Encyclopedia of LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Patricia J. Brooks
EDITOR
College of Staten Island and the Graduate Center of City University of New York

Vera Kempe
EDITOR
Abertay University
Home Sign

Defe children who are born to deaf parents and exposed to sign language from birth learn that language as naturally as hearing children learn the spoken language to which they are exposed. Children who lack the ability to hear thus do not have deficits in language learning and can exercise their language-learning skills if exposed to usable linguistic input. However, 90 percent of deaf children in the world are born to hearing parents who are unlikely to know a sign language program designed to train parents to teach sign language to their children and that could be accessed by their children. The deaf children’s own linguistic and cognitive abilities are not a factor. However, certain deaf children have been found to have difficulty learning to understand and use the sign language they hear from their parents. However, deaf children who are exposed to sign language early in life and who have access to sign language instruction early in life are more likely to learn to use sign language fluently.

See Also:
- Cross-Cultural Factors in Communicative Development; Dialect Usage and Language Development; Effects of Head Start Early Intervention on Language Development; Effects of Schools on Language and Literacy Development; Educating Children with Disabilities: Literacy Instruction; Methods; Reading, Development of; Socioeconomic Factors.

Further Readings


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to make requests of others but also to comment on the present and nonpresent (including the hypothetical) world and to “talk” to oneself—that is, to serve the functions that all languages, signed or spoken, serve. Home sign thus differs from the gestures that hear-
ing children produce as they learn language, which are typically single pointing gestures or an occasional iconic gesture. Hearing children rarely combine their gestures into strings and thus do not produce the ges-
ture sentences that characterize home sign.

Home signers are not exposed to codified language input and, in this sense, differ from children whose hearing parents use baby signs with them. Baby signs were developed to give parents a way to communicate with their hearing children before they are ready to talk. But, home signers are exposed to the spontane-
ous gestures that hearing people produce when they talk, which could, in principle, serve as a model for their gestures. However, co-speech gestures, as they are known, differ from home sign not only in function but also in form. In terms of function, co-speech gesture works along with speech to communicate; home sign assumes the full burden of communication. In terms of form, co-speech gesture relies on mimetic and ana-
log representation to convey information; home sign (like sign language) relies on segmented forms that are systematically combined to form larger wholes. The co-speech gestures that home signers see are thus dif-
ferent from the gestures that they themselves produce.

Two important characteristics of home sign follow from these facts: (1) the linguistic properties found in home sign cannot be traced to the gestures that the home signers’ hearing parents produce when they talk, and (2) home sign systems are not shared in the way that conventional communication systems are shared. The deaf child’s hearing parents produce co-speech gestures, which form an integrated system with the speech they accompany and thus are not free to take on the properties of the child’s home signs. As a result, although parents respond to their child’s home signs, they do not adopt them. Home sign is thus a produced but not a received system and, in this sense, differs from conventional sign languages and even from village sign languages (sign systems that evolve within a community containing more than one deaf individual).

Home signs may, however, hold a special place in the analysis of sign languages. It is likely that many, if not all, current-day sign languages have their roots in home sign. Home signs have much in common even if they are developed in very different circumstances around the globe. These shared properties reflect either the linguistic capacities that all human beings share or constraints imposed by the manual modality itself. Understanding the differences between modern-day sign lan-
guages and home sign provides insight into pressures that move languages away from their original starting points. Home sign thus offers a glimpse into the most fundamental properties of language and provides an anchor point against which to examine the trajecto-
ries sign languages (and perhaps all languages) take as they evolve.

Susan Goldin-Meadow
University of Chicago

See Also: Baby Sign Systems; Gestures in Communicative Development (Overview); Language Development in Deaf Children; Pointing; Sign Language Acquisition; Symbolic “Gesture Names.”

Further Readings

Humor

Humor is relevant in language development for sev-
eral reasons. Humor is communicative in nature as humor is almost always shared. Humor can serve as an introduction to pragmatics as humor has both a literal and intended meaning. Children’s sense of humor reflects their level of language development as one can only understand jokes in relation to ma-
tered concepts. It is thus not surprising that children with communication and language disorders often show humor deficits. Finally, humor may be useful in encouraging language development.

Incongruity Theories
Several cognitive models of humor espouse that humor is the product of noticing and appreciating incongruities, that is, things that are unexpected, unusual, or out of the ordinary. These theories suggest children’s humor develops alongside their cognitive abilities. From a language point of view, as children’s language abilities develop, their appreciation for jokes involving language abilities also develops. In 1979, P. E. McGhee theorized that from 2 years, toddlers produce mislabeling jokes, such as calling an apple a banana, once they have expanded their vocabularies. He also theorized that, from 3 years, children appreciate jokes involving incongruous attributes, that is, jokes involving playing with concepts, such as sug-
gestive wheels are square. These types of jokes could thus be expected when children can verbalize their understanding of concepts.

Research supports this theory to some extent. A case study found one child produced mislabeling jokes from 15 months (e.g., calling a hummingbird a duck). Interestingly, these jokes were made on average 50 days after the words inherent to the jokes were first used. The child also produced jokes based on con-
ceptual incongruity from 18-months (e.g., saying a horse says “baa”). Parents of children between 0 and 4 years report children make conceptual incongruity jokes from 2 years and mislabeling jokes from 3 years,