

Using Lámh Signing with children who have Down syndrome

Why use signs at all?

Most children with Down syndrome will experience a stage where they want to communicate, but can't talk clearly enough to be easily understood. It is also often difficult for children with Down syndrome to learn to understand words when they are just spoken, without some kind of visual support. (Visual supports are usually initially facial expressions, gestures and signs, but later will include pictures and written words.)

Using Lámh signs together with spoken words will make it more likely that your child will be understood, avoiding frustration. (Theirs and yours!!) Successful communication is very rewarding, and will encourage further attempts to communicate.

Typical Learning style of children with Down syndrome - strengths and weaknesses

Children with Down syndrome are usually visual learners. This means that they are generally good at learning by watching. Hearing is often relatively poor, with many children suffering from some form of hearing loss, which may be fluctuating or constant. Sounds in words are transient, they are only heard for a very short time. Signs can be held for much longer, giving your child more time to focus and understand. Using signs alongside speech taps into this relative visual strength, and helps compensate for difficulties in hearing, remembering and understanding sounds and words. Using a standardised signing system like Lámh means that the people around your child (like preschool staff, teachers,

Speech and Language Therapists, etc) will understand your child's attempts to communicate. It also means that there is consistency, with the same sign always being used with a word, avoiding confusion and frustration.

How does signing fit into your child's overall speech and language development?

0-6 months

Communication Targets: interaction, eye gaze, joint attention

How? Make sounds, play, sing, copy your child's sounds and facial expressions, take turns, be responsive. Gestures and facial expression are important, but don't worry about introducing signs at this stage. Take time to enjoy interacting with your baby, and make sure to allow a bit of extra time for them to respond.

Around 6-18 months

Communication Targets: as above, plus beginning to understand early words

How? Keep doing all of the above. Add in a few Lámh signs, choosing frequently used, high interest words, and using daily routines to connect the word and the sign with the object or action. Don't expect your child to copy signs or sign back at this early stage.

Around 1-3 years

Communication Targets: building vocabulary and encouraging two way communication

How? Keep doing all of the above.

As your child begins to show understanding of a few words and signs, begin to look out for and encourage attempts to use signs and sounds. Create opportunities for your child to use the signs that they know (eg Blow bubbles, then stop. Wait to see if your child will attempt to sign 'more' or 'bubbles') Add in more Lámh signs to daily routines. Focus on just one or two new signs at a time. Use lots of repetition.



Lámh Early Development News

Around 2-4 years

Communication Targets: building vocabulary, encouraging meaningful communication, introducing pre-reading and early reading activities.

How? As your child's speech develops, begin to fade out any signs which they no longer need (so stop signing words that are now fairly consistent and recognisable when spoken) Continue introducing new signs and words as above. (Still one or two at a time, with lots of repetition).

When your child has a vocabulary of about 50 words or signs, start to encourage the use of two signs together (eg Daddy's car, big ball, my drink..) At this stage, early reading activities like matching pictures and matching words should also be introduced (see DSE 'See and Learn' programme- also available as an app: 'special words') Early reading, like signing, taps into the visual learning strengths of children with Down syndrome.

Which course should I attend?

Ask your therapist about a Little Lámh Workshop if your child is around 6-12 months, a Family Lámh Course if your child is around 1-3 years and a Family Lámh Course Part Two if your child is over 3 (or earlier if they need additional sign vocabulary)

How long should I use signing?

While the focus on Lámh signing may reduce as the child's speech clarity improves, signing will continue to be a useful tool for many children to support their understanding of language, to grasp new concepts and to help clarify their own spoken communication.

Remember that once your child is able to say a word fairly consistently, you can stop using the sign. We use signs to support speech and language development, so once a word is understood and produced fairly reliably, the sign has done its work!

Children are individuals, and will move through these steps at their own pace. Some will need longer in each stage. All ages are approximate!

Anne Watson & Nicola Hart, Senior Speech and Language Therapists, Down Syndrome Ireland

Little Lámh is a new Lámh Workshop for families of very young children and families who only need a small number of signs at this time. Little Lámh was developed by speech therapists in Brothers of Charity Southern Services and is a 2 hour workshop that introduces Lámh and teaches 26 Lámh signs. A Little Lámh book is supplied to families at the workshop.

The Workshop is delivered by trained Lámh Tutors and Lámh Family Trainers. An App for iPad has been developed by a Waterford IT student and includes these 26 signs. It will be launched shortly.

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