

American Sign Language Foundation Expected Prior to Entering Kindergarten: A Checklist

Children’s language abilities can be described in terms of how much they understand of the language used by others around them (receptive language abilities), as well as the kind of language they are able to produce (expressive language abilities). The development of language abilities is closely related to children’s social and cognitive development, therefore, key features of these developmental areas are included here to present a holistic picture of what children should have in terms of “Kindergarten Readiness” competencies. Children who are missing some of these competencies may be slower to progress in attaining the K-12 ASL Content Standards.

| Receptive ASL Abilities: | | |
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| 1. Understands that signs are symbols to communicate meaning. This involves cognitive processing at the symbolic level in order to understand that one thing can represent another. | | |
| 2. Understands signing that is on a videorecording (as opposed to face-to-face); this involves another level of abstraction. | | |
| 3. Understands that maintaining eye gaze is necessary to give and receive language; An important developmental component of acquiring a visual language is appropriate visual attention (Loots & Devise, 2003; Harris, 2010; Koester, Papousek & Smith-Gray, 2000). | | |
| 4. Can follow simple directives (e.g., Time for bed now; or Go get your coat.). | | |

| Expressive ASL Abilities: | | |
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| 1. Develops accuracy in phonological skills in conjunction with motor and linguistic skills; Eight handshapes account for 84% of productions of children under 18 months of age: A, C, S, 5 (lax and bent), baby O, and G (Conlin et al., 2000) the location parameter is produced more accurately and with less variability than handshape and movement parameters of signs (Conlin et al., 2000; Marentette & Mayberry, 2000; Siedlecki & Bonvillian, 1993, 1997) face, head, and neutral space (in front of the body) are the most common locations for signs in children under 18 months tends to rely on a small set of movements and often replaces distal articulator movements (hands or wrists) with more proximal articulation (shoulder, torso) (Meier, 2000; 2006). | | |
| 2. Demonstrates beginning use of fingerspelling (Anderson & Reilly, 2002; Blumenthal-Kelly, 1995; Erting, Thumann-Prezioso, & Benedict, 2000; Padden, 2006). By 2 years of age, young children acquire the shape envelope of fingerspelled words, and lexicalized fingerspelling. In the early elementary years, they map fingerspelling to printed English forms. | | |
| 3. Demonstrates ASL pronouns (pointing) on pace with pronoun development in spoken language, around 17 – 20 months (Petitto, 1987; Pizzuto, 1990); As with children acquiring spoken languages, children who acquire sign language make pronoun reversal errors (i.e., signing you when they mean me) (Petitto, 1987). | | |

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| <p>4. Has ASL vocabulary that is rich, diverse, and robust. Some research has shown that children’s first signs may occur earlier than spoken words, generally around 8 – 10 months, as compared to 12 – 13 months (Anderson & Reilly, 2002); however this advantage does not extend to later developmental milestones (Meier & Newport, 1990).</p> | | |
| <p>5. Can express actions, nouns, adjectives, requests, protests, and social monitoring (i.e., please, thank you).</p> | | |
| <p>6. Can sign in sentences, including those with two or more ideas. Similar to spoken language, the combination of two lexical signs occurs at 16 – 18 months.</p> | | |
| <p>7. Uses of facial expression (nonmanual markers) for grammatical purposes. While children exposed to ASL use facial expressions for emotions (and these emerge by their first birthday), although children begin to use them at an early age (18 – 20 months) at this point grammatical facial expressions are still “connected to” their lexical signs and the hands and face and may revert to using lexical forms with blank faces as they learn the manual and non-manual grammatical rules and how they interrelate (Reilly, 2000, 2006). There appears to be a developmental precedence of “hands before faces” (Reilly, 2006), with children producing the lexical structures (signs) for questions, conditionals, negatives, direct quotation, and then later integrating the facial markers; this acquisition process continues up through even age 7.</p> | | |
| <p>8. Can sign reciprocally with peers; uses signs, rather than physical communication. This reflects the presence of communicative intent and the need to use language to interact socially.</p> | | |
| <p>9. Uses ASL to share everyday experiences.</p> | | |
| <p>10. Uses ASL to ask questions about how things work and about the surroundings; asks for help when necessary. This indicates an understanding of a key purpose for communication.</p> | | |
| <p>11. Uses ASL to tell or retell stories. Children at age 3 use unclear references and omit arguments, and even at age 4-9 children are still making numerous errors with spatial mapping in their storytelling (Loew, 1984).</p> | | |
| <p>12. Understands that language is something that can be evaluated for its grammatical and semantical correctness.</p> | | |
| <p>13. Comprehends and produces language play. Playing with language involves manipulating linguistic features and bending and sometimes breaking its rules. In order to do this a good understanding of the rules is needed (Cook, 2000; Crystal, 1998). Examples of language play in ASL include repeating signs in rhythm, using a series of signs with the same handshake, or moving the location of the sign onto another individual’s body (Snodden & Pollock, 2004).</p> | | |

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| <p>Socio-cognitive Understanding There is a strong relationship between the development of language and the development of cognition; and both skills are dependent on meaningful social interaction. Children who are ready to acquire language appropriate to their age demonstrate the certain social and cognitive behaviors. Researchers (Halliday, 1975; Snow, 1984; Vygotsky, 1986) note that these children are likely to do the following:</p> | | |
| <p>1. Understand the self as a separate identity. This is a concept needed to comprehend dyadic referencing; these children know their own name sign.</p> | | |
| <p>2. Use name signs for people in their lives. These children comprehend pronominalization, indexing, and verb directionality, and clearly distinguish between themselves and others.</p> | | |
| <p>3. Demonstrate curiosity, persistence, and exploratory behavior; these characteristics ensure the child is actively engaged in learning the rules of language by forming, testing, and re-formulating hypothesis.</p> | | |
| <p>4. Engage in pretend play, including “signing to self;” using language to direct thoughts is an essential step in cognitive development and establishing an “inner voice.”</p> | | |
| <p>5. Demonstrate categorical understandings (e.g., can sort objects by color, type, or size); Sorting and classifying are skills required to establish new vocabulary and an organized mental lexicon.</p> | | |
| <p>6. Know numbers to 10; Basic number concepts are needed for a variety of grammatical structures, including plural forms and noun distribution.</p> | | |
| <p>7. Understand the passing of time This concept influences understanding of verb tense.</p> | | |