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CAPTION: Evie Yoraway of Eden Prairie is pictured here at the age of 6-months when she started learning sign language. PHOTO COURTESY: Jen Yoraway.



CAPTION: Marsha Peterson with her son, Chad, when he was a baby. Chad is now 17 and communicates using sign language. PHOTO COURTESY: Marsha Peterson.

An Easy Way to Share the Benefits of Sign Language with Your Hearing Baby

(Eden Prairie, MN) – When they are eight months old, most babies still communicate their needs and desires by whining and crying, but not little Evie Yoraway. At that age, she was practically carrying on conversations with her parents.

“No she wasn’t talking yet,” laughs mom, Jen. “She was communicating using sign language.” Jen and Evan Yoraway of Eden Prairie, Minn., decided to start teaching their daughter sign language after reading about its many benefits in a parenting magazine.

The article they had read highlighted the results of a ten year study (1989 – 1999) funded by the National Institutes of Health. Dr. Linda Acredolo, a professor at the University of California, and Susan Goodwyn, Ph.D., a professor of psychology and child development at California State University did the research. They found that hearing babies who learn sign language have a definite advantage over those who don’t.

In addition to proving that hearing babies who learn sign language talk sooner, the study also found they get a jumpstart on their intellectual development, display fewer signs of frustration and aggression and are generally more self confident. The Yoraways say the findings definitely hold true for their daughter, who is now 19-months old and “talking up a storm.”

While there are many tools available for teaching babies sign language, including flash cards, videos and picture books, the Yoraways quickly discovered that Evie learned best when working 1-on-1 with her parents. Her favorite tool, the ***Talking with Baby*** book series, developed by fellow Eden Prairie resident, Marsha Peterson, the parent of a child with special needs.

Peterson’s son, Chad, was born with Down’s Syndrome and later diagnosed with Autism. He is now 17, and has never been able to communicate verbally. “When Chad was a baby I was advised to teach him American Sign Language, and I’m so glad I did because it really cut down on his frustration,” says his mother. “To this day, when he wants to communicate with someone he gets their attention and starts signing. He now knows the signs for more than 1,000 words.”

Like most children, as Chad was growing up, he enjoyed spending time with friends and family and loved to read, but it was disappointing to his mother that there weren’t any stories out there “in his language.” After getting laid off from her job as a pricing analyst in Jan. 2009, Peterson decided to devote her time to a project she had been wanting to complete for a long time.

The first installment in the Talking with Baby book series: ***Come Sign with Us: The Adventures of Potts and Friends*** was published by Beaver’s Pond Press of Edina, Minn., in June 2009. Story number one, “Yum! Morning Breakfast,” introduces babies to the signs they need to begin their day, including Good Morning, Mom and breakfast.

Story number two is “Bath Time Bubbles.” It teaches the words and concepts associated with bath time, including wet and dry, soap and bubbles. Peterson says the next two stories in the series will be about baby’s first birthday, animals and colors. Future stories will include signs associated with music and numbers, as well as childhood adventures.

“Some of the recent research I’ve been doing stresses teaching in context so kids will understand the words and how they transfer to other settings. That’s why I decided to focus on stories involving activities that kids take part in every day,” says Peterson.

Yang Zhang, Ph.D., a University of Minnesota professor who has conducted years of research in the area of language acquisition skills, says Peterson’s teaching method is right on. “Brain imaging studies done on babies who have received enriched exposure to language prove that the enrichment helps them learn,” he says. “Whether it’s teaching sign language, Spanish, Chinese, French or some other foreign language, it is the 1-on-1 interaction that really makes a difference when it comes to brain development.”

“I am thrilled that an activity I consider to be so fun is making a difference for my daughter,” says Yoraway.

In the review she posted on Amazon.com, Sally Knaeble, a retired teacher from Eden Prairie, Minn., said, “This is a great teaching book. It takes you through a series of stories and pictures, and slowly introduces you to the words and symbols for signing. The fact that the book pops open like a tent allows you to read the book and sign at the same time. It is a 'must have' book for all parents.”

Come Sign With Us: The Adventures of Potts and Friends is a Beaver’s Pond Press book. It sells for \$24.95 and is available at local book stores and through the author’s Web site: www.TalkingWithBaby.com.

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About Rachel M. Anderson

Rachel is a freelance writer who lives in Minnetonka, Minn. She has written professionally on family matters for the Minneapolis Star Tribune and Tampa Tribune newspapers.