

# Teaching Signing as a Request (Mand)

by  
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If it has been determined that sign language is the response form to be used with a specific child, it is helpful if all those working with the child follow the same procedures to teach the child to sign. Appropriate prompting and prompt fading procedures will insure the child learns to use new signs with little frustration, allowing the use of signs to be heavily paired with reinforcement.

It is often helpful to teach things that come in or can be broken into small pieces as the first requests since this will allow us to have multiple opportunities to practice the new signs. It also allows us to give the child more of the item when he learns a new skill on the way to independent signing. If the things the child desires are not those that can be broken into small pieces, it will be important to teach the child to give up a reinforcing item so that you can have multiple opportunities to practice. To do this, ask the child for the item when they're holding it. If the child does not give you the item, take it away and immediately give it right back. If the child begins to scream, cry or exhibit other inappropriate behaviors when the item is taken, turn away, ignore or use the counting procedure until the child stops exhibiting the negative behavior. Then, prompt the sign and give the child the item back. Continue until the child is giving the item to you on request. As soon as he gives it to you on request, reinforce heavily and allow him to keep the item for a longer period of time. Conduct repeated trials of this throughout the teaching session and gradually add other tasks between the response when the child gives you the item and asks for it back.

Some items the child may desire will not have standard signs. If this is the case, a sign can be made up. Be sure all those working with and interacting with the child know the sign he uses for the item so that it will be reinforced consistently. Signs can also be made up or modified if the child is unable to perform the fine motor movements required for the standard sign. When making up signs, try to use something that's "iconic" or looks like the item the child will request.

Before trying to teach a child to sign for an item to request it, it will be important to determine that the child actually wants the item at the time. (Establishing operation). This can be done by observing the child stare at the item, reach for the item or attempt to guide your hand to the item. It can also be done by offering a bit of the item or playing with the item with the child for a while.

We want to be sure to always pair the spoken word with the sign as well as with the item itself. The name of the item should be said 1) whenever you prompt the sign, 2) whenever the child produces the sign and 3) whenever the child receives the item.

If the child ever approaches someone and produces multiple signs, it is important that these "chained" responses not be reinforced. In other words, the child should not get the item. The child should only receive the item if he signs the single sign. Use prompting and prompt fading procedures to insure this. For example, if the child approaches and performs 3 consecutive signs, don't give him anything. If you know what he wants, prompt the sign, then ask, "What do you want?" to get an independent sign by itself before giving the child the item. If you're not sure what it is he wants, make a few of his favorites visible. As he reaches for the item he wants, prompt the sign then ask, "What do you want?" to get an unprompted response.



**What if the child is unable to imitate fine motor movements?**

1. Provide a hand over hand prompt of the sign. Physically manipulate the child's hand(s) to form the sign.
2. Say the name of the item as you manipulate the child's hands.
3. Repeat the name of the item as you give the child the item.
4. Provide multiple opportunities for the child to request the item.
5. Fade the hand-over-hand prompt as you begin to feel the child move his hands himself. It's often helpful to fade the last step of the sign first or gradually lighten your touch as the child performs the sign independently.
6. As part of the child's program, teach him to imitate other movements so you will be able to teach new signs through the less invasive prompt of imitation.

**What if the child is able to imitate fine motor movements in response to "Do this" but not if I say the name of the item when I sign?**

1. Say, "do this" and perform the sign.
2. Say the name of the item and perform the sign again. The child should imitate since he just performed the same movement.
3. Say the name of the item as you hand the child the item.
4. Gradually add other tasks between the "Do this" trial and the independent trial until the child is able to imitate the sign she you say the name and model the sign.

**What if the child is able to imitate the sign when I say the name of the item and model the sign?**

1. Say the name of the item as you perform the sign.
2. The child performs the sign. Say the name of the item as the child signs.
3. Do a transfer trial. Ask, "What do you want?"
4. The child repeats the sign. Say the name of the item as the child signs.
5. Say the name of the item as you give the child the item.
6. Gradually add other tasks between the imitative trial and the new response to "What do you want?" until the child is able to respond without the model.

**What if the child is able to sign to request the item but only if I say "What do you want?" (While we want the child to learn to respond to this question, we don't want him to only be able to ask for things when someone asks him what he wants. A "pure mand" is based solely on the child's desire for the item.)**

1. Ask, "What do you want?"
2. Child signs the item name. Say the name of the item as the child signs.
3. Give the child a small amount of the item then look at him expectantly.
4. If the child repeats the sign, give a larger amount of the item.
5. If the child does not repeat the sign, give a partial prompt such as moving your hands partially into the position for the sign. When the child performs the sign, say the name of the item and give it to him. Gradually fade out your imitative prompt.

**What if the child is able to sign to request an item but only if the item is present? (We want the child to be able to ask for things he cannot see.)**

1. The child signs for an item.



2. Say the name as the child signs and repeat it as you hand the child a small amount of the item.
3. Put the item out of sight and wait for the child to repeat the sign.
4. Gradually move the item to a different location. Let the child watch you as you put the item in the location. Give the child more of the item when he requests it when it is out of sight.

**What if the child is able to sign for things he sees or does not see but does not get my attention before signing?** (If the child is signing and no one is responding, he may stop signing because the sign is not reinforced. We want the child to learn to get a person's attention before performing the sign.)

1. Use 2 instructors. Have the first instructor hold the desired item but turn away from the child.
2. The second instructor prompts the child to touch the first instructor's arm. As soon as he does, the first instructor turns to the child and asks, "What do you want?" (or looks at him expectantly or acknowledges him by saying "yes?" if he's able to request without hearing the question).
3. The child signs to request the item. The first instructor says the name of the item as she gives the child the item.
4. Fade the second instructor's prompt until the child is tapping/touching the first instructor independently.

Throughout teaching, be sure to prompt the child if he is not responding within 2 to 3 seconds then be sure to fade the prompt. This will help keep the child successful and avoid frustrations.

