

Essential Links

Parent Links

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A Good Start: Suggestions for Visual Conversations with Deaf and Hard of Hearing Babies and Toddlers

Section I: Engage in Frequent, Positive Communication with your Baby to Help Language Develop Faster

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A More In-Depth Look: *Take time to respond to your baby's needs, to let your baby know by your smiles and your touch that he or she is loved. Play and loving contact are almost as important as food to babies!*

All babies need to develop positive bonds with parents or caregivers. These bonds develop — regardless of the hearing level of the parents or the baby — when the parents respond to their babies' needs ([Lederberg & Mobley, 1990](#)). Because young babies can't really tell us what they need, we must observe them carefully, sometimes guess, and try different things to satisfy them. Even though we sometimes have trouble figuring out exactly what a baby wants, the fact that we keep trying teaches babies how important we are to them — and how important they are to us!

It is critical to satisfy a baby's need for food and warmth and safety. It is also important to give the baby more than just those basics. Playing with the baby by exchanging smiles, by gentle touches, and with little games like peek-a-boo constitute more than "play." It is the natural way to strengthen the bond between parent and baby. It is also a natural way to communicate with the baby and build the baby's understanding of communication. Babies who feel loved and secure have extra energy available for learning language and other skills ([Slade, 1987](#); [Thompson, 1998](#); [Vondra & Barnett, 1999](#)).

A More In-Depth Look: *Use as many senses as you can to send messages to a deaf or hard of hearing baby. Emphasize touching games. Move your body and face and hands around in front of the baby. Emphasize your facial expressions even more than usual. Talk to the baby, too.*

Without having to think about it, parents use special ways to communicate with young babies ([Papousek & Papousek, 1987](#)). For example, hearing parents tend to raise the pitch of their voice when they talk to babies. They talk in a "sing-song" manner with a lot of rhythm. They often repeat phrases or sentences several times, giving the baby a chance to anticipate and know what will be said next. Hearing parents also gesture a lot to their babies, often making hand movements in rhythm with their words. They use facial expressions that are usually positive or happy — and they exaggerate those facial expressions compared with those they use when talking to others. Hearing parents also touch their babies frequently, stroking their faces, arms, and legs. Sometimes they hold a baby's feet and make "bicycling" movements with them. The important thing to note here is that hearing parents send messages to babies using more than one sense at once ([Bremner, 1988](#)). Even if a baby cannot hear the parents' speech, the baby can receive the messages sent through the other senses.

Deaf parents use many of the same behaviors to communicate with their babies. Although many don't use speech as often as hearing parents, they emphasize the other senses even more ([Erting, et. al, 1994](#)). They repeat signed messages again and again, and they make their signs "dance" with rhythm. Deaf parents also touch and stroke their babies' faces and bodies often, even more often than hearing parents usually do ([Maestas Y Moores, 1980](#)). Sometimes deaf mothers make signs directly on a baby's body. For example, I saw one deaf mother repeating "pretty baby" to her 3-month-old. When the mother made the sign for "pretty," which is usually made touching the signer's face, she made it on the baby's face instead. Then she leaned back a little and signed "baby" the regular way. All the while, the mother smiled and watched her baby. When the baby smiled back at her, the mother's smile became brighter.

In fact, deaf mothers so strongly emphasize their facial expressions with babies that they may look quite exaggerated to hearing adults. But the babies love those expressions, and watch and sometimes imitate them while smiling and laughing. In as many situations as possible, deaf mothers prefer using positive rather than negative-looking facial expressions ([Reilly & Bellugi, 1996](#)). Even when the grammar rules for sign language call for a lowered-eyebrow expression (that might look negative to a baby), deaf mothers substitute a raised-eyebrow, happy expression. These exaggerated and happy facial expressions, plus gestures or signs, make the mothers very interesting for the babies to look at — and the babies begin to learn that it is important and pleasant to watch their mothers. If hearing parents increase these kinds of communication behaviors, they will make their own communications more interesting to their deaf or hard of hearing baby, thus making it easier to keep the baby's attention.

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