



RESEARCH BRIEF: FINGERSPELLING

Appendix B.

The Developmental Process in Fingerspelling Acquisition

Typically fingerspelling and American Sign Language acquisition occurs simultaneously; however, this chart (see back page) focuses upon approximate developmental trajectories for fingerspelling.

Stage One

The earliest handshapes produced by deaf and hard of hearing toddlers use the whole hand; more complex handshapes are developed later as dexterity improves. Substitution of visually similar handshapes in the place of more complex ones is common in young children. In addition, transitioning between some letters (e.g. D and R) requires the more advanced motor skills acquired at a later age.

When ready for preschool, children exposed to ASL from birth know which vocabulary words to fingerspell, such as names of people, places, and simple proper nouns. Signing children are developmentally ready to understand how fingerspelling represents printed English. It is during this time that children begin to explore the relationship between fingerspelled handshapes and the printed letters.

Stage Two

The second stage of fingerspelling development focuses on a shift of attention to individual letters when attempting to fingerspell. Deaf children in this stage become aware of individual letters, and this is similar to the development of the alphabetic principle in hearing children. This occurs around four years of age for deaf children of deaf families. The children, though, often have handshape substitutions (5 handshape for W). Stage two continues until approximately third grade for children with early access to visual language, but it can continue until later for children who did not have the advantage of early fingerspelling.

Stage Three

The third stage of fingerspelling development is when the child has finally mastered neutral fingerspelling, including the appropriate handshapes in the correct sequence with correct movement. In this stage, which occurs around third grade for native signers but can continue to adolescence, there is a convergence of skills or fingerspelling synthesis when the child is able to

8-12 months	12-24 months	24-36 months	36-48 months	48+ months
Finger babbles in response to conversations.	Uses simple handshapes to form signs, mostly whole-hand letters and numbers/ handshapes: B, C, O, A, S, 1 and 5.	Uses handshapes of increasing complexity, such as L, G, F, Q, D, Z, Y, I, and J, to form signs.	Uses more handshapes of increasing complexity, such as V, H, W, U, T, H, K, P, X, Y, R, E, M, and N to form signs.	Begins development of the alphabetic principle by learning that lexicalized signs are made of handshapes.
First signs may appear.	Perceives fingerspelled words as a whole unit, known as a <i>movement envelope</i> .	Understands simple fingerspelled words (own name, pet's name, etc.).	Uses lexicalized signs abundantly, e.g. BUS, TV, and NO.	
Uses pre-linguistic gestures.	Early attempts at fingerspelling, sometimes to self.	Uses lexicalized fingerspelling to spell own name and names of others.		
	Begins using lexicalized fingerspelling.			

fingerspell a word, write the word, and understand the word when someone else fingerspells it. That is, reading, writing, and fingerspelling are integrated to the extent that each supports the other.

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