SIGN/Gestures SUPPORTED LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN NURSERIES AND PREScHOOLs

TRAINING

# Signing with hearing children and their parents

The use of sign supported language developed with the intention to offer hearing children from linguistically different environments a chance to communicate in a more differentiated way, i.e. communicate their emotions, wishes and needs before they are able to do so in spoken language of the early years environment, and for as long as the efficiency of spoken language production (with special regard to vocabulary) is lower than that of sign production.

The essential argument for the promotion of this method is that the use of sign supported language leads to an improved communication; that is, the children are more content because can understand what is expected from them and can communicate clearly, the care givers get more information about their children’s concerns, needs and wants because there are fewer misunderstandings. Sign supported language helps to tear down the barriers of silence and opens new worlds of communication between a child care professional and a child. Further arguments to support the use sign supported language are that it promotes the children’s cognitive capabilities (concentration, perception and information processing) and leads to improved social skills, emotional stability, improved self-confidence through communicative achievements, linguistic creativity, i.e. through ‘inventing’ new signs by themselves, and a faster spoken language development. Through the development of their fine motor skills as well as the multimodal linking of acoustic and visual coding, they improve their memory and their imagination. Some of the benefits of sign supported language with the children who do not speak English as their first language have been summed up as follows:

* Sign communication gives the child the ability to express his or her important needs and wants
* promotes the development of language and literacy skills
* it reinforces language skills already developed
* it reduces frustration from not being able to express one’s needs
* accelerates the development of spatial reasoning
* develops the understanding of language for the communication of emotions
* creates the feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment
* increases creative thinking
* teaches (the elements of) a second language that is formally and nationally recognized (e.g. it is based on the British Sign Language)
* It reduces unexplainable emotional outbursts.

# Target groups for sign support langauge instruction

Target groups of ‘Sign support language instruction’ are all hearing children. It benefits the children who speak English as their first language it is however specially recommended in the classrooms with large numbers of children who do not speak English as their first language. Sign supported language instruction is always supported by spoken language. The method can also improve the contact with hard-of-hearing and deaf children (cf. below), as well as with the children with different impairments (developmental or emotional disorders, learning disabilities, Down’s Syndrome, Autism, Aphasia, cerebral palsy, difficulties with learning or producing spoken language, etc.). The common topic of Sign supported language instruction is improving communication between children and adults and this is essential also for other groups of children with special needs. It is therefore possible that the approach of signing with children can be complement with special education approaches. There are many children with special needs who have problems with socialization in kindergarten and transitions within daily routine. They can find it difficult to organize themselves, express themselves or they can have speech or language delays or disorders or emotional difficulties. Our approach can therefore also be used also with children with Down’s Syndrome, children with attention deficit disorder (ADD), children with dyslexia, learning-disabled children, children with autism, children with speech and language disorders, deaf-blind children and many other groups. If working the special needs children some additional adjustments to the teaching can be recommended, depending on the target group.

# How to use sign suppoted language

An important aspect of Sign supported language instruction with children is helping parents and child care professional to support child’s development. All the activities support the Early years framework England and topic such as: A Unique Child, Positive Relationships, Enabling Environments and Learning and Development. We use the so-called key word signing approach, where the most frequent words from the child’s every day routine are signed. The words have been identified through the observation of experts at work in the kindergartens and relate to the topics of meal time, dressing up, hygiene, play time, the important others (family and other) and feelings. Further words have been identified through the review of books and songs which are most commonly used in the first three years of child’s development. We have come up with the recommended list of signs to start with when introducing Sign supported language into childcare playrooms. They are taught in sign communication courses by our instructors in our region and abroad. We promote the approach using standardized signs based on the British sign language. This was first introduced by an American researcher, Joseph Garcia, in America who used signs from American Sign Language. There are several advantages of this approach, among others it involves many iconic signs from the particular socio-cultural environment which are therefore easier to learn and bridge the gap between the hearing and deaf environment. They can be used in childcare and other educational settings because they are standardized. When forgotten they can be looked up again, they can be used by anyone, in childcare and other educational settings, and furthermore they can provide an introduction to a second language. Therefore the signs on drawings which are attached in the lesson plan all belong to BSL used by the deaf and hard of hearing people in Britain.

Courses for Sign supported language instruction are very much oriented in auditory/ oral communication. One of the rules is to always say a word as well while using key signs. Instructed to speak and sign the key word at the same moment we can enable a child to distinguish the most important word in a sentence. It can help a child to start a process of being able to have more auditory experiences listening to songs and simple stories. Playful activities are the main part during a course and laughing, giggling, singing, and playful silly noises and gestures offer good auditory stimuli to the early developing mind. This can be very useful in developing the parts of the brain that make connections with sounds and that produce sounds.

## The use of the method in practice:

The method can be used as a structured group approach. This is usually delivered in play and stay sessions either in Children’s centers or other play and stay settings (such as various playgroups organised by childminders, church groups, other NGOs). They can be delivered also in the nurseries. This would mean that the member of Language in your hands would go to the nursery and deliver a one hour session usually in a slot of 10 weeks. The play and stay sessions are usually the sessions attended by mothers and children. The number of children varies between 8 to 20. During this time the parents would be introduced to the theory of sign supported language, the benefits of signing, how to sign with the child to achieve the best results, the stages of signing and the basic vocabulary. The parents are also given the materials which would encourage them to sign at home. If the sessions are implemented in the nurseries they can last during the whole year on a weekly basis. In this case the basic and advanced vocabulary can be covered.

The lessons usually start with the meet and greet song, followed by the introduction of the topic through Signing Sam’s bag, the signing story, songs to support the topic, activities, recap and goodbye song.

The activities are very engaging and we have seen children join in regardless of the language they speak. It is often the case that the children who do not speak English start to talk to us using their own language using one or two of the signs as well. They very quickly all join in in signing and specially like the action songs.

The second approach is an informal approach which is delivered by child care professionals themselves. The Language in your hands train child care professionals on a regular basis. They then use the signing during their work with children. This is usually when introduction the activities of the day, circle time, story time, snack time, and other activities. They report that children very well respond to signing and that they indeed enjoy using the method.

## Example of the activity

The topic: How do we feel?

The aim is help children to understand different emotions and to use signs to express their emotions /emotional needs. The second aim is also to communicate the state of illness through signs.

1. Introductory song: I am glad you came today.
2. Introducing the topics: the bag with emojis: each child takes one of the emoji character out and we show the sign, ask the children how the emoji character feels and discuss about it
3. Story: Chose the story of your own which expresses the emotions. For example Dogs don’t do Ballet: read and sign the story and ask children to sign every time there is an emotion expressed in the story
4. We can sign the song If we are happy adapted to emotions
5. We move on to the signs for not being well. We act out the story of how the teddy bear or a dolly does not feel well. One of the children can be the doctor and one can be the mummy.
6. We explain the signs for ill, temperature, medicine, doctor, nurse, hospital, doctors.
7. We sign the song: Mrs. Polly had a Dolly who was sick and recap the signs.
8. Bye, bye song which can be bubble song.

Additional materials needed:

• Puppets / emojis, familiar characters / teddies / dolls

• Musical instruments and I player

• toys / pictures / photos

• Story books

• Simple vocabulary / signes

• Rhyme bag – objects / pictures to represent songs

• Echo microphones