



Key word sign and gesture

Suitable for people who need help understanding speech and suitable for some people as a means of communication. Formerly known as Makaton

How to introduce **Key word sign**

- 1. Make a commitment to the use of sign/gesture** Starting to use any augmentative system is a long-term endeavour. Teachers, support workers, friends and family need to learn the signs and learn how to use them effectively. People need to practise signing and make sure they are providing good, clear models. It can take a long time to stop feeling embarrassed about using our hands for communication. It can also be very discouraging signing to someone who doesn't sign back. Remember, parents spend hours a day, for a year or more, talking and babbling to babies before they start to clearly say words for themselves.

Children of deaf parents, who see signing daily in their environment, produce their first sign at around nine months. Children of hearing parents produce their first word at around one year of age. Signing is physically simpler to perform than speech.

If a person has an intellectual or learning disability they may learn at a slower pace. It is very important that these people see signs and gestures produced in a consistent and clear manner. It might seem like a long time before any gesture is reciprocated; however, it is best to persevere and remind yourself that things take time, especially if the person is just beginning to use signs and gestures as their means of communication. You need to keep on signing even when the person starts to sign.

- 2. Use a selected vocabulary** The potential for using sign and gesture is unlimited, so where do you start? It is too much to expect people to start at 'A' in the dictionary and work through all of the signs to Z. It is usually helpful to divide the signs being learnt into manageable stages. About 30-40 signs is a reasonable number to start with.

One of the most important things to ensure, when using signs, is that everyone is using the same signs and is providing good, clear models of the signs.

Key Word Sign Australia has a useful vocabulary of over 700 words. Key Word Sign used to be known as Makaton but this changed in 2010. The first 100 words have been called the Interactive Vocabulary (and are often taught at a beginners Basic workshop). These words have been selected for functional use. Communication partners are taught a range of different words to allow a person to greet, comment, request, reject and ask questions.

The Australian key word sign vocabulary has enough words in it to allow for communication at a simple level. It is based on vocabulary research studies and clinical use.

Interactive vocabulary includes:

- hello/goodbye
- how are you
- more
- help
- give
- wait
- like
- finish
- come
- go
- sit
- eat
- see/look
- put
- what
- where
- my turn/your turn
- turn on/off/over
- yes/no.

Using a ready-made vocabulary means that everyone knows and uses the same signs for the same set of words. One of the main problems in starting any communication strategy is that it doesn't stop when the person goes home or goes to work or goes to a respite unit on the weekend.

Communication happens everywhere and all the time. Even if teachers, support workers or family members only know 40 signs – but they are the same 40 signs seen in all places – the person is much more likely to learn and use those signs. It also means that the person's memory is not overloaded.

For some people, it is possible to select a unique vocabulary of individual signs for that person; however, it means that all of the people involved in that person's life need to know which signs are being used to make sure that a consistent approach is maintained.

Separating signs into topic areas also makes it easier to keep a record of which new signs are introduced and when they are introduced.

- 3. Use formal and informal teaching** Many of the early signs that are used are the same as natural gestures. There are approximately 160 natural gestures that we take for granted. These are signs or gestures such as:

- me
- you
- here
- there
- stop
- come
- yes
- no
- hello
- good-bye

Remember that these gestures were all learned at some stage. Think about how a baby learns to wave good-bye. At first, the mother gives total assistance and gradually reduces this to a nudge of the elbow or a verbal prompt such as: 'Wave bye-bye.'

In just the same way, when we first introduce a new sign or teach a gesture, we may have to physically assist the person to make the sign. This is the formal side of teaching where we may have to physically help the person to form the shape of the sign with their hands. Sometimes there will be some feature of the concept or the object that is present in the way the sign or gesture is produced. For instance:

- *drink*: where a drinking motion is made with a 'c-shape' hand;
- *banana*: where 'peeling' the index finger like a banana is mimed.

Sometimes it is a matter of coupling the hand-shape and movement of the sign with the photo or picture of the object, or concept, that it represents.

Teaching the sign and practicing how to produce it may need to occur in a one-to-one situation; however, the best time to reinforce the signs is when they are being used, in their usual context. The formal teaching needs to occur with the informal use of signs, gestures, facial expression and body language, in all daily activities.



It is also important to give examples of the next step by expanding the person's sign attempts: if they sign *toilet* – you say and sign: 'Yes – you go to the toilet.'

- 4. Use Directionality and Placement** Whenever we talk to people we use more than just words to get the message across. Some people and some cultures use many facial expressions and gestures to give extra emphasis to what they are saying. Think of the difference between saying: 'I'm angry at you' with a pleasant smile; or with fists raised and a scowling face. The fists raised are sure to create more impact! It's another way of demonstrating how visual cues can say much more than just the words. Try describing a spiral staircase without using your hands. It is almost impossible!

Directionality means giving visual cues to help someone understand what to do or where to go. The instruction: 'Give me the ball,' will be better understood if accompanied by the gesture of starting with your arms outstretched and then drawing them in to yourself. Whoever you are instructing will determine from your body language that you want the ball. You only have to gesture 'give' and gesture 'ball' and the message becomes obvious.

If you were to tell someone: 'Go to the bus,' your instruction would be more easily understood if coupled with the gesture to 'go', in the direction of the bus. The gesture provides a great deal of information. A similar visual tool is placement.

Placement is a beneficial visual tool that can be likened to pretending there is an invisible surface in front of you. If you want a person to place two objects next to each other, you can create that idea by miming it on your invisible surface. 'Put the ball and the box on the table.' The whole instruction is spoken, the key words are signed and the message is made clearer when you mime placing the objects where they should go on the invisible surface before you.

How to adapt *Key word sign* for different levels of communication

People who communicate at an unintentional or pre-intentional level:

- may benefit from the communication partner using simple speech as they sign;
- may benefit from seeing a gesture to help them understand what is happening at different times of the day.

People who communicate at an intentional informal level:

- will benefit from seeing a small number of simple signs and gestures to help them understand their day;
- may use a sign or gesture:
 - to point
 - wave hello or good-bye
 - indicate 'more'
- may produce 'signals'. Note: A 'signal' is used in specific situations. A person may:
 - touch their chin when they see food;
 - may sign 'toilet' not to mean 'toilet' but as a response or request for anything.

People who communicate at a symbolic (basic) level:

- will benefit from seeing signs and gestures to help them understand their day;
- may use up to five signs;
- may use signs to indicate 'finish', 'more'.

People who communicate at an symbolic (established) level:

- will benefit from seeing signs and gestures to help them understand their day;
- will learn and use some signs as part of their communication (if they are in an environment where signing is used consistently and if they are physically able);
- will begin to put two signs or a sign and gesture together.

The information in this handout is taken from the manual *InterAAction: Strategies for Intentional and Unintentional Communicators* See pages 184 – 192 for more detailed information. www.scopevic.org.au