

## Baby sign language gains popularity as teaching tool

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Gene Racz | Staff Writer



Pre School 2 students, ages 4-5 at The Learning Experience in East Brunswick learn sign language from teacher Renae Challender.

**CENTRAL JERSEY** — As a group of preschool students sang together at The Learning Experience in East Brunswick in early July, they mimicked the hand shapes of their instructor who taught them sign language for some of the words to the song.

At another location of The Learning Experience in Hillsborough, pre-K students there listened intently as their teacher led them through different hand “signs” as she read aloud from a book.

The Learning Experience child development centers have expanded their curriculums nationwide to include American Sign Language for its hearing students starting at 6 weeks old up through 6 years of age.

The chain of early education centers is not alone in believing that there are real benefits for teaching “baby sign language” along with the rest of their core curriculum.

Proponents of “baby sign language” point to a growing body of research suggesting that the teaching technique may promote the development of greater vocabularies, higher IQs and even closer bonds with parents in children.

“The parents do find it as a positive piece of our curriculum — that our children are learning how to sign and they take part in implementing that at home as well,” said Megan Bowden, director of The Learning Experience in East Brunswick. “Just from what I’ve read, they say that it boosts a child’s IQ. I think that alone, if that is something that they’ve done research on and there’s proof that, yes, it does help a child’s IQ, then it can’t be anything but beneficial to the children.”

Linda Acredolo and Susan Goodwyn, professors of psychology in California, have teamed up to conduct research that indicates using signs with pre-verbal babies helps them learn to talk and gives them a jumpstart to their intellectual development in addition to other benefits.

Acredolo said their research data regarding IQ and baby signing language have not been published in a peer reviewed journal, only presented at the International Conference on Infant Studies in 2000 in Brighton, England.

“The more I learn about the effects of signing as a jump-start to early language development, the more confidence I have in the data,” said Acredolo.



The Learning Center in Hillsborough is a child development center which is now teaching children sign language to help increase IQ's and vocabulary. Here teacher Kristy Keel teaches her class of kindergarten students in sign language.

On their web site, [www.babysigns.com](http://www.babysigns.com) Acredola and Goodwyn present an overview of their research which gained initial notoriety through their book, “Baby Signs: How to Talk to Your Baby Before Your Baby Can Talk,” published in 1996. The web site says the book has sold more than 400,000 copies in the U.S. alone and has been translated into 14 foreign languages. The trademarked “Baby Signs” Program has been featured on national television, including The Oprah Winfrey Show, NBC’s Today, ABC’s 20/20, Dateline NBC, CBS Morning Show, ABC’s Good Morning America, and the NBC Nightly News.

Christine Mendez, director of The Learning Experience Hillsborough, says the baby sign language has been in place for about two and a half years there.

“The parents think it’s great, especially the parents of 2-year-olds who see their children do it at home with them,” said Mendez. “So, the toddlers, they will say “more” and they’ll make sign for “more.” They learn basic signs like please, thank you, drink, eat, milk.

“I think it’s great, especially at this age,” added Mendez. “A lot of people are fascinated that children as young as 1, a lot of time can’t verbally express themselves, but the teachers can understand them through signing.”

Mendez’ 2-year-old son, Talan, attends The Learning Experience school in Hillsborough, and Mendez sees the results of signing to foster communication skills firsthand at home.

“People are amazed and so am I,” Mendez said. “The results are positive and I’m fascinated by what a 2-year-old can do.”