



Chapter 8

Learning to use a sign language

It is easy for a young child to learn a complete sign language. A child will first begin to understand the signs that others use, especially for people and things that she sees every day. After she begins to use signs that are important to her, she will learn and use many others.

Each sign will help your child learn more about the world around her. As her language skills develop, she will begin to put signs together. After a while she will be able to sign in full sentences. This will also help her develop her mind. If you and your child enjoy learning sign language together, you will get better results.

The best way for you and your family to learn the sign language used in your area is to have a deaf person who uses it teach you. See Chapter 3 for guidelines on how to teach your child language. See pages 103 and 150 for more information on how deaf adults can help the community learn sign language.



If there is no one who can teach sign language, there may be a book to learn some signs to use with your child. But learning sign language from a book is harder and less effective than learning from a person.

In this chapter, we show people using signs, and we also show how signs can be put together to make sign sentences, like this:

One picture by itself does not show all of the signs in a sentence.

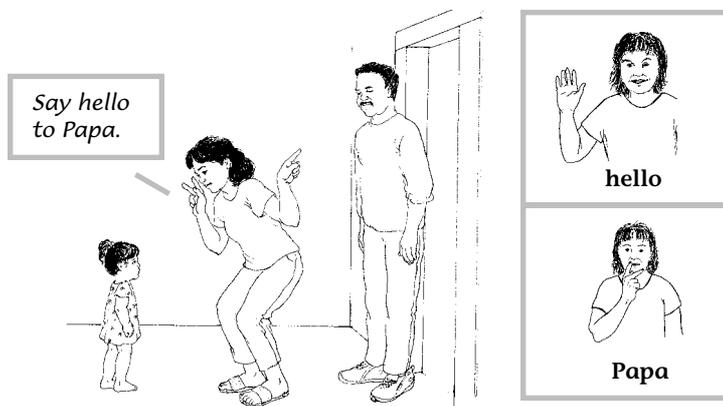


We sometimes show the signs that make up a sentence in boxes that you read from top to bottom.

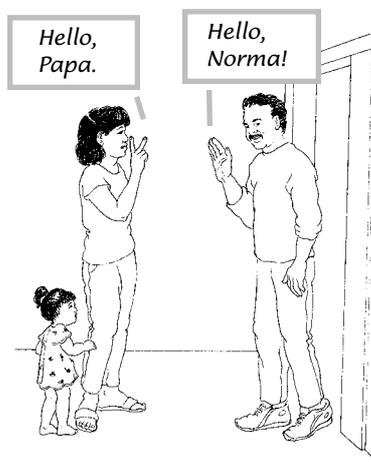
► **How to help your child understand new signs**

A child first learns the signs for things and people that are important to her. So notice who or what your child is interested in. To help a child learn her first signs:

1. It helps to make the sign near the object or point to the person, so your child connects the two. Show by the look on your face that something important is happening.



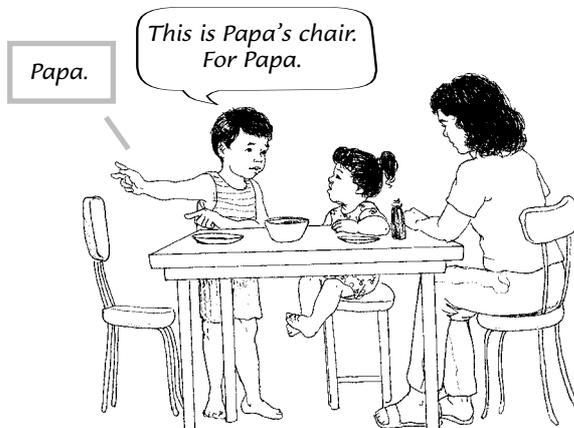
2. Sign the name of the object or person and use it several times. **Be sure your child can see your hands and face when you sign with her.**



3. Watch for your child's response. Does she respond in any way that shows she understood? If so, praise her. If she does not respond, repeat the sign a few more times.

4. Use these signs as much as you can throughout the day. Encourage the whole family to use them, too.

Try to be patient. It may take your child some time to learn her first signs.



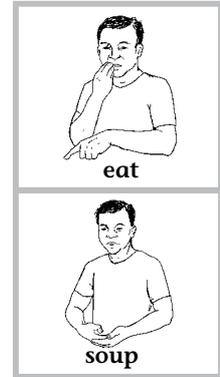
Help your child learn different kinds of signs

In addition to learning the names of objects and people, your child needs to learn many different kinds of signs. This will help her learn more about the world around her. It will also prepare her to be able to think and sign in sentences later on.

You can use the same steps as on the previous page to teach your child 'action signs', 'feeling signs', and 'describing signs'.

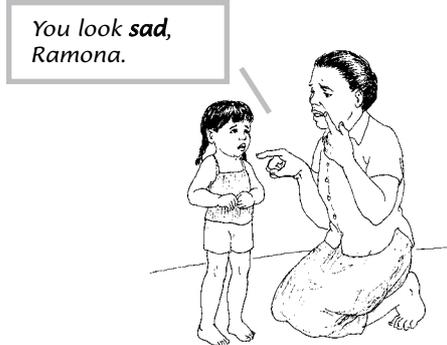
- **action signs**

Signs for 'eat', 'sleep', and 'drink' are often the first action signs a child learns.



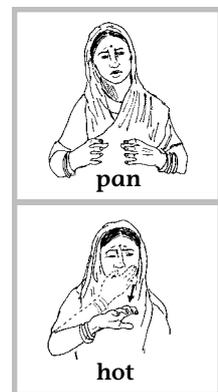
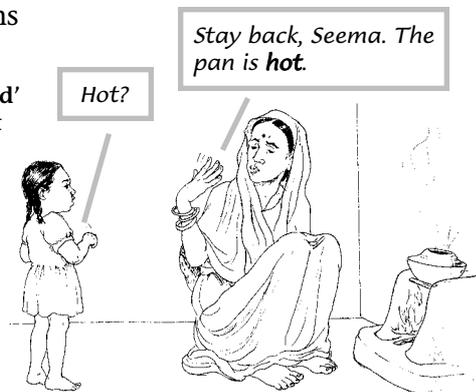
- **feeling signs**

Signs for 'happy', 'sad', and 'angry' are often the first feeling signs a child learns.



- **describing signs**

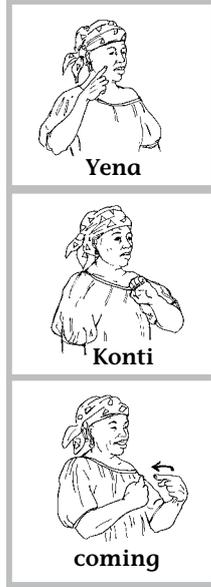
Signs for 'wet', 'dry', 'hot', or 'cold' are often the first describing signs a child learns.



Another kind of sign that is important to know is:

- **name signs** (the name given to each person)

Look, your cousins Yena and Konti are coming.



You can make up name signs for each member of the family. A sign will be easier to remember if it looks like the person in some way. This brother and sister made up signs for each other based on how they look:

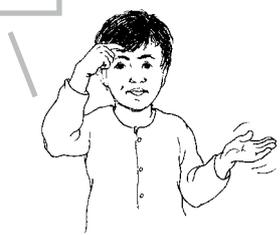
Isabel has a curl on her forehead.



Carlos has a mole on his cheek.



Where is Isabel?



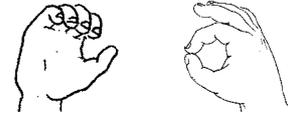
Carlos is hungry.



Learning to sign

When your child sees people around her using sign language to communicate she will begin to use signs herself. Remember that some signs are easier to use than others.

When a child learns to sign, she first learns where to put her hands. Then she learns to move her hands in the right way and, finally, to shape her hand and fingers correctly.



This shape is easier.

This shape is more difficult.

Your child is not going to make every sign exactly right. At first, you may not even be able to understand the sign. But praise her for trying, and do not be too anxious about her signing clearly.

► Ways to encourage your child to begin using signs

1. Watch for the messages she is already sending through gestures, sounds, and expressions on the face.
2. Give her the sign for the message she is sending.



3. Emphasize the sign, and repeat it several times. Encourage her to imitate you.

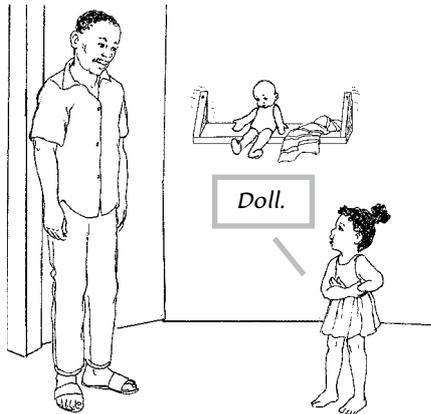
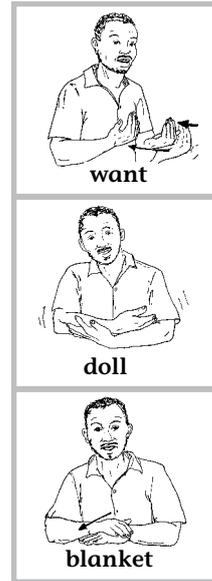
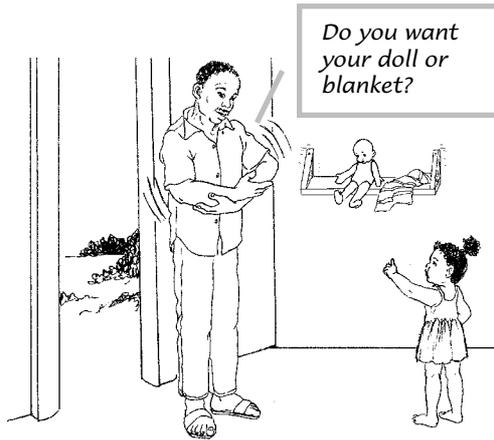
If she tries to imitate you, praise her. If she does not make the sign in the right way, do not correct her. Instead, simply repeat the correct sign.



4. When your child has learned a sign, encourage her to use it often. Find ways to include it in your everyday activities.



Ask questions that can be answered with a single sign.



If your child answers, praise her. If your child does not answer:

- she may not understand the sign.
- she may not understand the idea of a question – that it needs an answer.

One way to teach your child about questions is to answer them for her at first. After a while she will get the idea.



► **How to encourage your child to communicate simple needs**

When your child wants something, she is more eager to learn a sign that will help her get what she wants. Here are some ideas for encouraging your child to use sign language to communicate simple needs:

- Whenever your child seems to want something, encourage her to sign for what she wants.
- Create situations that need your child to ask for something.

What do you want, Rani? Tell me in sign language.



Play more?

Oscar's father stopped their game until Oscar asked him to continue.

When your child uses a gesture that can mean different things, act confused. Encourage her to send a more specific message by giving you the sign.

Do you want your cup or ball?



Can you sign 'cup'?

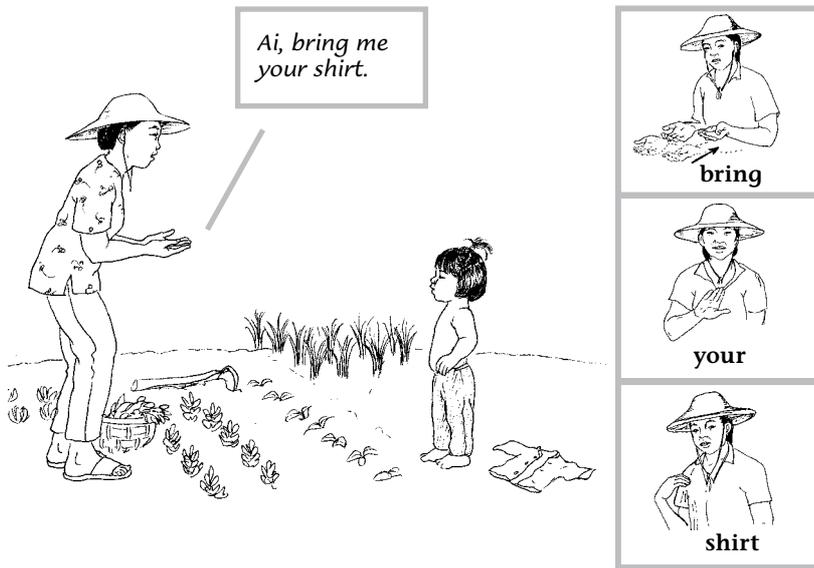


Cup.

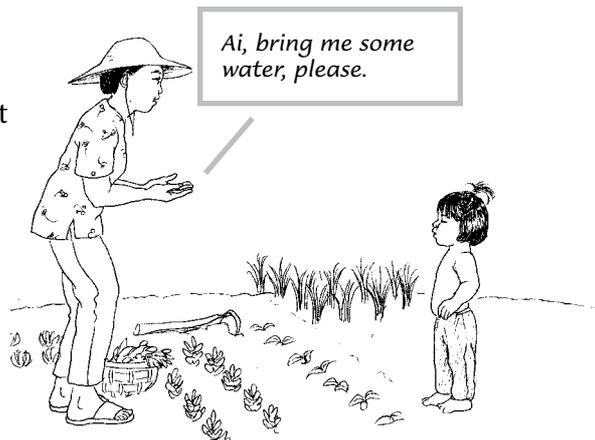
► **How to help your child make and follow simple requests**

As your child learns to recognize the names of objects, people, and activities, she can begin to understand simple requests you make. Begin with short requests. Emphasize the signs she already knows and use gestures to make the message more clear. Be sure to give your child enough time to respond and repeat the request if necessary.

At first, make requests about objects or people she can see around her.



Then make requests about objects or people she cannot see, using signs you have taught her.



Your child will soon learn to make requests herself. Everyone should encourage her when she tries to make requests.

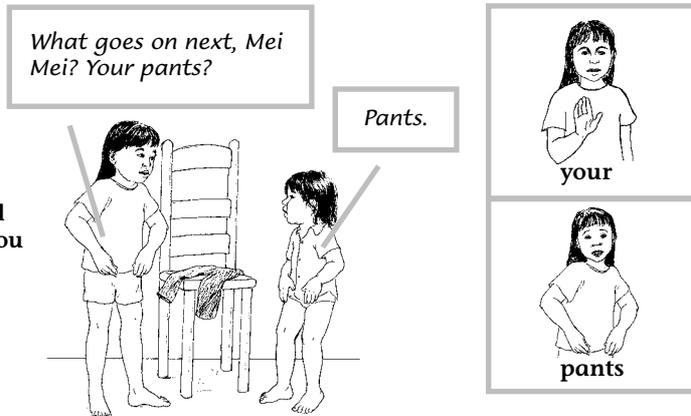


► **Ways to encourage your child to learn more signs**

The best way to help your child learn more signs is to communicate with her as much as you can – and to encourage her to send messages back to you. Here are a few ideas for communicating throughout the day.

- Everyday activities are a good time to learn new signs. This gives a child a chance to use the same signs over and over.

Always make sure your child is looking at you when you sign with her.



- Make a mistake to encourage your child to correct you. Here, this child's mother called her by her brother's name.



Try making up games that include some new signs. For example, these children are playing a game to find hidden objects they can name by sign. At the same time they are learning some new signs.



Understanding groups of signs

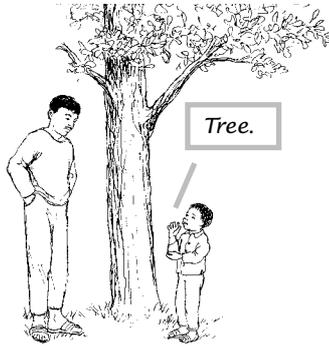
After using single signs, a child begins to put signs together to express complete thoughts. By learning to combine signs to express complete thoughts, a child is on the way to using a full language.

Putting groups of signs together is a big step for a child. It allows him to communicate more about the objects and people around him than just their names. At first he puts 2 signs together. Then he begins to use 3 signs — and, finally, longer groups of signs. He must first understand how other people do this before he can do it himself.

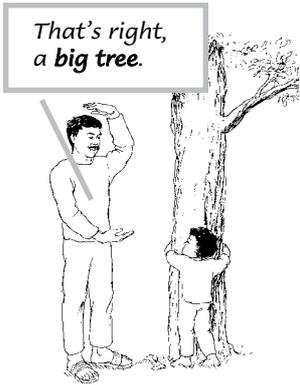
► **How to help your child understand groups of signs**

1. When your child names an object or person, expand on what he says.

Stress the group of signs you want your child to learn and repeat it several times.



2. Watch for your child's response. Does he respond in any way that shows he understood? If so, praise him. If he does not respond, repeat the sign several times.



3. Use these signs as much as you can throughout the day. Encourage the whole family to use them too.

Remember the **big tree**, Manop? Tell Mama about the **big tree**.



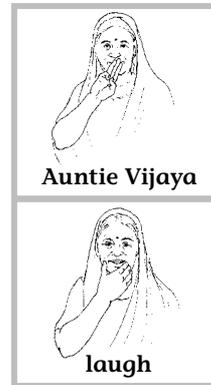
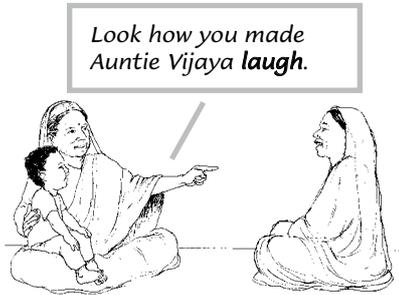
remember
big
tree

In this example, the parents put together the name of an object ('tree') with a word that describes it ('big').

Knowing words and using a language helps a child develop his mind. When he knows words like 'big' and 'small', he can use those words to think and to express difficult ideas – like comparing one thing to another. See Chapter 7 for information about how language helps a child's mind to develop.

To teach your child other groups of signs, try putting the name of an object or person together with:

- a word or sign that shows what a person or thing does.

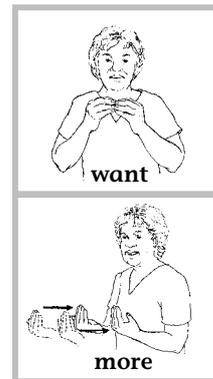


- a word or sign that shows where an object or person is.



Now you can stay warm **under** the blanket, Adwin.

- a word or sign that shows wanting more, or for something to happen again.



- a word or sign that shows not wanting something, that something is all gone, or that something cannot be done.

No, Salim, the sweets are **all gone**.



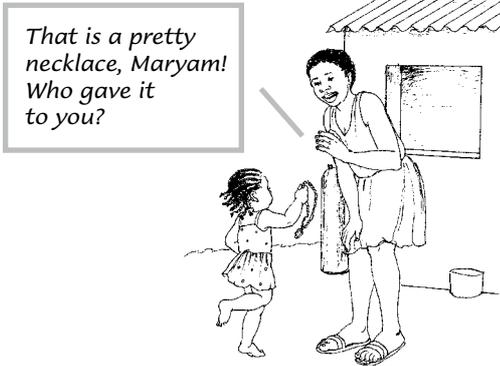
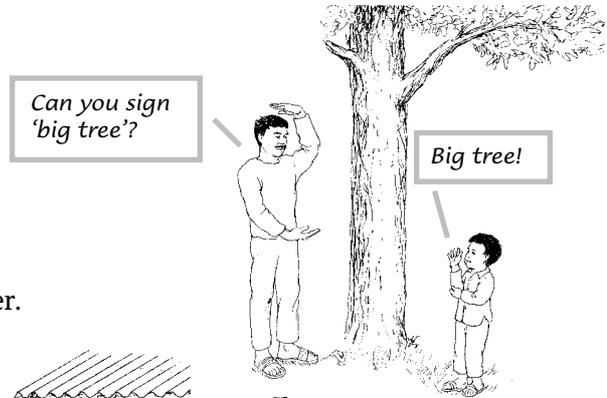
Using groups of signs

You have been using groups of signs to communicate with your child. For a child to begin using groups of signs by himself, he needs to know several signs so he can put them together in different ways.

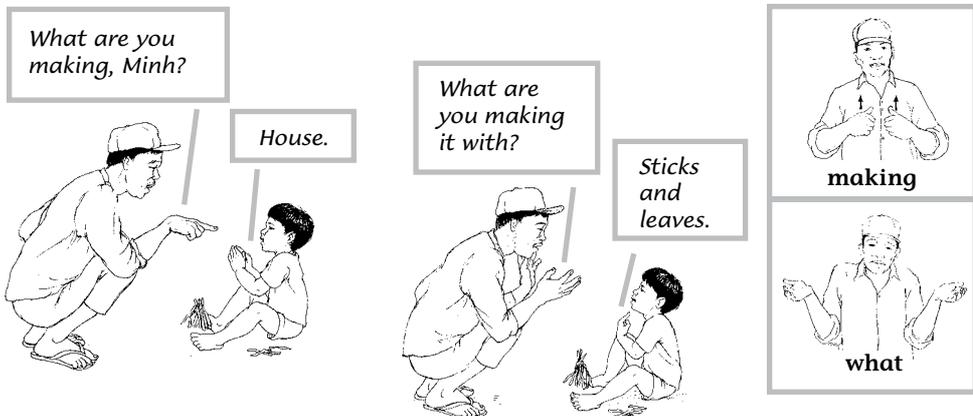
► Ways to encourage your child to put signs together

When your child signs a single sign, encourage him to expand on what he says. You could:

- expand on the sign yourself and encourage him to copy you.
- ask a question and encourage her to answer.

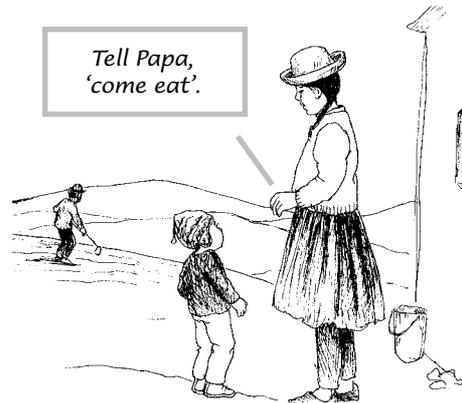


- ask your child about what he is doing.

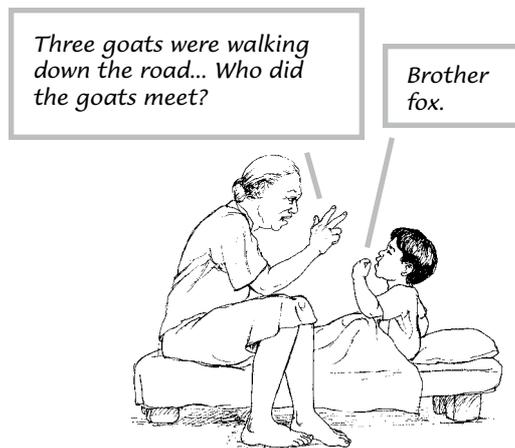


Here are some more ways to encourage your child to use groups of signs:

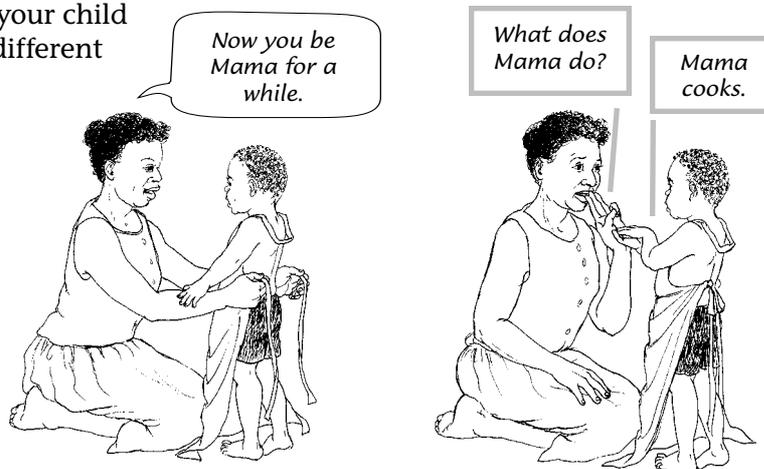
- Ask your child to deliver a simple message.



- Try telling stories together. When your child has seen you tell a story many times, he may be able to sign part of it himself.



- Encourage your child to take on different roles.



► **Use questions to encourage your child to think**

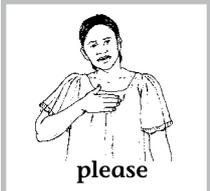
Asking questions is a good way to keep communication going. Questions also encourage your child to think.

- Give your child tasks that ask her to think in new ways. Then encourage her to communicate about what she is doing.

Please take out the stones and throw them away. How can you tell which are stones and which are beans?



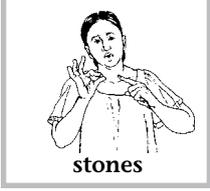
Beans are bigger.



please



take out



stones

- When your child has a problem, ask her to tell you how to solve it.

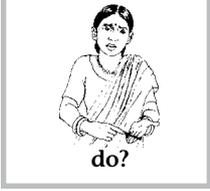
The wagon is too heavy to pull. What should we do?



what



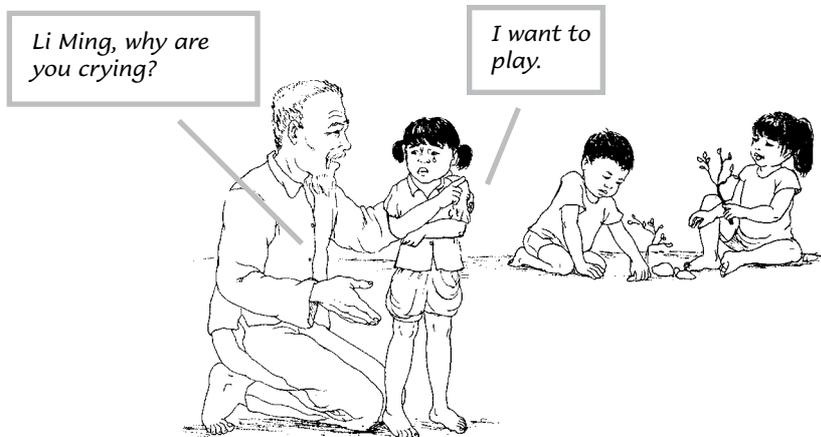
we



do?

- When you notice your child is expressing an emotion, ask her to explain how she feels.

If she has trouble answering you, first think about whether she knows the signs she needs to answer the question. If she does not, help her learn these signs.



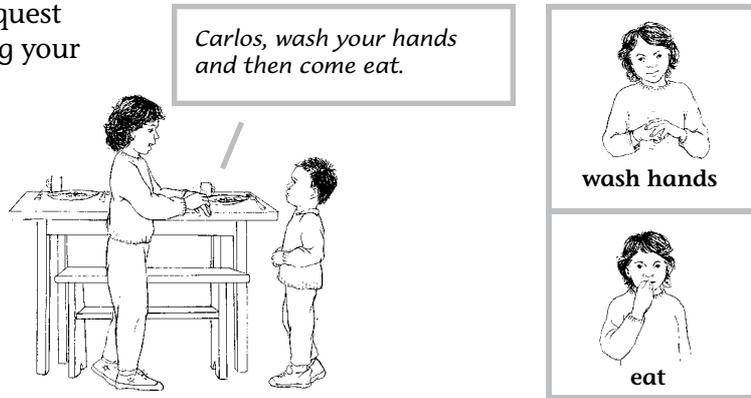
'Why' questions can be complicated and difficult for a child to answer. Because the answers to 'why' questions must often include things, actions and emotions, they are important for developing children's thinking skills. A child needs a lot of practice to answer these questions, so keep working on 'why' questions. If your child still has trouble answering the question, give her several choices.



► **How to help your child follow 2-step requests**

When your child understands more signs, he can begin to follow more difficult requests. You can start by expanding the simple requests your child already understands, by turning them into requests with 2 steps.

First, make a request about something your child can see.



Then slowly make the requests more difficult.

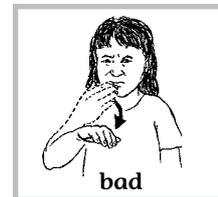


► **Help your child notice that how a sign is made is part of its meaning**

A person adds meaning to her signs by making them larger or smaller, by making some signs slower or faster than others, and by changing the way her face looks.

Help your child pay attention to these different ways of signing so he will understand more of the message being sent.

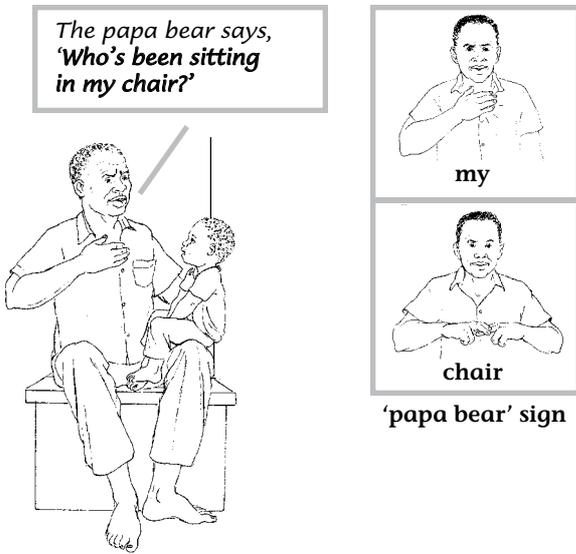
If you want to say something is bad, you can make a sign like this:



If you want to say it is very bad, you would make the same sign ('bad') larger and faster:



Telling stories is one of the most enjoyable ways to teach your child sign language. Try signing in different ways as you play different characters. Also try putting a lot of emotion (like joy or sadness) in your voice and on your face to show how the characters are feeling.



Signing for different characters helps a child pay attention to the story. It also helps a child see the expression, the size, and the different ways signs are made.

Teaching sign language to parents of deaf children

People who use sign language as their first language can teach parents how to communicate with babies and children who are deaf.

Here is a story about a group of Indian mothers with deaf children, living in England, who learned British sign language from a deaf teacher. Before they learned sign language, the children and their parents had trouble communicating because it was so hard to understand each other. Learning sign language changed this.

Signing across language barriers

Lisa is a British woman who was born deaf. After she finished teacher training school, she got a job teaching deaf children. Part of her job was to help the mothers of the deaf children learn sign language. Among the groups that Lisa taught was a group of Indian women who did not speak English. At first, it was difficult for Lisa and the mothers to communicate with each other. Lisa used British sign language and another teacher translated for her into spoken English. Then another woman translated the spoken English into Punjabi, the language that all the mothers spoke.

The mothers' group first learned signs about the home. They also learned signs for what the children were studying in class. This helped parents understand and communicate with their child at home.

Later, a man joined Lisa's group of mothers learning to sign. He then taught fathers and older brothers in a group for men. In both groups, parents with older deaf children shared their experience with parents of very young deaf children. This let them use their new sign language skills to discuss things that were very important to them.

Watching Lisa work and teach, the parents saw that deaf children could be teachers, make a living, and be respected by other people. Many families in the community learned something about deaf people at the same time that they learned how to communicate with their deaf children.

I am so glad Ashis and I can share ideas with each other now...



TIPS FOR ADULTS LEARNING SIGN LANGUAGE

Sign language depends a lot on the way you express things through the whole body. The way you stand, and expressions on your face all communicate as much as your hands.

See how Nimi's expression changes as she asks the question, "What should we do?" in sign language



Deaf people watch the face of the person they are communicating with — not only that person's hands — just as hearing people look at each other's faces as they listen.

- Act out what you want to say. Do not worry about making mistakes or looking foolish.
- Use anything and everything that helps to communicate: gestures, expressions on the face, body movements, pointing, signing, and finger spelling (spelling out words by using signs for each letter). Try communicating an idea or simple sentence with no formal signs at all. Just use gestures, facial expression, and pointing. Even when you do not know or forget a formal sign, you can still communicate with deaf people this way.
- Each person learns language in a different way and at a different pace. Learn as much as you can. Do not worry about what others have or have not learned. The goal is to help your child, not to compete with others.
- To really learn sign language, use it often with deaf people who sign.

Minh and I sometimes make each other laugh trying to act out a sign we do not know. But the more we sign, the more we learn!



Learning sign language will not be easy. But remember, it is important to your child to have a common language that all of you can share. Keep practicing sign language. If you do not use it, you lose it — just like any other language you learn.