

## EARLY DEVELOPMENT

# Say it with a sign

While baby signing has been practised in the US for years, it's only now coming into vogue in Ireland. **Carmel Doyle** looks at the benefits for you and your baby

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**R**EMEMBER the film *Meet The Fockers* where the rather psychotic character played by Robert De Niro teaches his grandson 'Little Jack' to communicate his needs via sign language? So imagine your baby could express emotions such as love, happiness or frustration and needs such as hunger or thirst using simple gestures before they are able to speak, and you could communicate back in the same manner, repeating the word or expression you are conveying at the same time.

Baby signing is a movement that has been prevalent in the US for over 25 years now, but this form of infant-parent communication is only starting to catch on here in Ireland.

It was in 1982 that two psychology professors, Dr Linda Acredolo and Dr Susan Goodwyn, started to research how babies could potentially communicate using signs. Their interest was sparked after they observed Linda's little girl, noticing how she was using a 'sniff-sniff-sniff' gesture to refer to flowers.

Deciding to delve further, Acredolo and Goodwyn noticed that babies between the ages of 10 and 24 months were spontaneously using simple gestures to represent words they weren't yet able to say. For instance, they saw that a baby might pant for "dog", or flap their arms for "bird". This led them to devise Baby Signs, a new form of infant-parent communication, with their book *Baby Signs: How to Talk to Your Baby Before Your Baby Can Talk* being published in 1996. As part of their baby signing approach, Acredolo and Goodwyn draw on simple signs from American Sign Language.

Veronika Pavlisova is currently Ireland's first Baby Signs instructor and operates classes in Dún Laoghaire. She describes baby signing as a natural baby sign language that allows babies and their parents to use simple signs to communicate

important things like being hungry or thirsty, hot or cold, afraid or sad, often a full year before babies can speak.

Pavlisova herself first heard about signing with hearing babies during her own pregnancy. Using some Baby Sign products she started to teach her then nine-month-old daughter signs.

"Once I could see that my daughter was excited that she could communicate with me, I wanted other parents to know about signing, but because Baby Signs doesn't have any partners in Ireland, I did distance learning training."

Many babies, in their desperation to communicate, spontaneously create gestural symbols or "signs" to stand for the things they want to talk about, according to Pavlisova.

"They may blow-blow-blow when their food or bath water is too hot, or pant-pant-pant to let you know they see a dog."

### Modelling signs

So how does baby signing work? "Once you know that babies are eager to use simple gestures to stand for things, the next step is to make it easy for them by purposefully modelling signs for things they are likely to want to talk about," says Pavlisova.

She says such signs could represent if your baby is hungry or thirsty; if they like their bath water; if their food is too hot; or if they hear an airplane flying



overhead.

At the beginning, she says parents start with only two or three signs and then gradually add more.

And when can you expect your little one to start signing back to you?

Explains Pavlisova: "The answer varies from baby to baby, depending on a child's interest in communicating, the development of related skills such as memory, imitation and attention and the frequency with which parents model the signs. The most typical age range for first signs is between 10 and 14 months."

### Language development

While some people might be concerned that encouraging your child to use sign language might slow them down in starting to talk, the opposite happens, according to Pavlisova.

"Acredolo's and Goodwyn's research found that two year olds who had used baby sign language had significantly larger verbal vocabularies than their non-signing peers. And by the time they were three years old, the language skills of the babies who had used baby sign language were more like that of a four year old."

Veronika Pavlisova is currently running a six-week play class called *Sign, Say & Play in Dún Laoghaire, Co Dublin*. It's designed for parents and children (aged six months to 2.5 years). For further information, visit [www.babyvillage.ie](http://www.babyvillage.ie).

