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Introduction

ASL (American Sign Language) and BSL (Baby sign language) are highly specialized forms of sign language that are widely used for the purpose of communicating with preverbal toddlers and infants. Over the past two decades, Sign languages have gained increased popularity among people who are parents of infants and toddlers. ASL and BSL are also designed to assist children in expressing their wishes and needs much earlier in life than they would without these communication aids (Swanwick, 2001, p. 67). This is primarily why baby signing experts are of the strong opinion that negative behavior among children such as tantrums and frustrations can be effectively avoided if children are taught to communicate in a more positive manner through the use of sign language.

Discussion

Numerous researchers have acknowledged that children learn to understand signs at a very young age. For example, if taught or trained well, children of about six months of age can learn basic signs that cover concepts and objects like ‘teddy bear’, ‘bath’, ‘play’, ‘cold’, ‘hot’, ‘more’, ‘pacifier’, ‘sleepy’, ‘hungry’, ‘water’, ‘milk’, and ‘thirsty’. Petitto et al. (2001), author of ‘Bilingual signed and spoken acquisition from birth: Implications for the mechanisms underlying early bilingual language acquisition’, conducted research to prove that when consistently and regularly exposed to sign language, children of six to seven months of age actually begin understanding these signs very efficiently by the eighth or ninth month (Petitto et al., 2001, p. 41).

Sign language usually consists of three things - manual signs, key words, and gestures. These signs, gestures and key words are specifically designed for adults and children who suffering from learning, language, and communication difficulties (Petitto et al., 2001, p. 41). The ability to use a sign for a particular word is extremely helpful for children in the long run. This is because it boosts their communication skills and provides what may be termed a 'bridge' to the spoken word (Petitto et al., 2001). In addition, sign languages also help facilitating the acquisition of written and verbal forms of communication in the later stages of the learning process. These are the main reasons why learning sign language at an early age can prove to be of immense benefit to individuals.

Fischer (1998) explains that children who learn to use and understand sign language at a very early age also exhibit a range of psychological benefits. These benefits include greater self-esteem and improved confidence in oneself. In addition, negative feelings such as anger, frustration, and resentment are also strongly subdued in such children. Hence, being able to use sign language to communicate can prove to be a lifesaver for children suffering from learning and communication difficulties, particularly at times when the child is experiencing anxiety (Fischer, 1998).

Parents, too, have acknowledged that myriad benefits that they can gain by teaching their children how to 'sign' words. For example, signing is largely regarded as rewarding since it facilitates bonding between the parents and the child (Fischer, 1998). This is mainly because of the fact that establishing and maintaining eye-to-eye contact is an integral part of sign languages and this helps the child to bond with their parents. Sign languages also aid bonding because they involve more tactile contact. Since it is imperative that parents establish and maintain a strong

bond with their children in the early years in order to facilitate their learning, sign language can play a pivotal role in achieving this objective (Fischer, 1998).

Apart from this, there are several other reasons why sign language can be considered an effective mode of communication between parents and children. For example, when at a public place, it would be far easier for a parent to reprimand their child by using sign language rather than through a verbal reprimand or warning (Meadow, 2005, p. 323). A parent may simply use the appropriate gesture for no in order to discourage the child from repeating a certain behavior. This is certainly a kinder way of reprimanding the child rather than reprimanding him in front of random strangers. Where a verbal reprimand in public would probably hurt his self-esteem too and affect his self-confidence, a signed reprimand works more effectively in getting the message through without hurting the child in anyway (Meadow, 2005, p. 323).

In the same way, a signed complement can also prove to be more effective in praising the child for a certain behavior. This is because it is common for humans to believe that words undermine the emotional strength of a complement (Meadow, 2005, p. 323). For example, after saying sorry to a person a couple of times, the words seem to lose their meaning. Hence, a child may be more pleased if a parent gives him a signed compliment. From the point of view of a parent, it is also true that sign language brings numerous advantages such as reduced guesswork regarding what the child is thinking or what he is trying to say (Meadow, 2005, p. 323). The use of sign language as a mode of communication also encourages children to communicate with their parent more openly.

According to Power (2005, p. 455), communication plays a key role in the early behavioral, emotional, social, and cognitive development of children. He also acknowledges that there exists a strong connection between difficulties in communication and behavioral problems

such as shyness. It is also true that learning how to effectively use and understand sign language helps to boost the mental development and vocabulary skills of a child (Power, 2005, p. 455).

Children using sign languages also exhibit a marked reduction in tantrums and a stronger bonding with their parents. A stronger bonding helps parents to develop a better understanding of their child's personality.

When keeping in mind the fact that children need to learn to communicate effectively from a very young age in order to gain self-esteem as well as self-confidence, it is clear that sign language provides a myriad of benefits to both parents and children by aiding communication and promoting positive behavior (Power, 2005, p. 455). Numerous researchers have also proven that consistent use of sign language allows children to communicate more effectively. This is because they are able to communicate with others by using words as well as gestures. Hence, their audience is able to understand them more easily.

Conclusion

When debating whether or not children should learn to use sign language, it is clear that it provides a myriad of benefits to both children as well as parents. Although some researchers have expressed their concerns regarding sign language discouraging the early use of verbal communication among children, these statements are not grounded in meticulous research and credible evidence. In the long run, it can certainly be said that sign language is one of the most effective and helpful ways of communication for children as well as parents.

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