early education and special education. She is currently the director of nursery school at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York.

  
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