

TITLE: An Evaluation of Program Outcomes for Parents in the Baby Sign Program

Introduction/Goals:

The early years of development can be a frustrating time for a caregiver or parent when it comes to communication with a preverbal child about what they need when the only means of communication on their end comes in grunts and gestures. In order to raise children in an environment of love and trust, parents need to be made aware of and given the tools that allow them to understand children's needs and guide them appropriately (Barth et al., 2005). Parent education provides a mechanism to intervene with families that may face challenges in raising children and assist them in developing the patterns of care that are important for a healthy childrearing environment (DeBord et al., 2006).

The deliberate use and teaching of symbolic gestures (i.e representational) through parent modeling as a way of communication with a child who is not yet capable of verbal speech and is not hearing impaired is referred to as Baby Sign. Baby Sign is currently a growing and popular adapted sign language to promote early communication and development between children and families (Howlett et al., 2010). There are various opportunities to learn about or participate in the Baby Sign approach through books, videos, or classes (Gongora & Farkas, 2009). The beginning of Baby sign as a language taught to preverbal children, with no ties to a hearing-impaired individual, began in 1996, but has gained popularity through popular media (Barnes, 2010). The American Academy of Pediatrics has recognized the positive effect that baby sign efforts can have on communication between parent and child, but there is to this point a limited understanding of how baby sign programs can provide a variety of benefits to parents of young children.

The *Baby Sign* program has recently been developed as a primary prevention-focused parent training program with families involved in parenting young children who are preverbal or have communication challenges. Currently, the program is being implemented on a pilot basis by three sites in North Dakota with parents of young children. The key objectives of this study were:

- 1) To design an initial program evaluation for use with participating parents in the Baby Sign program;
- 2) To gather feedback from parent participants and assess perceptions of program value and impact regarding the Baby Sign program;
- 3) To explore implications of teaching Baby Sign as a parent training intervention and whether it might assist with parent-child understanding, communication, and emotion management.

Methods: The Baby Sign program is a parent training program designed for use with parents raising young children who are either in the preverbal stage or may have communication

difficulties. It is intended to assist parents in developing positive and nurturing parental strategies and behaviors for understanding and communicating with a young child. The program consists of a series of parent training sessions that are designed for parenting young children, learning the basic elements of baby sign, and using communication strategies to enhance understanding. Typically, participants are involved in a multi-session program that involves weekly meetings, group learning and discussion, and repetition of basic baby sign and parental skills.

The Baby Sign parenting program is in its pilot phase in North Dakota and has been piloted by parent and family educators at three different sites in the state. The researchers for this project developed a program evaluation based on the objectives and content of the existing Baby Sign program to allow for formative assessment of the experiences of participants in the program. The program evaluation consisted of demographic, participant satisfaction, and Likert-type questions for participants to complete, as well as open-ended response questions. A retrospective post-then-pre design was used to gather feedback from participants in three complete sessions of the Baby Sign course. Participants included 28 parent participants with children under the age one year. Analyses of the participant data involved calculation of means and standard deviations for demographic and participant satisfaction items, while a paired t-test analysis was conducted to examine participant perceptions of program effects. Also, a thematic qualitative analysis of open-ended responses was conducted.

Results: Participants in the pilot sessions of the Baby Sign program expressed high satisfaction with the class, rating it highly on a 5-point scale ($M = 4.64$). Additionally, they felt instructors were well prepared ($M = 4.56$), material was well presented ($M = 4.80$), information would be useful to them ($M = 4.67$), and class materials were helpful ($M = 4.84$). Class participants also felt that it was helpful to them in several ways to a “large” or “great” extent (5-point scale), including being more attentive to their child’s needs ($M = 4.33$), helping them to communicate more effectively with the child ($M = 4.48$), and planning to use baby signs regularly due to the class ($M = 4.45$). Comparison of parent perceptions of their knowledge in specific areas prior to and following the class indicated statistically significant gains in knowledge of child development, children and cognitive development, children and language development, and usage of baby sign strategies. Paired t-test analyses also showed significant increases among participants in perceived confidence with their young child, feeling of closeness to the child, and comfort in responding to the child. Parents also rated the Baby Sign class ($M = 3.57$) as a more useful source of information on parent-child communication and baby signs than eight other possible sources of information on the topic.

Implications: While the results of this intervention are promising, they are based on limited information provided thus far and further evaluation remains to be done. However, the feedback provided through the implementation of the program at pilot sites indicates that the program is being well-received. This program evaluation provides an initial step in exploring the pilot feedback given on the Baby Signs parenting program and its potential usefulness with parents who are guiding young children in their critical early years.

References

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