

Requesting Using Signs

When working to establish communication, we usually work on requesting first. Requesting is the only form of language that directly benefits the child and so learning to request teaches your child that talking is valuable and words are powerful!

1) To teach this concept of requesting, select strong reinforcers/something your child really wants

- something consumable (food or drink) (very small amounts given at a time)
- something of short duration (bubbles, tickles)
- something easy to take away (music or videos – can be turned off)
- something that can be given over and over again

Your child has to WANT the reinforcer or it won't work. If he/she just ate lunch, food won't be a good reinforcer. What is reinforcing changes throughout the day, week and month.

2) Follow the procedure used in the example below:

- present a cookie (the reinforcer)
- say "what do you want?"
- immediately sign and say "cookie" and then
- immediately physically prompt your child through the sign (*why sign? Because we can't make your child say words and because your child needs to complete some sort of activity/to communicate in some way to get what he/she wants. Pairing the words with the signs won't decrease the chance your child will say words – it actually increases the chance your child will use words as he/she will realize that words are easier to say than signs are to make. You could also consider the use of picture cards – whether to use signs, picture cards or to focus strictly on teaching a child to talk is currently being debated among those who work with children with developmental delays and disorders*)
- immediately deliver a small piece of cookie
- repeat and repeat this procedure as much as you can, giving a small bit of cookie each time
- move through the steps fast. The point, initially, is that your child accepts the prompt (the prompt is you shaping his/her hand into the sign) (*if your child resists you shaping his/her hand, work over time on desensitizing his/her hands by giving gentle, deep pressure on the hands and palms. Also, try to hold his/her hands during playful routines when you are having fun together.*)

3) As your child begins to learn to do the sign, you fade the prompt

4) At first, select a few clear and very strong motivators that do not have signs that look the same (for example, the signs for "eat:" and "drink" are very similar in how they are done and so both should not be taught in the beginning.) Possible examples may include: cookie (or another favorite food), music, swing, ball, up, tickle. Once you select the favorite activities/items, use the above procedure consistently throughout the day. It will take your child much longer to learn how to sign if sometimes you use the above process and other times you just let him/her have what he/she wants without having to sign. So, if you choose "swing" as one of the early signs to teach, but you don't always make your child sign "swing" when he/she wants to swing, it may take your child a very long time to learn to use that sign.

As your child learns some signs and is using them to request, then use this process with as many things as possible during the day. Think of all the things you do for your child that you can set up as requests! Your child may be doing a lot of things independently for himself (getting toys he wants, getting a snack, turning on the TV, etc.). While independence is important, most children learn those kind of independent skills easily. **Learning language is HARD WORK and it is VERY hard to teach! So you might want to think about creating multiple situations all day long that make your child DEPENDENT on you and dependent on learning to request in order to get what he wants.**