Language from the Beginning

Early Sign Language Acquisition and Deaf Children's Development



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Language from the beginning

Language begins before the first sign



Everyday exchanges give language meaning

[1] Lieberman, Hatrak & Mayberry (2014)

Early sign language development

First signs

Around the first birthday



Signs carry meaning

Combining signs

During the second year



Signs express relationships

Growing language

Preschool years and beyond



More complex sentences and stories

With accessible sign language from birth. Timing varies between children.

[2] Bonvillian et al. (1983); [3] Anderson & Reilly (2002)
[4] Caselli et al. (2021); [5] Pietarinen & Kanto (2025)

Taking part and observing

EXPRESSING

BEING ADDRESSED

OBSERVING OTHERS



What can the child understand
when nobody is addressing them?

[6] W. C. Hall et al. (2018); [1] Lieberman et al. (2014)
[7] M. L. Hall et al. (2018), for the link between language access and executive function

Bilingual development

Sign language and other languages



Written language: reading and writing
Spoken language: access varies

An early language foundation supports later language learning

[8] Mayberry & Lock (2003); [9] Davidson, Lillo-Martin & Chen Pichler (2014)

Preventing language deprivation

Early access to a shared language



Families need support and fluent signing models
Access includes the conversations around the child

[4] Caselli, Pyers & Lieberman (2021); [6] W. C. Hall et al. (2018)

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[9] Davidson, K., Lillo-Martin, D., & Chen Pichler, D. (2014). Spoken English Language Development Among Native Signing Children With Cochlear Implants. Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, 19(2), 238–250. doi: 10.1093/deafed/ent045