

UNDERSTANDINGS, EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCE OF PARENTS IN TERMS OF USING BABY SIGN LANGUAGE AS A MEANS OF SUPPORTING A CHILD'S EARLY COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Gestures are not only preconditions for a language but also predict a linguistic development and a child's purposeful gesturing can be considered to be the beginning of conscious communication. Several studies have concluded positive effects of baby sign language for toddler's language development and development of communication skills. Using gestures during a child's pre-language period motivates them to acquire and use the language by giving them a linguistic example. Activities based on gestures can be used to develop a toddler's vocabulary and language skills early on. Supporting early on development of communication skills can have a positive effect on the education system by reducing the number of children that may require special education services. The goal of the research is to find out understandings, expectations and experience of parents in terms of using baby sign language to support child's verbal language development and early on communication. Based on the research objective, the following research questions were established: 1) How are parents understanding baby sign language as a means for the first communication method? 2) What are the expectations of parents for baby sign language courses as a supportive means for developing a child's language? 3) How are parents evaluating the effects of baby sign language on a child's language development? 4) How are parents evaluating the change in child-parent communication during the baby sign language course? For the thesis, a qualitative research method and semi-structured interviews as a research instrument were used. The sample consisted of 10 parents who have participated in at least one baby sign language course. To analyse the collected data, the principles of qualitative content analysis were used. The analysis of the data showed parents are increasingly considering it important to consciously develop their child. They are getting more competent at finding the appropriate tools for that, considering it important to use the sign system for early communication with the child. Parents are aware of the possible positive effects the baby sign language courses have on the development of a child's language skills and explain desire to support their child's linguistic development and reduce the possible difficulties of language acquisition in the future. According to the parents, participation in a baby sign language course helps to support the development of a child's oral language by increasing the vocabulary, giving the child a skill of sentence construction and understanding of the grammatical structure of the sentence allowing to use a common communication tool with a parent. The study showed parents who participate in a baby sign language course are paying attention to developing a child's communication skills which allows parents to take into consideration a child's needs and growth in order to better understand a child's thoughts and prevent frustration.

Keywords: *Baby signing, development of verbal and nonverbal communication, development of communication skills, parent-child bonding.*

1. Introduction

Human communication consists of both verbal and non-verbal forms, the latter playing a crucial role in early childhood development. During the pre-linguistic period, children intentionally use gestures to initiate and maintain communication, establish joint attention, and express needs, desires, and interests (Tomasello, 2003; Lüke et al., 2022). Research indicates that children's earliest communicative acts are often mediated through hand movements and gestures, which precede the emergence of spoken language (Limia et al., 2019).

Pointing, or deictic gestures, are considered the first manifestation of intentional communication and typically emerge between 8 and 10 months of age, prior to the onset of speech (Goodwyn et al., 2000; Kuvač Kraljević et al., 2014). Through pointing, children direct a communication partner's attention toward

an object or event, enabling the expression of intentions and facilitating shared understanding (Tomasello, 2003). These gestures are regarded as foundational for language development, as they are closely linked to joint attention and early speech comprehension (McNeill, 2005).

Symbolic gestures usually develop after deictic gestures and carry specific semantic content (Crais et al., 2004). Typically developing children begin using symbolic gestures between 13 and 16 months of age, often before their spoken vocabulary reaches approximately 25 words (Acredolo & Goodwyn, 1988; Rowe & Goldin-Meadow, 2009). Such gestures may represent objects, actions, or culturally conventional meanings and serve as a bridge between visual and spoken communication (Iverson et al., 1999).

Gesture use and spoken language development are closely interconnected. Previous studies have shown that gestures not only precede speech but also predict later language development (Iverson & Goldin-Meadow, 2005). Early gesture use may enhance children's communicative confidence and support language development by providing an effective means of expression during a period when speech production is still emerging (Capone & McGregor, 2004; Goodwyn et al., 2000).

Evidence suggests that the combined use of gestures and speech can accelerate spoken language development and facilitate vocabulary growth (Acredolo & Goodwyn, 2000). These findings underpin the concept of baby signing, a gesture-based communication approach that enables hearing children to communicate prior to acquiring spoken language (Mueller & Acosta, 2014). A fundamental principle of baby signing is that gestures are consistently accompanied by grammatically correct spoken language and are intended to support rather than replace speech (Doherty-Sneddon, 2008).

In Estonia, an Estonian Sign Language-based program titled "*Baby Signing: Communication Before Words*" has been developed in collaboration with sign language experts and is intended for typically developing hearing children. Despite international research on baby signing, no previous studies in Estonia have examined parents' perceptions, expectations, and experiences regarding its impact on children's spoken language development. Therefore, the aim of this research is to explore parents' views, expectations, and experiences of baby signing as a support for early communication and spoken language development.

2. Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach in order to explore parents' lived experiences with baby signing. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to describe their perceptions and experiences in depth.

The sample consisted of ten parents who had participated in baby signing courses. Participants were informed about the purpose and objectives of the study and provided informed consent prior to participation. Most parents joined the baby signing course when their child was between six and eight months of age, although the sample also included younger and older children, as well as one parent who used signing with the child from birth.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using speech recognition technology developed at Tallinn University of Technology (Olev & Alumäe, 2022). Data were analysed using thematic content analysis. The analysis followed a six-step process: transcription, initial coding, identification of categories, development of themes and subthemes, refinement of thematic structure, and interpretation of findings in relation to the research questions and existing literature.

Ethical principles were strictly followed. Participants' identities were anonymised, participation was voluntary, and interview data were accessible only to the researchers.

3. Results

3.1. Parents' perceptions of baby signing

Parents generally described their initial perceptions of baby signing as positive and intriguing. Baby signing was viewed as a valuable tool for understanding the child before the emergence of speech, reducing frustration, and supporting early self-expression. Parents highlighted both child-related benefits and personal gains, such as acquiring new skills and increased awareness of child development.

The motivations for joining baby signing courses varied and included curiosity, interest in alternative communication methods, a desire to support language development, and concerns related to possible speech delays. Parents particularly valued the supportive learning environment, playful teaching methods, and sense of community provided by the courses.

3.2. Expectations regarding language development support

Parents expected baby signing to support spoken language development primarily through improved speech comprehension and vocabulary growth. Compared to everyday communication, baby signing was perceived as fostering greater parental presence, joint attention, and focused interaction.

Parents emphasised that the simultaneous use of gestures and spoken words helped children form meaningful associations, thereby facilitating word learning and retention.

3.3. Perceived impact on children's spoken language development

According to parents, children typically began using gestures before producing their first spoken words, often by one to two months. Gestures were primarily used to express needs, desires, emotions, and interests. Many of the concepts communicated through gestures were phonologically complex words that were difficult for children to articulate at an early age.

When spoken words emerged, children often combined words and gestures, particularly when articulation was challenging or vocabulary was limited. For typically developing children, gesture use gradually decreased by the end of the second year of life, whereas children with atypical language development continued to use gestures as a supportive communication strategy for a longer period.

3.4. Changes in parent-child interaction

Many parents reported that participation in the baby signing course led to more conscious, calm, and emotionally attuned interaction with their child. Joint attention, eye contact, and intentional communication became central elements of daily interaction. Parents described increased sensitivity to their child's developmental level and communicative cues, which contributed to reduced frustration and a closer parent-child relationship.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that parents perceive baby signing as a meaningful and effective tool for supporting early communication and spoken language development. Baby signing enables children to express themselves before speech emerges and provides a foundation for later language acquisition. According to parents, the combined use of gestures and speech supports the formation of semantic associations, enhances speech comprehension, and promotes vocabulary development.

For parents of children with atypical language development, baby signing was considered a valuable early intervention strategy that reduced communicative frustration and provided children with an accessible means of expression. These findings align with previous research emphasising the importance of parental responsiveness, joint attention, and multimodal communication in early language development (Iverson & Goldin-Meadow, 2005; Kaiser & Roberts, 2011).

Overall, the study highlights the importance of increasing awareness of non-verbal communication and baby signing as a complementary communication tool. Parents reported improved interaction quality, increased communicative confidence in children, and greater motivation to use spoken language as articulatory abilities developed.

The main limitations of this study include the small sample size and the diversity of participants' backgrounds, which limit the generalisability of the findings. Future research could include larger samples and longitudinal designs to further examine the long-term effects of baby signing on spoken language development.

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