



## Chapter 4

# Basic communication skills

People usually communicate by using words or signs. But children begin to communicate long before they learn these skills.

Communication happens when:

- one person sends a message, and
- another person receives the message and responds.

A young child sends a message by moving her body, making sounds, or changing the look on her face. When parents understand her movement and respond to her, they are already communicating.

This child is sending messages that:

She is excited.



She wants her toy.



She is happy to see her mother.



Basic communication skills develop when a child is a baby, before she learns to talk or sign. During this time you can help your child learn that communication makes things happen. Basic communication prepares your child to learn to speak and use sign language.

This chapter will help you understand how your baby can:

- take turns.
- pay attention to you.
- understand you.
- use gestures.
- make sounds.

## How children learn to communicate

Although a child communicates from birth, at first he does not realize he is doing so. He moves his body, makes sounds, or changes the look on his face because of the way he feels. For example, he might cry because he feels hungry or wet. Slowly, he sees that his messages make things happen. When he cries, someone comes to find out what is wrong. When he smiles, people smile back. So he begins to send messages to make things happen.

Communication is a powerful tool for getting what we want or need and understanding what other people want or need. You can help a child begin to communicate by responding to his movements, sounds, and looks on the face. This helps him learn that his actions have an effect on others.

### Let your child take turns

Taking turns helps your child develop two-way communication skills. When he is older, this will help him learn how to make conversation with other people.

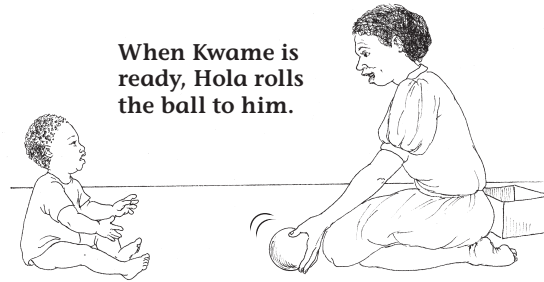
Here, Kwame's mother Hola helps them get started.



Hola's face shows she is asking a question.

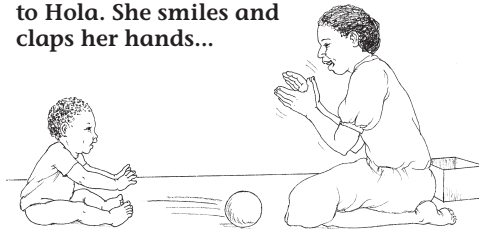
Your child will learn even more if you can keep a give-and-take going between you.

For example: Hola waits until Kwame is looking at her. She gets him interested and engaged by raising her eyebrows, smiling, and shaking the ball.

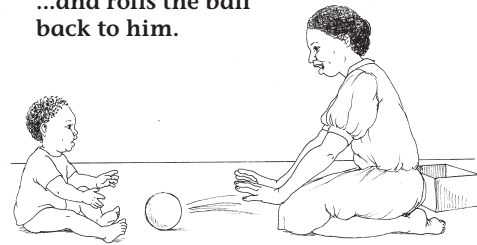


When Kwame is ready, Hola rolls the ball to him.

Kwame rolls the ball back to Hola. She smiles and claps her hands...

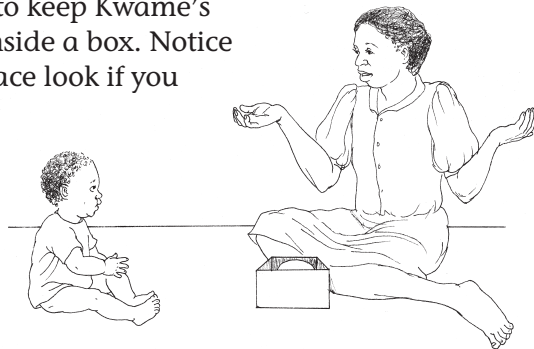


...and rolls the ball back to him.

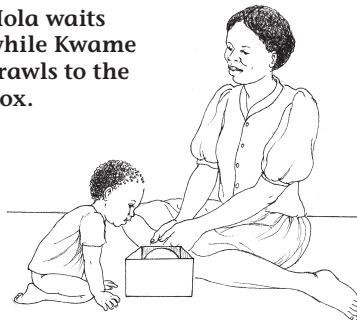


Now Kwame knows what to do. He and his mother are taking turns.

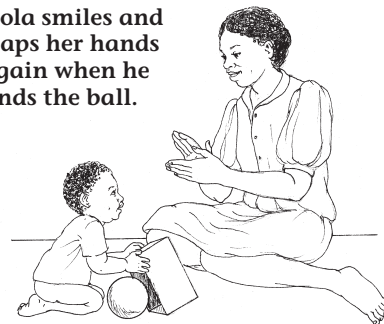
Then Hola changes the game to keep Kwame's attention. She hides the ball inside a box. Notice Hola's face. How would your face look if you were asking, "Where is the ball?" without using words?



Hola waits while Kwame crawls to the box.



Hola smiles and claps her hands again when he finds the ball.



As you see in these pictures, basic communication begins when a child is very young. Communication does not have to include words.

### To encourage your child to take turns

Every time you take turns with your child it will be different. Here are some general guidelines to make taking turns successful.

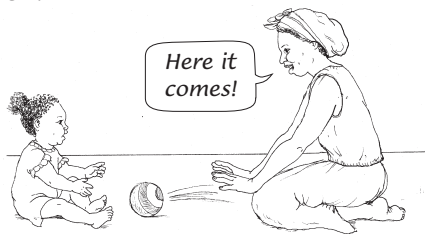
To begin:

- Get your child's attention and let her know you are ready to play.

**If your child does not respond in any way, try giving her a prompt, like a touch on her arm, to remind her it is her turn.**



- Let your child take her turn first. You can then respond to what interests her. But if you have to wait a long time, go ahead and begin yourself.



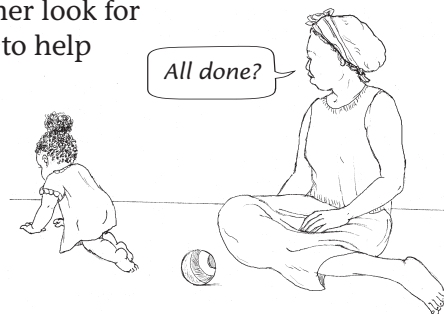
**Wait until you have your child's attention before you take your next turn. Then try to take about the same amount of time for your turn as your child took for hers.**

- Your child will know that you noticed her action and liked it. She will now try to use it again to get a response. When your child makes a sound or a sign and gets a positive response, she will want to make more sounds or signs.

When you respond to your child, try to:

- copy her sounds and actions (if she says "ga...ga," then you say "ga...ga").
- continue things that she likes (rolling the ball to her again).
- add to what she does (like making her look for the ball), to keep her attention and to help her learn new ways of playing.

**Allow your child to stop whenever she wants. At first, taking turns may last only a minute or two. But soon your child will want to take turns for a longer time.**



As children grow, they will take turns more.

Older children who cannot hear also need to learn to keep a give-and-take going through whatever activities that interest them. For a child who is 5 years old, playing a game may be more interesting than rolling a ball.



Rene's older sister is teaching her a clapping game.

## Preparing a child to use signs and to speak

While a child is learning that communication can make things happen, you can help her learn to understand words and signs. This will prepare her to use signs and to speak. To understand words and signs, she must first learn to pay attention to them and learn that words and signs have meanings. See Chapter 8 and Chapter 9 for suggestions to help your child learn the meaning of signs and words, and learn how to use signs and words herself.

## ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO USE HAND MOVEMENTS

It is natural for a child to use gestures. Both deaf and hearing people already use their hands, bodies, and make expressions with their faces to communicate many things—both with words and without words. These movements are called gestures. We wave “good-bye,” shake our heads when we mean “no,” and we point.

Here are some examples of people using gestures:

This child is telling his mother that he wants something.



Do you think it will rain?

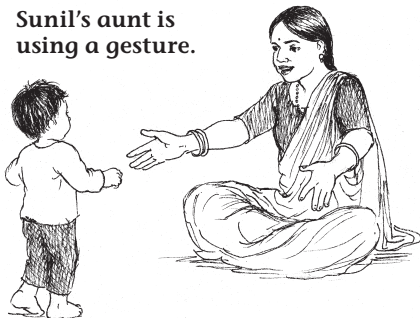


This man is answering that he does not know.

Using gestures and signs does not prevent a child from learning to talk. **Gestures help prepare a child to sign and speak.** By using them he learns that he can send specific messages. For example, he learns that by shaking his head, he makes it clear he does not want to do something.

When you are with your child, expect him to use gestures, signs, or sounds. Your child needs to learn that his words or signs are important and that people react to his communication.

Sunil's aunt is using a gesture.



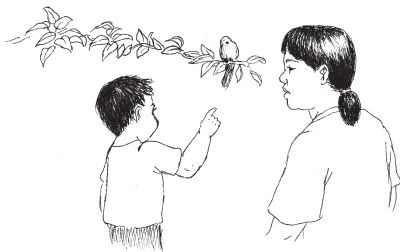
Titus' grandmother is using a gesture and word together.



- Use the hand movements your child already uses to communicate. Many children begin to make up hand movements that name objects, people, or activities. If you watch for these movements, you and your family can begin to develop "home signs."

For example:

Tae Woo points at a bird.



Tae Woo makes a "flying" movement to name the bird.

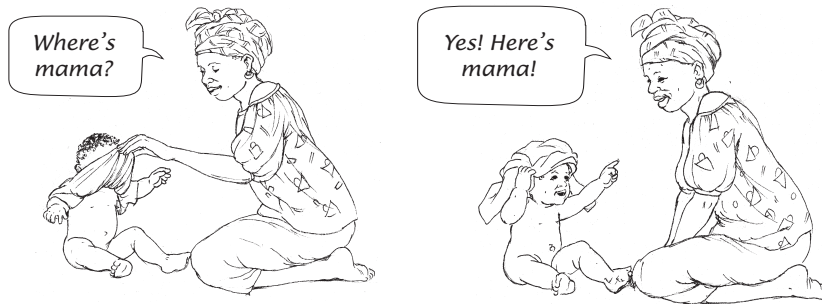


Tae Woo's mother uses his movement together with words.



These signs are very useful for family members to communicate with each other but they may not be understood by other people. See page 40 for more information on home signs.

- Play games that help a child learn to point.



- Draw pictures of different family members, and of the foods your child usually eats, the objects he likes to play with, and the clothes he wears. Encourage him to point to what he needs.



- Help your child show what he feels by using gestures. He will remember the gestures you make and he will copy them.



## COMMUNICATE WITH HOME SIGNS

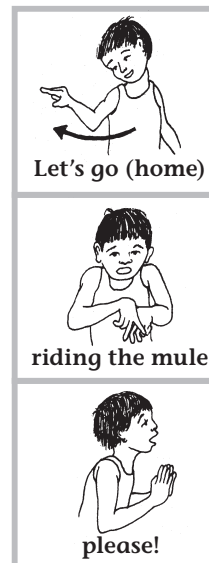
When a family has a deaf child, gestures help them begin to communicate with each other. But people need more complete ways to communicate than simple gestures. It would be best if you could ask a deaf adult to help you and your family learn the local sign language. But when you cannot find a deaf adult, you can make up and use “home signs”—hand and body movements to express yourselves and communicate with your deaf child. Here is an example:

A Mexican man went to a village with his 6-year-old deaf son. When the boy wanted to go home, he pulled on his father’s clothes. Then he used home signs that he and his family had made up.



This boy is pulling on his father’s clothes, pointing and also using home signs (“riding the mule” and “please”).

This helps him communicate more than he could by simply using gestures.



Making up and using home signs is natural for families with children who are deaf or cannot hear well. Other deaf and hearing people will probably not understand the signs you have made up, but you can share them with friends just as you have done with the family.

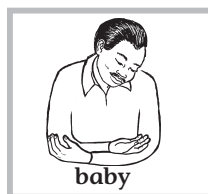
Your child and your family are probably using gestures and home signs right now. It makes sense to continue doing this. Even though home signs do not make up a complete language, they can be very helpful for expressing simple ideas and are a good start to communicating. To learn more about teaching your child the sign language that is used where you live, see Chapter 8.

### Making up home signs

Making up signs can be fun. Remember, it will take time and patience. But there will be big rewards as you and your child begin to understand each other. The next few pages give ideas for making up signs. You can change them to fit the gestures, customs, and language of your area. You and your family will have many ideas for creating your own home signs.

Here are some suggestions to help you get started:

1. Try to make signs look like the things or actions you want to communicate:



This sign for "baby" looks like someone holding a baby.



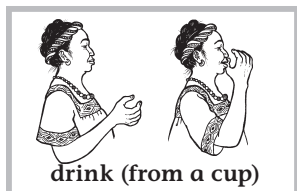
2. Watch for signs your child makes up and use them. Many children, for example, make up signs to name people in the family.



One child made this sign for her sister, Maria, who wears glasses.

3. Use hand shape, position, and movement to make different signs. For example, when making the sign for drinking from a cup you could...

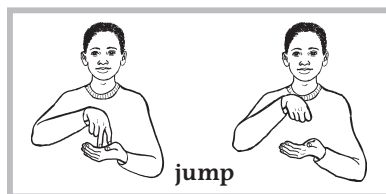
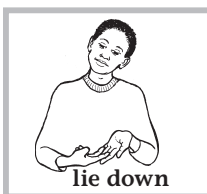
Shape your hand like a cup. Then move your hand as if you were drinking from the cup.



Or, if you wanted to sign about drinking from your hands, you could change your hand shape like this:



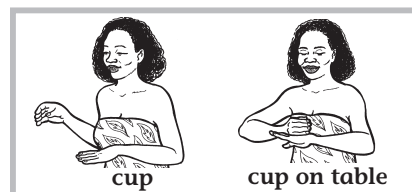
4. Try to create similar signs for actions or things that go together. For example:



You can also create similar signs for opposites, like "push" and "pull."

5. Combine signs for objects, actions, and ideas to create sentences. A child who learns to put ideas together will develop more complete communication skills.



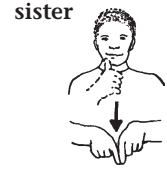
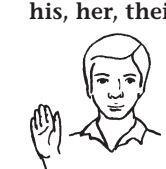
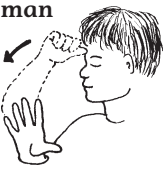

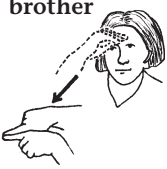

"Put the cup on the table."



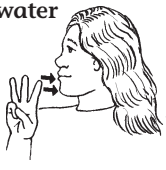
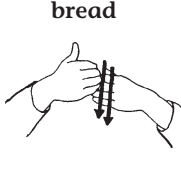



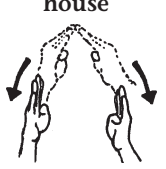

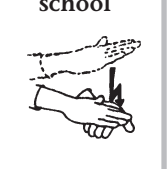
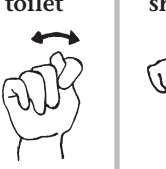

## Examples of signs

These signs are from American Sign Language. You may find useful ideas for creating your own home signs from these signs, together with signs from your local sign language. These examples also show the many types of signs a child needs to know in order to communicate.

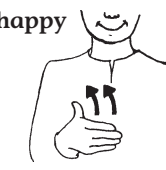





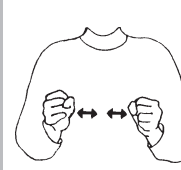



### Signs for people

woman 	mother 	sister 	his, her, their, your  direct sign towards person
man 	father 	brother 	our 

### Signs for things

water 	bread 	money 	chicken 	sign 
house 	village, community 	school 	toilet 	shoe, sandal 

### Describing signs

happy 	angry 	clean, nice 	dirty 	thirsty 
hot 	cold 	deaf 	red 	blue 

These examples also show how each sign can be changed and combined with other signs to give it new meaning.

**Action signs**

about doing something	about thinking		about relating to others		
<p>start</p>	<p>stop</p>	<p>understand</p>	<p>forget</p>	<p>like</p>	<p>love</p>
<p>use</p>	<p>walk</p>	<p>want</p>	<p>don't want</p>	<p>help</p>	<p>play</p>

**Question signs**

<p>what</p>	<p>where</p>	<p>why</p>	<p>who</p>	<p>no</p>	<p>yes</p>
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**Signs about direction**

<p>under</p>	<p>inside</p>	<p>outside</p>	<p>to</p> <p>Direct the sign toward the person or object.</p> <p>ball      throw      to her</p>
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**Signs about time**

<p>future</p> <p><i>"It is going to rain."</i></p> <p>future-sign</p>	<p>rain</p>	<p>past</p> <p><i>"It rained."</i></p> <p>past-sign</p>	<p>rain</p>	
<p>now</p> <p><i>"It is raining."</i></p>	<p>rain</p>	<p>now</p>	<p>day</p>	<p>night</p>

## ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO MAKE SOUNDS

Children start using hand movements and gestures at an early age, and these can become the basis for developing communication and sign language. Children also start making sounds and noises at an early age, and these too can become the basis of communication and the development of spoken language.

Your child needs to learn that a person makes sounds with the lips, the tongue, the breath, and vibrations in the throat and nose.

Teach a child how sounds feel in his body, how to control his breath, and how to shape his mouth and tongue to make different sounds.

As you do the activities below, encourage your child to imitate you. It can be difficult for a deaf child to learn to make sounds. So when he does, let him know he has done something important.

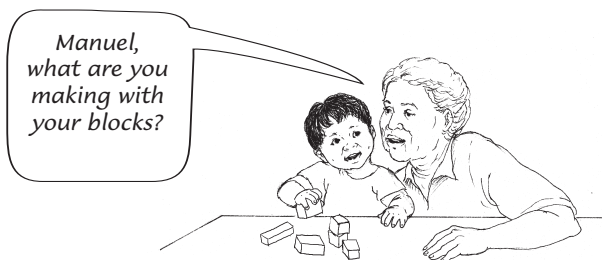
- Lay your child on your chest. At first, let him feel your chest rise and fall as you breathe normally, without talking.

Then talk or sing, letting your child feel the different ways your chest moves.

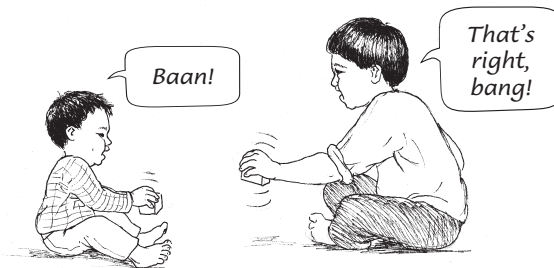
Encourage him to feel the breath coming out of your mouth, too.



- In a natural voice, speak very closely (about 8 centimeters or 3 inches) to your child's ear. Speaking this close makes sounds easier to hear. Your child will also feel your breath as you speak.



- Make up sounds that are easy to see on your lips and repeat them often during the day.
- Try matching a sound with an object.

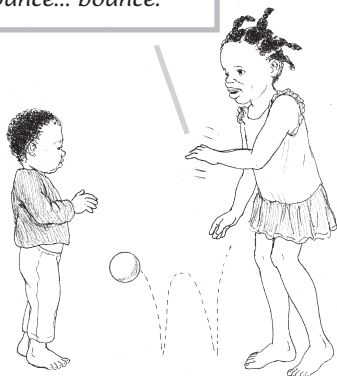


Praise your child when he makes a sound or says a word.

- Try matching the length of a sign to a movement...

...or the length of a word to a movement.

*Bounce... bounce...  
bounce... bounce.*



*Roooooll.*



Encourage your child to make sounds by praising her as soon as she makes a sound or says a word. Small praise is enough—you can use a smile as praise. Or point to your ear and say, “I heard you.” Or nod or say, “Yes.” Remember, it is very difficult for her to learn how to speak clearly and to communicate using spoken words.



Here are 3 ways to show your child you are paying attention to his sounds:

- You can imitate him, showing that you enjoy imitating him. For example, if your child says “ooo” then you do that too, and wait to see if he does it again.
- You can respond to his sound like it is the beginning of a conversation. Try to understand what your child is communicating and answer it.



- You can ask him questions about what he is communicating. It will encourage him to start a conversation. Besides, asking questions is a good way to encourage him to ask you questions.

When your child has developed basic communication skills, he is ready to learn a language. For more information on learning a language, see Chapter 7. See Chapter 8 for information on learning sign language, and see Chapter 9 for information on learning a spoken language.