

FIRST SIGNS

Thirty signs worth knowing, for anyone who spends time with a child who signs. Say the word out loud every time you sign it. You do not need to be fluent to be understood.

NEEDS AND REQUESTS

MORE

Both hands: fingers and thumb pinched into a flat O, pointing toward each other. Tap the fingertips together twice.

Often the first sign a child uses, and the one they use most.

HELP

One hand flat and open, palm up. Rest the other hand on it as a fist with the thumb pointing up. Lift both hands together.

Gives a child a way to ask before frustration asks for them.

WANT

Both hands open in a loose claw, palms up. Pull them in toward your body.

Combines with everything else here: want book, want music.

ALL DONE / FINISHED

Both hands open, palms facing your chest, fingers up. Twist the wrists quickly so the palms turn outward.

Ends an activity clearly. Say it out loud too: all done with snack.

EAT / FOOD

Fingers and thumb pinched together as if holding a small bite. Tap the fingertips to your lips once or twice.

Same sign for the food and for eating.

DRINK

Curve one hand into a C, like holding a cup. Bring it to your mouth and tip it up.

More useful than water alone, since it covers any drink.

WATER

Index, middle, and ring fingers up in a W, thumb and pinkie touching. Tap the index finger to your chin twice.

Thirst is a common cause of sudden upset.

BATHROOM / TOILET

Make a fist with the thumb between the index and middle fingers, a T shape. Shake it side to side.

Learn this one before anything else on the list.

POOP

Make a fist with the thumb sticking up out of the top. Grip that thumb with the other fist from below, then pull the lower hand down.

A separate sign from bathroom. Some children use only one.

PLEASE

Flat open hand on the center of your chest. Rub it in a circle.

Model it rather than requiring it before you respond.

THANK YOU

Flat open hand, fingertips at your chin. Move the hand forward and down toward the person.

Starts at the chin and stays flat, unlike blowing a kiss.

SORRY

Make a fist with the thumb resting along the side. Rub it in a circle on your chest.

Same place as please, different handshape: flat hand asks, fist apologizes.

WATCH THESE SIGNED BEFORE YOU USE THEM

Written directions can only get you close. A sign is handshape, place, palm direction, movement, and face all at once, and in the feeling signs the face carries as much meaning as the hands. Look each one up on video first. Two free and trustworthy places: Lifepoint (ASL University, lifepoint.com) and Handspeak (handspeak.com), both showing signs performed by fluent signers.

FEELINGS AND SAFETY

These are the signs that turn managing a moment into understanding it. A child who can tell you they are scared, rather than only show you, is a child you can actually help.

FEELINGS AND SAFETY

YES

Make a fist, palm facing forward. Bend it up and down at the wrist, like a head nodding.

The most underrated sign here. It lets a child answer, not only request.

NO

Index and middle fingers together, thumb below. Snap the two fingers down onto the thumb once.

Yes and no are the pair that end most guessing games.

STOP

One hand flat, palm up. Bring the other flat hand down onto it sharply, at a right angle.

Short, sharp, unmistakable. Worth knowing for safety alone.

WAIT

Both hands up in front of you, palms up, fingers apart. Wiggle the fingers.

The honest sign for wanting something you cannot have yet.

HURT / PAIN

Both index fingers extended, pointing toward each other a few inches apart. Twist them back and forth.

Make it near the part that hurts, and a child can show you where.

SICK

Middle finger of one open hand touches your forehead, the other touches your stomach. Add the face that goes with it.

Pairs with hurt. Both matter most when a child cannot say either.

HAPPY

Flat hand on your chest, brushing upward in a circle. Two hands makes it bigger.

Name the good feelings too, not only the hard ones.

SAD

Both open hands in front of your face, fingers spread. Draw them slowly downward as your face falls.

The face is part of the sign, not decoration.

MAD / ANGRY

Open hand in a claw in front of your face. Pull it toward you, tightening, with a tense expression.

Gives a child something to do with anger besides escalate.

SCARED / AFRAID

Both hands in fists in front of your chest. Open them suddenly toward each other, like a startle.

Fear and anger look alike from the outside. This tells them apart.

PEOPLE, PLAY AND CONNECTION

The signs that are less about needs and more about being together: choosing, taking turns, asking for a person, and saying the thing that matters most.

PEOPLE, PLAY AND CONNECTION

DIFFERENT

Both hands in fists with index fingers up, crossed so one fingertip rests behind the other. Pull them apart.

Useful for offering a choice, or naming that a plan has changed.

MY TURN

Flat hand tapped on your chest for my. Then hold an index finger up and flip the wrist over toward whoever is next.

The sign that makes group activities survivable.

PLAY

Both hands: thumb and pinkie out, middle three fingers folded down, a Y shape. Twist both wrists back and forth.

Best used just ahead of a transition, not only during it.

BOOK

Palms together in front of you. Open them like a book, keeping the pinkie edges touching.

Pair it with holding up two choices: this book or that one.

MUSIC

Hold one arm across your body. Sweep the other flat hand back and forth above that forearm.

Lets a child know singing is coming before it starts.

MOM

Open hand, fingers spread, thumb leading. Tap the thumb to your chin.

Chin for mom, forehead for dad, same handshape.

DAD

Open hand, fingers spread, thumb leading. Tap the thumb to your forehead.

Useful when a child is asking for a parent and cannot say so.

I LOVE YOU

Thumb, index finger, and pinkie extended, middle and ring folded down. Palm faces the person you are telling.

One handshape holding three letters at once. Easy for small hands.

SIX THINGS THAT MAKE SIGNING WORK

1. **Say the word while you sign it.** Signing alongside speech gives a child two ways in instead of one.
2. **Sign where they can see it.** Get down to eye level. A sign made above a child's head is a sign they miss.
3. **Respond to the attempt, not the accuracy.** If a child reaches toward you with two fists bumping, that is more. Answer it.
4. **Use the same signs every time.** Consistency between home, school, church, and grandparents is what makes a sign stick.
5. **Sign what is about to happen.** Signs are most useful just ahead of a transition, not only during it.
6. **Never move a child's hands without asking.** Hand-over-hand teaching should be invited, not imposed.

HOW MY CHILD SIGNS

Children rarely make a sign the way the book does, and that is not a mistake to correct. Their version is real communication. Write down what it actually looks like so the next person recognizes it.

SIGN	WHAT MY CHILD'S VERSION LOOKS LIKE	WHAT THEY USUALLY MEAN BY IT
MORE		
HELP		
WANT		
ALL DONE		
EAT		
DRINK		
BATHROOM		
YES		
NO		
STOP		
WAIT		
HURT		
HAPPY		
MAD		
PLAY		
MOM		
DAD		

TWO THINGS WORTH KNOWING

Signing does not slow down speech. Parents are told this constantly, and the research does not support it. Giving a child a way to be understood tends to reduce frustration, not replace talking.

American Sign Language is a full language belonging to the Deaf community, not a set of gestures. Using a handful of signs for daily needs is a good start, and if your child is going to rely on signing, learn from Deaf instructors and ask your speech-language pathologist to build it into their goals.