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Speech and sound are absolutely necessary to achieve normal language acquisition.  
Early exposure to sign harms normal spoken language acquisition.



**Brain and Language Laboratory for Neuroimaging**

A resource hub of the NSF Science of Learning Center for Visual Language and Visual Learning

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**BUSTED**

- ▶ All hearing children acquire language on a strikingly regular developmental timetable, revealing the same universal language acquisition milestones: babbling ~6 months, first words ~12 months, first two-word combinations ~18 months, etc. This was thought to be due to the importance of speech development and hearing.
- ▶ Children with early exposure to signed languages achieve every one of these universal milestones in language acquisition and on the same developmental timetable (including babbling ~6 months — but on their hands!).
- ▶ Studies of early sign-exposed deaf children show that exposure to a visual language facilitates the acquisition of spoken language. The classic patterns of bilingual language learning are present even though one language is soundless and the other is based on sound.

*Implications: Speech and sound are not necessary for normal language learning. Early sign exposure does not harm a child's chances of learning English; it helps. A child who is exposed to sign and English is bilingual. All children receive benefits from early bilingual language exposure. A bilingual ASL-English language learning model is vital to young deaf children's normal language acquisition and academic success. The belief that learning sign language should wait until the child is older risks the deaf child missing the critical language development period and the benefits that come from bilingual learning.*