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PSYC 430

Advice Column

Dear Editor:

I recently read a question in your publication from *Concerned in Cincinnati*, about the parent's concern with the "Baby Signs" that their child's daycare center was teaching their child. I know there are incredible amounts of toys and development tools being advertised to parents and that the sheer number of these can make one skeptical of their benefits. There has been a decent amount of research done that indicates that "Baby Signs" can have a positive impact on the flow of daily activities and that it can also enhance verbal language development. Looking at these studies could be very beneficial in alleviating *Concerned in Cincinnati's* apprehension.

Two recent studies relied on reports from parents about their child's progress with gesturing and language development. The first study was done by Goodwyn and Acredolo (1993), who instructed the mothers of 22 infants on how to use symbolic gestures with their children in order to learn how gesturing interacts with language development. They found that the onset of gesture use was, on average, .69 months earlier than the onset of verbal words. The researchers' findings supported their theory that nonverbal language use is a stepping stone in the development of verbal language development. A second study that relied on information provided by parents was done by Goodwyn, Acredolo, and Brown (1988). In this study two different experiments were conducted, one in which 38 infants' mothers were interviewed about forms of non-spoken communication their child used and the second in which the mothers of sixteen infants kept journals about their child's communication skills, were interviewed about gestures their child used, and filled out a language assessment pertaining to their child. Results of the studies showed that the more gestures a child knew, the sooner they reached the point where they had 10 words in their vocabulary. The researchers concluded that symbolic gesturing and verbal language are complementary, that knowledge of symbolic gestures can aid in the development of verbal language. It's

important to note that because both of these studies relied on parental reports, the data may be inaccurate, biased, and less reliable than data collected in a laboratory setting.

There are a few other recent studies that do not rely on interview from parents and therefore may be deemed as more reliable. Goodwyn, Acredolo, and Brown (2000) instructed the parents of 103 infants to either model symbolic gestures for their children, model verbal names for objects, or put no extra effort into modeling language to their child. Participating infants were then brought into a laboratory six different times between the age of eleven months and 36 months for an assortment of language tests and assessments. The researchers found that the children whose parents had modeled symbolic gestures scored better on the assessments than the participants in the other two groups and concluded that the use of gestures facilitates, not hampers, verbal language development. Capone and McGregor (2005) also conducted an experiment in a laboratory setting, but these researchers excluded any participants who had developmental delays or hearing impairments. They conducted an experiment with nineteen toddlers with three different conditions. In all three conditions participants heard the spoken word associated with an object, but in one condition infants also saw an adult demonstrate a gesture depicting the object's shape and in a second condition infants also saw an adult demonstrate a gesture depicting the object's function. The experimenters then tested word retrieval and found that participants in the condition that demonstrated a gesture indicating the shape of the object identified objects correctly 68 percent of the time, at a much higher rate than the participants in the other conditions. From these results, the researchers concluded that gestures provides an additional representation for objects and the more knowledge and mental representations a child has about objects, the easier it is for them to retrieve the words for those objects.

It's good for parents to question different toys and practices that claim to aid in development before deciding to introduce it to their children, but in this case the research clearly suggests that "baby signs" can be a very beneficial tool in daily life and in the development of verbal language. All of the researchers that conducted the discussed studies concluded that an infant's use of gestures, or "baby signs", facilitates verbal language development. One set of researchers even adamantly details the

reasons why the switch from gesturing to verbal communication is inevitable (Goodwyn, Acredolo, and Brown, 1988). I hope that *Concerned in Cincinnati* can let go of their fears that incorporating “baby signs” into their child’s lives will have a negative effect on verbal language development. Based on the implications of these studies, I would recommend that every parent start to use “baby signs” with their children. It may take a good deal of effort and time, but it appears that the benefits outweigh the costs.

References

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