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SIGNS FOR SUCCESS

The Signs for Success Programme and better behaviour

A recent study considered the value of the Signs for Success Programme and its sign language methodology. Is it true that children are engaged much more at all levels when sign language is used, and does behaviour improve?

The claim

Signs for Success is a pioneering programme that can train any teacher, classroom assistant or nursery nurse to use sign language in the classroom in order to raise language and literacy levels, and to instil positive behaviour patterns for every child. Signs for Success employs techniques, tested over time, in completely innovative ways. When 'hearing' teachers use signs in mainstream classrooms, children learn at a younger age, and at a faster pace, and the children retain that knowledge much longer. Best of all, they enjoy learning.

With Signs for Success:

- hearing babies sign before they can speak, they speak earlier, have larger vocabularies and learn more quickly;
- hearing children have larger spoken vocabularies and learn to read, write and spell at a faster rate and with more enjoyment;
- positive behaviour patterns become the norm.

The research project

The following evaluation of one aspect of the Signs for Success programme was carried out by teacher/researcher Carmel Faulkner (2006) for Birmingham Local Authority (LA). It took place in a group of schools in Nechells, Birmingham, where many children enter nursery or school with lower than expected social skills. The study evaluates the impact of the programme on children's personal, social and emotional development with a focus on **maintaining engagement and supporting behaviour management.**



The method

The primary research method was non-participant structured observation to establish children's behaviour patterns and the frequency of practitioner interventions in three foundation stage settings. In four observations, practitioners used sign language and in four observations practitioners did not use sign language.

There were, on average, thirteen children in each group session. The children were aged 3 – 5 years old and included boys and girls, children with special needs and children with English as a second language. The activities observed included storytelling and circle time.

Practitioners were told that the observations were to evaluate the impact of signing in everyday practice. **They were not told that the observations had a behaviour focus.**

Key variables under scrutiny were:

1. Incidents of children's distracted or disruptive behaviour during group activities with and without the use of sign language

2. The frequency of teacher intervention in managing behaviour with and without signing intervention

Systematic recording procedures were used in order to quantify participants' behaviour and to enhance the reliability of the study.

Definitions of terms

For the purposes of the study, children's behaviour is classified as "distracted and disruptive". The main distinction between the two forms of behaviour is a child being distracted "alone" and a child being "disruptive with another", through talking or touching for instance. We use the overall term "disengaged" in the evaluation to describe this behaviour.

The term "setting" is used as a universal reference (for different sorts of nurseries and for two reception classes in a primary school). The term "practitioner" is used to refer to teachers, nursery nurses and learning support assistants.

"Children exposed to sign language were noticeably calmer, more engaged and more actively 'listening' than children participating in sessions where sign language was not used."

– researcher

The results

A total of eight observations of practitioner-led group activities were carried out in a target sample of three foundation stage settings by the teacher/researcher.

Four observations were carried out in two reception groups and two nursery groups. Practitioners did not use sign language during activities.

Four observations were carried out in three nursery groups and one reception group. Practitioners did use sign language during activities.

One reception class was split into two groups, as normal practice, and so were observed as such. The children in the nurseries were observed in their family groups.

The "signing" practitioners leading the groups consistently used signs during observed activities. The "non-signing" practitioners leading the groups did not use signs during observed sessions but might occasionally for other purposes.

Practitioner intervention and children's behaviour were observed for the duration of fifteen minutes and instances of intervention and behaviour were recorded by the teacher/researcher.

Figure 1 Table to show aggregated frequency of practitioner intervention and children's behaviour.

Observations 1 – 4 involve signing
Observations 5 – 8 do not involve signing

Observation	Frequency of practitioner intervention		Frequency of children's behaviou
	Signing &/or verbal	Verbal or other	Disengaged
1	4	0	4
2	7	0	7
3	0*	0	0
4	8	0	8
5	0	14	20
6	0	10	25
7	0	15	19
8	0	16	22

As the table (Figure 1) demonstrates, there is a strong correlation between the variables: practitioner's use of sign language and children's behaviour. The frequency of practitioner intervention based on children's behaviour is

significantly lower during sessions where signing is used.

Frequency of practitioner intervention (signing and/or verbal) = 19

Frequency of practitioner intervention (verbal or other) = 55

Figure 1 shows that where sign language is used children were less frequently disengaged. The results demonstrate that where sign language is not used, incidents of disengagement were significantly higher —more than twice as many incidents occurred.

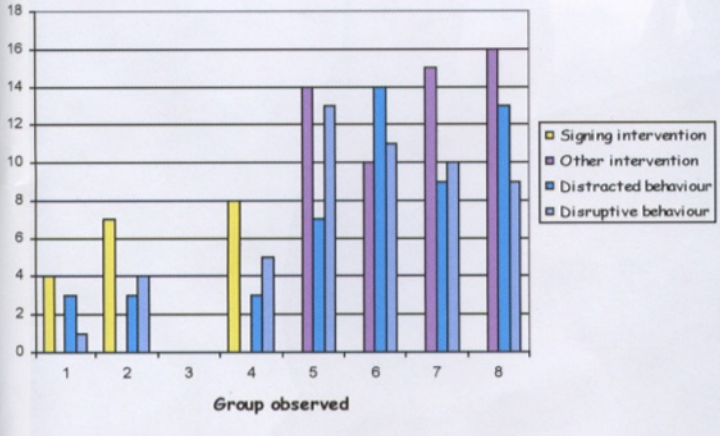
Frequency of disengaged behaviour in children (sign and/or verbal) = 19

Frequency of disengaged behaviour in children (verbal or other) = 86

Figure 1, observation 3*: shows that during one observation there was **no practitioner intervention** with or without signing and there were **no incidents** of distracted or disruptive behaviour. During this session the children were fully engaged. **The practitioner used signs related to the story – not as a behaviour management strategy - and encouraged children to join in.**

During the four observations where signing was used to support behaviour management, this was the only form of intervention, with or without speech. No other strategies, such as rewards or "time out" from the group, were used.

Figure 2 Chart to show aggregated data for frequency of practitioner intervention and children's behaviour.



Children's behaviour

The chart (Figure 2) demonstrates that during observations where signing was used, there were significantly fewer incidents of distracted or disruptive behaviour.



Practitioner's intervention

The chart (Figure 2) shows that during observations where signing was used, the frequency of practitioner intervention was significantly less than during observations where other methods of intervention were used.

During the observations, the practitioners who used sign language did not use any other behaviour management strategies, rewards or sanctions. This may have been a conscious or unconscious decision or coincidental. Although practitioners sometimes used a sign without speech to intervene, speech was never used without signing.

Signs for Success is "Innovative [and offers] great potential to increase literacy for all children."

– Prof. Tim Brighouse, Commissioner for London schools, London University

The conclusion

The findings showed there to be a strong correlation between the use of signing and children's behaviour.

- Children were consistently more engaged during sessions where the practitioner used sign language.
- In comparison, children were more frequently distracted or disruptive when sign language was not used.
- In addition, practitioner intervention was less frequent when sign language was used.
- In comparison, practitioners used intervention significantly more often when they were using behaviour interventions other than sign language.

It would appear that this research supports the curriculum guidance for the foundation stage which emphasises the inextricable link between non-verbal communication and children's learning in speaking and listening. It suggests that young

children in early stages of speaking and listening rely on non-verbal communication to understand.

The findings showed there to be a correlation between the use of sign language as a behaviour management tool and pupil behaviour. The main finding was that children were consistently more engaged during sessions where the practitioner used signing.

The practitioners' perceptions

When asked which children benefit most from Signs for Success:

- six out of seven practitioners said: "Everyone benefits."
- one practitioner said: "Children with difficult behaviour respond well to signed instructions."
- one school's (St. Vincent's RC Primary School) recent Ofsted report stated: "The use of signing effectively supports pupils with language barriers, those in the early stages of learning English and others with difficulties in concentration."

These perceptions correlate with and enhance the findings in this study.

"Using signing means that behaviour management is less intrusive."

– a nursery teacher

"[Signing] helps calm the children and eradicates the need to raise your voice."

– a reception class teacher

Some parents' perceptions

In the evaluation analysis of practitioners' perceptions, a number of practitioners made reference to parents' participation in sign language.

- A nursery practitioner (2003) said that not only have parents shown a lot of interest but they expressed a desire to be trained in sign language themselves.
- A reception class practitioner (2005) suggested that through signing, parents have a direct link to a teaching method used every day at school which could reinforce children's learning at home.
- A parent of a nursery child wrote (March 2003), "I find this innovative approach to teaching and learning both progressive and rewarding."

The evidence suggests that people's perceptions of the use of sign language are that it has a positive, visible impact on children.

Summing up

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of the Signs for Success Programme on the personal, social and emotional development of young children.

The research indicates that the Signs for Success Programme:

- has a powerful and positive impact on children's behaviour, levels of engagement and ability to listen;
- dramatically reduces the need for practitioner intervention during large group activities.

Carmel Faulkner, Researcher

To order the Recommended KIT, go to www.signsforsuccess.co.uk

Contact Kathy@signsforsuccess.co.uk

