

83 - Sign Language from Cradle to 4K

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Audience: Current Active & Enrolled Students

Episode Transcript

Host Dr. Shipley: Hello, everyone, and welcome to Early Childhood Chatter with Dr. Shipley and Dr. Heald. And as always, we will be uploading a new episode every other week on Wednesdays.

Host Dr. Heald: Twice a month, we'll come to you with a 10-minute professional development with new ideas for you to try. Don't forget to subscribe to the podcast for notifications about future episodes.

Today, we are so excited to have with us our friend Tanya Hayes with us today. Tanya is a veteran speech therapist with a master's in education and has specialized as an early intervention speech therapist.

She served children for over 30 years in the home, the childcare settings, and public schools. Most importantly, she has a heart for helping parents and early childhood professionals know and use strategies that help children find their voice. Tanya has worked with the SC School for the Deaf and Blind, and for the past 12 years, she has worked with Sprout Pediatrics and specialized in children with language delays, apraxia, and children on the autism spectrum.

Today we are super excited to welcome Tanya to our podcast. Welcome Tanya.

Tanya Hayes: Hi, I'm so tickled to be with you guys.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Tanya, you and I got to chat for a little bit yesterday, which was super exciting, while I was on the treadmill.

Tanya Hayes: Yes, good for you.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Yeah, I know.

I know. So, we talked a little bit about the sign language that you're teaching. So that was my foreign language in college, and it was one of my favorite classes.

But then I told you also I used that in my pre-K and kindergarten classroom. So, thank you for being here because your title today is Sign Language from Cradle to 4K. The brain loves it and why you should be using it more.

So, I was super excited when you turned this in. So why did you choose this topic?

Tanya Hayes: Well, I love that you're already on board and see the value of it. You were sharing so many wonderful ways that you implemented it in your classroom.

And I just know that such a broad spectrum of folks can benefit from using sign language. From parents to early childhood professionals who might be caring for babies and toddlers, to even our preschool teachers, whether they're in a for-profit childcare center or a church or private school setting, as well as even grade school teachers are benefiting and seeing the benefits of using sign language in their classrooms. And so, I just wanted to kind of bring this topic out, and us to kind of get started with this conversation about how it is useful for infants and toddlers before they have

language. But it's also super great for children who are late talkers, or possibly non-verbal because they have Down syndrome or autism or something.

And they're still working to find their voice and get their words. So, it's just a super great conversation to have and it benefits so many people.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Yes, I agree.

So why do you think that this topic is so relevant for our teachers, our administrators, our family? Why do they need to understand this?

Tanya Hayes: Well, first of all, we need to all take a step back and realize that we are in the middle of an epidemic of late talkers. We were seeing the beginnings of it pre-COVID, but after COVID, we have just seen a surge of children that are not gaining and using words, reaching those typically developing milestones of having, you know, first words between 15 and 18 months. Putting words together at two years. We are seeing more and more children who are not meeting those milestones, and we are attributing it to, surprising, this is no surprise to you guys, but increased screen time.

So, we have less engagement with our parents and caregivers and people that are in, obviously we don't have tablets and screens at school with, you know, in childcare centers, but we are seeing an uptick in screen time. But then also you throw in COVID, where we were all at home just trying to survive, and many families were working online, and they were doing anything they could to get through a Zoom meeting and that included throwing a phone or a tablet or turning on the television to their children. And then let's also not forget that even once we reintegrated into our social world again, we were masked up.

And so, our lips and face were covered. So, lots of that, you know, just indirect communication that happens with a smile or a, you know, a frown or just even a wink sometimes got kind of disrupted. And so, we really are seeing more and more children with language delays and just needing that extra boost.

I laugh all the time and I'm like, you know, you parents are keeping me in business. I will never lack for a job because you people think it's free babysitting, but nothing is free.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Right. Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: You know, and I think that you highlight the reasons that we need it and the importance of it.

Now walk us through exactly what it might look like for us to dip a toe in, and actually get started.

Tanya Hayes: Okay. First of all, I would just say, you know, I have a lot of times I'll have families that, you know, I get them in early intervention.

They are not; their child is not talking. And I say, so tell me kind of some of the struggles that you have on a day-to-day basis with your little one. And they'll say, well, you know, she doesn't talk, or he doesn't talk.

And the goal is absolutely get the verbal communication going. But there's this little hierarchy that we know is present, and it helps children begin to use their words. And it starts, it's kind of like if you want a child to walk, you don't expect a child to walk if they can't even sit yet.

Right. Yeah. So, we're looking for them to sit and then we're looking for them to crawl, and then pull to stand and then, you know, cruise and then they walk.

So, it's the same way with talking. The downside is, we just don't know that ladder. And so, when we want a child who's nonverbal to begin kind of getting on that ladder of moving towards expressive speech, we want to increase motor imitation skills.

And so motor imitation looks like, oh, can you wave? Can you wave bye bye? Oh, can you blow a kiss? Oh, can you clap? These are all the things that we want babies to do. Right. But if we have a child who's 18 months and they have limited motor imitation skills, we want them to do more imitation.

So, can you stomp your feet? Can you knock on a door? Can you knock some blocks down on command? Can you fly an airplane on command? So, we want them to be able to do something after us just like we're doing through play. And one of those motor imitation skills becomes imitating motions with our hands. So, we might take a functional word that's super important to a boy like ball and ball.

The sign for ball is you just both of your hands are in front of you. Your fingers are sort of gently turned as if you're holding an imaginary ball right in front of you. And so, if a boy is super wanting to play with a ball and I'm signing ball and I have it and I roll it to him, and he rolls it back to me, and then I hold it and I say, oh, do you want the ball? And I sign ball, and he looks at me and then I roll it to him, and we get in this back and forth taking turns playing with the ball.

Eventually, he's going to imitate that sign for ball because he's super motivated. He wants that ball. It's functional to him.

It's relevant. So, then we have that imitation of the sign ball. And I know he means ball.

He knows I mean ball. And so, it really is expressive language, but it is nonverbal and, but it is considered a word. So, if you go to the pediatrician and they say, how many words does your child say? If you've got 10 signs that they can do, those actually do count as words.

Because what we know, is that when children are imitating actions, imitating signs, they're on that hierarchy of beginning to start using language. And then that's that third tier is maybe they approximate ball for ball, bah, bah. And then, oh, you mean ball? And we draw, oh, here's the ball.

And we're just doing lots of auditory bombardment, with that word and that sign. And then we get the word ball. So that's the ladder, motor imitation, signing, and then word approximations, and then those words.

And oftentimes, I tell families, if we get about 20 signs that they're using consistently, it is, we know that the words are coming. Once the brain makes a connection between 20 motions and the actual thing, whether it's a verb or a noun or whatever, the words will come. Now if I have a child on the spectrum, or have a child who has Down syndrome, I might need more than 20.

But you're typically developing child that's just a late talker. If I can get them to learn and use 20 signs, it's just a matter of time before the words come.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: And for all the educators listening, I'm sure I'm envisioning how this is completely supporting both the receptive and the expressive vocabularies of our youngest learners.

So just as Tanya has said, these motor and these, you know, this bank of words that they have, and these bank of signs that they have, are all building up to that receptive vocabulary, what children can understand. Ultimately the expressive vocabulary to what children are going to be able to output. So, Tanya, I love that.

Tanya Hayes: Yeah, you're, you hit the nail on the head because in our brain, when the brain is, when the body is moving, the brain is learning.

And so, when my hands are moving and oftentimes what's so cool about sign language is like if I want to sign cracker, I hold my left-hand kind of up in a fist and I tap my left elbow, with my right fist on the left side. That's the sign for cracker. And so, when I do that, my right-hand crosses midline to tap that elbow on the left side.

Whenever the body is crossing midline, we have this hemispheric integration thing happening. And so, we're building that corpus callosum in the brain. And so the more times we can sign and cross midline, or do any kind of movement, whether we're riding a tricycle or singing and dancing and having movements where we're crossing midline, we are

building that, those brain connections and, and those repetitions, of motor movements are feeding the brain and building that receptive and expressive area of the brain.

And that's in that left side of that hemisphere, Broca and Wernicke's area. And so we're working both receptive and expressive areas of the brain. And what parents a lot of times miss out on is they don't, they're like, "oh, I know he's two and he doesn't have very many words, but it's fine".

The problem is, is that we have a very rigorous education system, that is now pretty much expecting kindergartners to read. And almost if you don't start kindergarten and already kind of know a few words, you're behind the eight ball. So, if we don't have our words at two, how in the world are we going to get our words, start making sense of sounds, in order to decode by the time, we're in kindergarten? We are already behind.

And so that is that kind of spotlight, that I'm trying to shine for parents, that we need your child talking and using language. Because that expressive language becomes their written expressed language in stories, and their understanding of books, and all of the things that they will do when they are finally, you know, in a cognitive academic world.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Yes. And yesterday we talked about how I used it in my classroom, and one of the ways I used it was we would sign the whole alphabet, and we would do the sign for A and then we would do A, A, A, A, A, A and then we would go to B. And it was amazing how they needed that sign to know what the sound was.

But then after they got it, by the end of the year, they were signing the whole alphabet. They were signing their name. They could sign words.

We did the Pledge of Allegiance. We did songs. And the parents were just astounded that their children were also reading and signing.

And I really do attribute a lot of my students that were reading by the end of pre-K, to some of the signing I was doing. So, my question is, what if a parent is hesitant or what if a teacher is hesitant because they think it's going to not help the child start reading or talking, but it might delay that?

Tanya Hayes: Yes, I hear that regularly. And this is what I usually say to my parents.

I go back to that walking example and I say, you know what, if you're 15-month-old cruising couches and coffee tables, are you worried about them walking? And they usually look at me and go, no, I mean, I wish they would be walking, but no, they're going to walk because they're cruising. I'm like, exactly. Cruising is to walking as signing is to talking.

They will drop the signs as soon as those words come, just like your kid is going to quit cruising, as soon as they can walk without holding on to anything. And it's just kind of that extra little crutch. Think of it like, oh, I've got a broken leg.

I just need a crutch for just a little bit longer. And just like you were just describing, Tisha, when they use that cue. So, for example, a lot of times my late talkers turn into those children who are struggling readers.

And so, I will work on some phonics and some phonemic awareness stuff with them. And sometimes when we're working on rapid naming of letters and letter sounds, if they don't know the letter that I'm showing them, I'll do that sign. And it's like a little crutch.

And then they'll go, oh, yeah, D. Oh, B, because sometimes that D and B is tricky to separate for those children. And B, the sign for B is like you're holding up the number four with your fingers and D is very different. So, it helps them quickly distinguish the B and the D because I've paired that sign with it.

So, I just I quickly can tell parents, trust me, they will not continue to sign. And if they do continue to sign, it will be a connection point that you guys have together. And it's like a little secret code.

They can sign potty, and you know they're going to the bathroom, but they don't have to announce it. Or you can say in the mall to them, you can say Bryson. And when they look at you, you can sign the sign, wait, and they can stop if they're way ahead of you.

And so, it's like a way that you can kind of have a secret code with your kids. So, it's always a blessing. It works itself out.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: You know, there's been so much today. I could actually pick your brain for longer. And we have some good news for our listeners after.

But just if I were a parent and I had a child who is not, you know, able to put words together quite yet or is struggling with communication, what strategies do you have that you can give our parents or even our early educators for a child who is not showing signs of communication yet?

Tanya Hayes: So, the first thing I would say is, is I do have a link to Sprout Pediatrics website and on there under the handouts, we have several handouts that we share. It's free. We make it available to all educators.

You don't have to put your email address in. It's just literally we want you guys knowing how to help get this child on that communication ladder. And the first one is a poster that's motor imitation skills.

So, these are all the things that you can be encouraging your child to imitate. After that, there's another handout that's pre-language skills. So, like what kinds of sounds can we try to get them to do, like snoring or animal sounds or uh-oh or uh-uh-uh-choo, what kinds of sounds can we get them to imitate? And then the final two posters are the top 20 signs that we as speech language pathologists have identified as some of those early functional signs, that are super relevant and super motivating to children.

And so go ahead, print those posters out and just start working on them. I love the NAEYC has in our ethical like guidelines, in the second section to families, it says design programs and policies inclusive of and responsive to diverse families. That includes you as an early childhood educator.

When you take the time to learn these signs, you are being ethically responsible for all children in your classroom to have a chance to be able to communicate, whether they're verbal or nonverbal. So, by learning a few signs, you're also helping those children that maybe are working with a speech language pathologist and know and are using some signs. You now can meet them where they are and continue reiterating that in a new environment.

So, they've got the home, they've got therapy, and they've got your preschool classroom. So just a great way to kind of get on board with that sign language piece.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: I love it, Tonya.

I could talk to you all day about this because in my classroom, it just changed my classroom community. But I need you to give me three takeaways for our listeners.

Tanya Hayes: OK, so I've already said one sign language is movement.

And when the body is moving, the brain is learning. So absolutely, that's perfect. Late talkers need lots of opportunity to imitate actions.

So imitating actions and imitating sign language helps them begin the imitation process so that they can later imitate noises and words. And then finally, sign language is powerful because it incorporates Gardner's multiple intelligences, as well as all three of those learning styles that we know children have. They're either visual, auditory or kinesthetic.

And when you're signing, you're never just doing a sign. You're not just giving a picture of ball. You're saying ball, you're signing ball, so they see it.

And then if you're asking them to sign it with you, they're kinesthetically doing ball as well. And we have this wonderful incorporation of all the learning styles, so that learning happens quicker and faster. Because we're layering all those learning styles into our instruction to them.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: There's so many tools that you've given us so far with helping our children work towards learning expressive language.

And I just absolutely love that. So, as we wind down, can you give our listeners one challenge?

Tanya Hayes: One challenge, go print those posters, and just learn three signs this week and use them. The sign for book, the sign for ball, the sign for eat.

Super functional, super relevant to most children. And you will find how easy it is as you're reading books, as you're singing songs, as you're interacting and playing with children, how easy it is to just incorporate it into your organic experiences as you play with children.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: And I'm on the website right now just to interject real quick.

And I love the fact that you have this access for free to be able to print it out. When, cute story as we wind down before I turn it over to Dr. Shipley, both of my children learned to sign before they communicated. And when I think back, you know, and where they are today, the more sign was something that they were very comfortable with using.

And they are two very, you know, large, big athletic boys now. So, it's cute to look back and think about the sign that they used most often was more food, more drink, more. And here they are today.

Tanya Hayes: And tune in because that whole more concept, I as I'm presenting in y'all's conference coming up, I'm going to do a whole class on autism, and how to understand and lead children on the autism spectrum. And one of the things that we will talk about is using sign language and how that sign more with this particular demographic, might not be a good one to lead with. So, I'll let that be a tease to that class.

But absolutely more is a very functional sign. And my little granddaughter is signing please, please, please, please for everything. But I was over there this weekend.

And sure enough, she loves to go outside. I signed outside three times for her. And by the fourth and fifth time, she was approximating the sign for outside because she wanted to go out so badly and she knew Yaya would take her.

So super great. And I do have a class that I'm doing on Eventbrite. It's going to be a live class in September on the fifth.

If folks want to tune in, they can sign up no matter where they are in America and do that class along with me. It's live and I have a little code. If you use the code play, you can get five dollars off and tune in and do the sign language class with me.

And I'll teach you all those signs, you leave with bunches of relevant information for your classroom.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: OK, perfect. So, let's let's break this down.

So, one, Tanya is presenting at the Early Childhood Conference this summer. You can find that link if you want to go and watch her session, on our biography page part of this podcast. So, make sure that you do that,

Two:

I want you to make sure that you follow her little link where you can go find the signs, and three, she has said she wants to come back and talk about behavior management using signing. Right.

Tanya Hayes: Yes.

Tanya Hayes: Yes. OK, so be watching for that because we will record that one soon and it will just be a second part to this podcast. So, Tanya, thank you so much for being here.

This has been amazing information.

Tanya Hayes: Absolutely. I have enjoyed it.

Y'all do a great job with your your setup. I just can't imagine juggling all that y'all do. So thank you for inviting me.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Thank you so much. And we will chat soon.

Tanya Hayes: OK, thanks.