Using Sign Language Throughout the Daily Routine*

BY KAREN “KAY” RUSH, HIGHSCOPE EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIALIST

Using sign language with young children has been shown to enhance early learning experiences across content areas, from literacy, language, and communication to social-emotional development. You may be wondering how and when to use American Sign Language (ASL) in your own classroom in order to maximize these many benefits. This article will guide you through the daily routine and provide examples of how to make ASL a part of children’s ongoing activities and interests.

How Many Signs and How Often?

Being consistent and repetitive is the key to helping young children learn sign language and to incorporating it as an expected part of the daily routine. Introducing about five to ten new signs a week (based on words that are commonly used in the classroom) is a good number to start with; then you can gauge from there what types of signs you should add and how many are appropriate for your children, based on their interests and how fast they learn the signs. Many preschool teachers who use sign language with their children report that it does not take long for preschoolers to master this “language in motion” (Dennis & Azpiri,

*The articles in this issue have been adapted from Ready, Sign, Go: Using Sign Language to Promote Preschool Learning, by Karen "Kay" Rush. (Highscope Educational Research Foundation, 2011).
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2005). As Marilyn Daniels points out, “Children like to use sign. They pay more attention because of the movement; they become more involved. They are involved in the process of learning and interested in it” (qtd. in Snodden, 2001, para. 5). It has been my experience as a classroom teacher that with consistent use, children begin to use and understand sign themselves in around one month’s time. This time frame can vary depending on how often you incorporate signing into your daily routine and on differences between individual children. Some children may already be familiar with signing since many parents, aware of the link between sign language and early literacy skills, begin teaching signs to their infants and toddlers at home. Just remember, consistency is the key.

**Signing Throughout the Daily Routine**

Learning and using signs for each part of your daily routine (e.g., greeting time, clean-up, outside time) provides another way to let children know what to expect in the day ahead, adding to their sense of safety and security as they anticipate and follow the day’s events. A consistent daily routine allows enough time for children to pursue their interests, make choices and decisions, and solve child-sized problems in the context of ongoing activities. Throughout the day, teachers and caregivers can use sign language with children to help make transitions within the routine smoother and quieter. Just imagine a teacher yelling across the room to tell children where to go next, as opposed to a teacher signing from across the room the next thing that will happen. As an alternative to signaling a transition by having a child or an adult beating a drum or ringing a bell to get everyone’s attention, teachers can instead give the five-minute reminder in sign language. Signing can also be a useful alternative for young children who are sensitive to loud noises. Next we will take a look at signing in each of the different parts of the daily routine.
Greeting Time

Since most preschool programs begin their day with greeting time (also called circle time in many programs), this is a good place to start using sign language within the daily routine. You can start the day with your favorite “Good Morning” song with accompanying signs.

Another important part of greeting time is the time when children and adults gather to read the daily message board. The message board supports children’s language and literacy development by encouraging purposeful conversation, reading, and writing. By using simple drawings, letters, and words, teachers facilitate learning at different levels of development. Reading the message board also provides opportunities for introducing mathematical concepts, as when children read numerals on the board or figure out how many of their classmates are in attendance (Gainsley, 2008).

Large-Group Time

Using sign language with songs during your large-group times is an effective way to introduce your children to ASL. Children are used to doing movements with fingerplays, songs, nursery rhymes, and chants, so signing at this time will seem natural to the children. See this issue’s “Classroom Hints” article for a close-up look at using sign language at large-group time.
Small-Group Time
Signing is an effective accompaniment to small-group activities in many different content areas. You can use sign language to enhance children’s early learning experiences when telling and reading stories, and doing activities focused on the creative arts, mathematics, and science.

Planning and Recall Times
Teaching children the signs for the interest areas in your classroom can be useful as you carry out planning and recall-time strategies. Children can sign to one another and to the adults the area they plan to work in; or, during recall, adults can sign the name of an area and ask children who worked there during work/choice time. For example, young children or children new to the program often simply “point” to an area when they first begin to plan their work-time activity. Teaching them to use the appropriate sign encourages them to use gestures in a more descriptive or informative way. Similarly, children who do not yet provide much verbal detail when they plan or recall may be able to elaborate more fully if they have learned the signs for specific materials or actions they will (or did) use at work time.

Another strategy adults can use is fingerspelling the letters in children’s names as a way to encourage turn-taking for planning or recall. For example, a teacher might say, “Whose name begins with this letter? [Teacher signs the letter B] Briana, yes, your name starts with the letter B. Tell us what you’re planning to do at work time.”

Work/Choice Time
Signing is also an effective accompaniment to work-time activities in the different interest areas. Using the appropriate adult-child interaction strategies, adults can use sign language to describe the actions and materials the children are using and to support the choices children make during the course of their work, choice, or other activities.

A note of caution, however; as adults, we don’t want to dominate or change the focus of the children’s play during work time. So be careful not to make signing the focus of what the children are doing or have done. Signing should be incorporated into their play, not become their play.
Using Sign Language Throughout the Daily Routine, continued

Materials and actions. Teaching children the signs for the materials they use and their actions during activities can provide additional opportunities to incorporate signing throughout the daily routine. For example, in the block area, children can learn the signs for the different sizes and shapes of the blocks they use. They can also learn the signs for the different structures or creations that they build with the blocks, such as car, building, stage, house, castle, and spaceship.

Pretend play. Adults can sign the roles and characters that children portray while engaged in pretend play. For example, the children in the HighScope Demonstration Preschool often engage in scenarios that involve pets and their owners. This gives the adults opportunities to introduce a variety of animal signs, such as cat, dog, and fish, as well as other signs related to their play scenario (e.g., owner, eat, food, walk, veterinarian).

Problem solving. During work time, there are many opportunities for children to engage in problem solving with materials and ideas. For example, children might “help” one another carry a “heavy” block or figure out how to “stack” two blocks on top of each another, and so on. Adults can sign what children do as they solve problems with materials. They can also teach the children how to sign, “It worked!” which is the one-word sign success! in ASL.

Conflict resolution. As children interact with one another throughout the day, there are bound to be some conflicts. Often conflicts occur when children have a hard time expressing their feelings. Teaching children the signs for feelings and emotions can help them express themselves when they can’t “get it out” in words. Signing encourages conflict resolution, and helps children to communicate with each other more effectively. Teaching children signs such as stop, share, and help can greatly enhance the problem-solving process and support children’s efforts to resolve conflicts and get along with one another.
Using Sign Language Throughout the Daily Routine, continued

Transitions

Transitions within the daily routine can be challenging and sometimes stressful for children and adults. Using sign language can help make transitions go more smoothly. As noted earlier in this chapter, a major transition within the daily routine is cleanup or put-away time. Adults can use sign language to let children know that work time will soon end and cleanup or put-away time will begin in five minutes.

Using sign language can also make some other transitions — such as going from one activity to another — go more smoothly. For example, the adult might say, “It’s time to go outside. When I sign a color you’re wearing, go to your cubby and get your jacket. If you’re wearing clothing with the color [say and sign red], get your jacket. Sam and Ella are going to their cubbies because they’re both wearing clothing with the color [say and sign red]. If your shoes are the color [say and sign brown], you may now go to your cubby to get your coat.” When children have learned the signs for colors, you can simply use the sign and have the children name the color.

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In summary, when using sign language in your classroom, remember to keep it simple, make it fun, and make it meaningful. But also be sure to give the children what they need to learn the signs: consistent exposure along with opportunities to use signing throughout the daily routine. As you incorporate more signing into your teaching practices and as part of meaningful conversations with children about their ideas and interests, you will soon begin to see your preschoolers use sign more frequently and more accurately.

References


Karen “Kay” Rush is an Early Childhood Specialist at the HighScope Educational Research Foundation in Ypsilanti, Michigan, where she trains and mentors preschool teachers in the HighScope Curriculum and writes articles for HighScope’s publications, ReSource and Extensions. Kay also serves as a substitute teacher at the HighScope Demonstration Preschool.

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If you are wondering how to introduce your children to American Sign Language (ASL), large-group time is an ideal place to start. During this part of the daily routine children are already used to doing movements to songs, rhymes, fingerplays, and other activities; signing will build naturally on what they are already doing.

Start with songs your children are familiar with. When introducing the sign language of a song, talk to children briefly about who uses sign language, explaining how Deaf people use their hands to talk and sing. You don’t have to give a full history lesson about sign language, just a brief sentence or two to let children know they are about to do something different with the song than they normally do when singing it. You might say something like “Today we will sing a song without using words. We’ll make motions with our hands, which is called **sign language**. Deaf people use their hands to talk to each other because they can’t hear sounds like each other’s voices. Today we’re going to use sign language to sing our song with our hands. Watch and copy.”

Show the children the signs for the words or phrases in the song first, and let them practice the signs separately before starting the singing activity. Sing the song with children without recorded music, so you can control the speed of the song. This way, as children learn, their hands and movements can keep up with each other, and they can slow down if they have to or speed up if they want to.

Don’t worry about teaching children each and every single word of the songs or fingerplays; just the main phrases are important. For example, when we first introduce the song “Friends,” sitting in a large circle that includes everyone in the classroom, we use the sign for **all** to represent the whole line “All my friends are here with me...” Then we sign **me** by pointing to ourselves. It is important to keep it simple for the children, and true to ASL grammar and sentence structure. Articles such as the, an, and a are very rarely used in sign language. Most pronouns are implied; that is, they are established at the beginning of a conversation. For example, if you are talking about a “girl” in a story, you would use the sign **girl**, then fingerspell her name, sign her name sign, and then “place” her in an established space within the signing area by pointing to it. For the remainder of the story, you would point to that space when you refer to her. (If you are referring to someone in the signing area, you would simply point to that person.)

The thing to keep in mind when singing songs with children is to keep the activity simple. You may want to initially introduce three or four signs and then gradually add new signs each time the children sing the song. You will know how fast to introduce signs by how quickly your children learn to use them while signing.

Here is an example of a familiar song and a list of the signs and a description of the related hand gestures. As children simultaneously sing and sign, they are not only building their sign vocabulary, but they are engaged in a multisensory experience that will enhance their early learning and literacy development.

**Skiddy-mer-rink**

Skiddy-mer-rink a dinky dink,
Skiddy-mer-rink a doo,
I love you!

Skiddy-mer-rink a dinky dink,
Skiddy-mer-rinky doo,
I love you!

I love you in the morning
and in the afternoon,
I love you in the evening
and underneath the moon;

Oh, Skiddy-mer-rink a dinky dink,
Skiddy-mer-rink a doo,
I LOVE YOU!
Skiddy-mer-rink a dinky dink, Skiddy-mer-rink a doo,  

[This is a nonsense phrase, and the children together can decide how to make the sign. This is a good time to incorporate choice time into large-group time.]

I love you.  
I — point to self with forefinger (pointer).  
LOVE — Cross arms over chest  
YOU — Children can point to one another.

(Repeat)

I love you in the morning  
MORNING — Place one arm horizontally in the crook of the elbow of the other arm and raise that arm straight up from the elbow toward your body. The hand that is moving represents the sun. (The horizontal arm represents the surface of the earth. Thus, the movement of the hand shows the sun coming up over the horizon in the morning. See photos on p. 3).

and in the afternoon  
AFTERNOON — Place your arm horizontally across the front of your body with the fingertips resting under the elbow of the other arm. Slightly bend the other arm forward half way down. The horizontal arm represents the earth and the hand that moves is the sun; together they represent the relationship of the sun to the earth in the afternoon.

I love you in the evening  
EVENING — Place your arm horizontally across the front of your body with the fingertips resting under the wrist (palm facing down). Then slightly bend the other wrist forward and down.

And underneath the moon  
MOON — A modified C handshape taps the side of the forehead. The handshape represents a crescent moon. To represent the full moon bring the C handshape off the forehead and out in the air and use the other hand to make a circle together forming the full moon.

Skiddy-mer-rink a dinky dink, Skiddy-mer-rink a doo,  

[Same as above.]

I Love You!  
I — point to self with forefinger (pointer).  
LOVE — Cross arms over chest  
YOU — Children can point to one another.

You can see and hear teachers perform "Skiddy-mer-rink" with children on the CD accompanying Ready, Sign, Go! (HighScope Press, 2011), by choosing "Large-Group Times: Songs" from the menu.
Another large-group activity is the stop-and-go game. Children can dance to music while the teacher or another child signs stop, and all the children freeze in their tracks. Then the sign for go is signed and they begin again. It is sort of a modified version of the “freeze” game. You can add signs later to this game, for instance, slow, fast, jump, hop, and so on.

By using sign language in these kinds of activities, children will be more likely to sign with each other during movement experiences and will be more receptive to learning and using ASL in other parts of the daily routine.
Using Sign Language With the Letter-Links System

BY KAREN “KAy” RUSH

This 90-minute workshop is designed to assist teachers in becoming aware of the benefits of using the letter-links system in conjunction with American Sign Language (ASL). The objectives of this workshop are for participants to: (1) use the letter-links alphabet system with the sign language manual alphabet and (2) develop ways to link the two systems to enhance preschoolers’ learning.

What You’ll Need: Handout (Opening Activity; see box below for how to create); a manual alphabet chart or a chart made from page 58 in the HighScope book Ready, Sign, Go! Using Sign Language to Promote Preschool Learning (Central Ideas and Practice); a chart of the nine steps of “Getting Started With Letter Links” from pages 45–47 of Ready, Sign, Go! (Central Ideas and Practice); card stock, scissors, masking tape, markers, and glue sticks; multiple copies of the manual alphabet; and copies of the HighScope book Letter Links: Alphabet Learning With Children’s Names (DeBruin-Parecki and Hohmann, 2003; Application Activity).

Opening Activity

Whose Name Is This?

(20 minutes)

1. Give participants the handout with three to four letter-linked puzzles.

2. Give participants about five minutes to figure out the names based on letter-linked symbols and the formation of the letters.

3. Have a discussion based on these questions:
   - How did participants figure out the correct names?
   - What strategies did they use?
   - What prior knowledge did they need
   - How did they know what symbols stood for what letters?

4. Discuss with participants how children figure out how to spell or recognize their names. To a preschooler learning the alphabet, the letters of their name may look just like those foreign symbols that had no meaning to you in the opening activity.

5. State that having prior knowledge helps. Using the letter-links system in combination with the ASL manual alphabet is another way to help children learn the letters in their names.

Central Ideas and Practice

Ways to Use Letter Links

(20 minutes)

6a. Explain the letter-links system as a name-learning system that links and pairs a nametag with a picture of an object that starts with the same letter and letter sound as the child’s name. Talk about how children and teachers use letter links for many purposes. For example, letter links are used on children’s nametags and belongings, on sign-in sheets and job charts, and are printed on cards for writing practice in the writing area. Mention how, as teachers focus on alphabetic principle, letter-linked cards become materials during planning, recall, and small- and large-group activities. Show examples of the letter-linked nametags and show Letter Links: Alphabet Learning With Children’s Names in English and Spanish. Also if you have access, demonstrate Letter Links Online (go to the...
HighScope website at www.highscope.org and type “letter links online” into the search field).

6b. American Sign Language uses a series of hand shapes called the manual alphabet; signing the alphabet to make words is known as finger spelling. Show a manual alphabet chart or page 58 in the book Ready, Sign, Go! then practice signing each letter with the group. Sign and then have participants copy. Then have participants find a partner to practice signing the alphabet with and to fingerspell each other’s names or their own.

6c. Combining the two systems supports the development of memory. Research studies confirm that a child’s memory of the sequence of words is dramatically improved when taught using the manual alphabet and fingerspelling (Mechelli et al., 2004). Therefore, simultaneously presenting words visually, kinesthetically, and orally enhances a child’s language development. Clearly, children need solid visual knowledge of letters to read well; when the visual knowledge is combined with signing the manual alphabet (the more modes the better), reading performance improves.

7. Post the nine steps of “Getting Started With Letter Links” on pages 45–47 in Ready, Sign, Go! Also, for your background information, read Chapter 2 of Letter Links: Alphabet Learning With Children’s Names. There are only eight steps in this book. A ninth step is to add the finger-spelled manual alphabet to the picture with the nametag.

At the end of this part of the activity, allow participants to take a 15-minute break.

Application Activity
Make Your Own Letter-Linked Nametags
(20 minutes)


9. Make a list of the names of the children in your program and the choices you could provide for them for letter-linked pictures. Try to provide at least three choices per name.

Implementation Plan
Plan for Using Letter-Linked Symbols With ASL
(15 minutes)

10. Letter-linked symbols and the manual alphabet support children’s concrete learning of alphabetic principle. Write down an implementation plan that maps out your first steps in using them in your preschool classroom.
NEWS BRIEFS

New Features for OnlineCOR

We recently added new features to OnlineCOR that make this tool even more valuable. There is now a robust lesson-planning feature — making it easier to use COR data to inform instruction. Administrators may also use this interface to view teacher plans/routines so they can more easily mentor teachers in the lesson-planning process. In addition, you can now access OnlineCOR through your iPad or Android tablet, which allows you to put anecdotes into the system as you do your observations. If you don’t have access to Wi-Fi in the classroom, no problem...you can sync the tablet to your computer later.

Program Quality Assessment Goes Online!

The Preschool PQA is a rating instrument designed to evaluate the quality of early childhood programs and identify staff training needs. The Preschool PQA is appropriate for use in all center-based early childhood settings including, but not limited to, those using the HighScope educational approach. Administrators can use the OnlinePQA to evaluate programs and classrooms, and teachers can use it to evaluate their own classrooms. Both can use it to identify professional development needs.

New Partnership With Discount School Supply

HighScope recently partnered with Discount School Supply® to create pertinent supplemental product kits. Approved by HighScope to support specific curriculum books, the kits provide top-quality products in convenient sets designed to help teachers follow the HighScope approach to early education. These new product kits are available exclusively from Discount School Supply. The three new kits cover literacy, science, and mathematics. To see the kits, click here.

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The conference is scheduled for May 2–4, 2012.

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ASK US

BY KAREN “KAy” RUSH

I have heard that using sign language in the preschool classroom can help reduce conflicts, but I’m not convinced. How might this work?

— A Preschool Teacher

In signing classrooms, adults report fewer instances of biting, hitting, and screaming because children are better able to express themselves, which in turn reduces their level of frustration and makes them less likely to engage in aggressive behaviors. Furthermore, some preschoolers are more apt to tune out or not listen when they become emotionally upset. Signing not only helps children express their own feelings, but it can also help them pay closer attention to the feelings expressed by others, as well as to the proposed solutions. In other words, some children’s eyes are open more than their ears during conflict resolution, which means signing can be an especially effective strategy for expressing and sharing feelings, and communicating solutions.

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