

**ASL STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT**  
**Early Childhood Education Department**  
**California School for the Deaf**  
**39350 Gallaudet Drive**  
**Fremont, CA 94538**

**3 to 12 months**

- Begins to notice signing
- First sign may emerge from 10 to 12 months
- Babbles with hands
- Imitates facial expressions
- Points to people, objects and places but not at self

**12 to 18 months**

- Uses at least 10 signs
- Begins to use points as pronouns
- Acquires new signs but does not mark with inflections

**18 to 24 months**

- Signs reflect basic handshapes with simple movements (straight forward, up, or down)
- Early signs not always produced according to adult conventional forms
- Combines 2 or 3 signs including points
- Begins to distinguish and use non-manual markers (facial grammar)

**2 to 3 years**

- Sign order used to show semantic relations
- Begins to use classifiers to represent objects (with little or no movement); types limited by the handshapes child can produce
- Begins to use varied inflected verb forms (directional/agreement, dual, temporal aspect)
- Attempts more complex signs but substitutes basic handshapes for the complex handshapes
- Begins to use non-manual markers (raised/squinted eyebrows) for YES/NO and WH-questions
- Demonstrates negation with headshake or sign "NO"
- Begins to use possessive (your, mine) and plural (US-TWO, YOU-THREE) pronouns
- Refers to things around them during conversations and storytelling; may copy the actions and facial expressions of others in a story

**3 to 4 years**

- Begins to mark distinctions between noun-verb pairs (FLY/AIRPLANE)
- Uses classifiers to show objects and movements of these objects
- Begins to make modifications to verb signs to show the manner and amount of time involved in an activity (temporal aspect) by changing the movement of the sign and/or adding facial expressions

- All "real world" pronouns (pointing at objects and people in the immediate environment) used correctly
- Tells stories through use of objects or role-playing; may not always show clearly who is speaking or doing something

#### **4 to 5 years**

- More complex handshapes and movement (wiggling fingers, twisting wrists) used accurately
- Begins to use noun modifications to show different meaning (e.g. repeating the noun to show plural)
- Simple sentences still used by complex sentences including topicalization and rhetorical questions emerging
- Begins to set up points in space to establish location for people and objects not present in the environment
- Role-playing used more frequently with characters clearly identified but skills to show changes in roles such as body shifts, eye gaze and facial expression not used consistently

#### **5 to 6 years**

- Clear and consistent use of complex handshapes and movement
- Fingerspelling used more
- Use of complex sentences including relative clauses and conditionals continuing to expand
- Use of verb modifications to show intensity, manner, number and distribution continuing to expand
- Use of abstract referencing to talk about people and things not in the present environment
- Storytelling becomes more "adult like"; makes frequent self corrections
- Takes on a variety of roles during conversation and storytelling; changes in roles indicated through facial expression, body shifts and eye gaze shown clearly and consistently

#### **References:**

Bonvillian, J.D., Orlansky, M.D. and Floven, R.J., *Early Sign Language Acquisition: Implications for Theories of Language Acquisition*, Third International Symposium on Sign Language Research, 1983

French, Martha; *The Toolkit Appendices for Starting with Assessment – A Developmental Approach to Deaf Children's Literacy*, Pre-College National Mission Programs, Gallaudet University, Washington, D.C., 1999

Newport, Elissa L. and Meier, Richard p.; *The Acquisition of American Sign Language*, NIH/NSF Research Grants, 1986

Schick, Brenda; *The Development of ASL*, University of Maryland, 1991

Sign Talk Development Project, *Discovering with Words and Signs, A Resource Guide for Developing a Bilingual and Bicultural Preschool Program for Deaf and Hearing Children*, 1994

# **GUIDE TO THE ASL DEVELOPMENT**

## **OBSERVATION RECORD**

**Early Childhood Education Department  
California School for the Deaf  
39350 Gallaudet Drive  
Fremont, CA 94538**

### **Description**

The ASL Development Observation Record was developed for the Early Childhood Education program at the California School for the Deaf in Fremont (CSD) to document the ASL language development of Deaf children from the time when they enter the Early Childhood Education Department (ECE) to Kindergarten. The goal of the observation record is to identify the language strengths and needs of each child and to document the progress made over a period of time. The observation record also serves as a guide for the teachers in assessing their role as language models and how they use language with children.

### **Evaluation System**

Emerging - what you see infrequently (at least 3 times)

Developing - what you see increasing but inconsistently; prompting usually needed

Proficiently - what you see clearly and accurately most of the time without prompting

#### **A. Communicative Intent**

This section identifies the non-verbal behaviors used in a consistent, purposeful manner to convey intent to communicate. Language begins before the first word with the intent to communicate. And the need to communicate comes before the development of form and content. During this stage, the child attempts to communicate needs nonverbally and uses functional gestures. Early nonverbal exchanges between the child and adult form the foundation for communicative skills.

Facilitating intentional communication include:

- Observing the child's actions and then reacting by mirroring the behavior and describing the actions with parallel talk and self-talk
- Helping the child acquire new gestures and signs by modeling new behaviors
- Planning routines and repeating activities to help the child increase intentional communication
- Responding to and interacting with the child in a joyful manner

## B. ASL Comprehension

---

Receptive skills, or comprehension is determined from observing the child's responses to behaviors, pictures or questions through appropriate facial expressions, actions and language. Adults need to create an environment that allows the child maximum opportunities to demonstrate as many skills as possible.

- #6. Fingerspelled signs- Some examples: #(FINGERSPELLED) YES, #NO, #TOYS, #FIX, #BUSY, #EARLY, #OUT, #BANK, #BACK, #HA, #ALL, #DO, #COOL

## C. ASL Production

ASL is a visual-gestural language, which is the natural language of the Deaf community in the United States and other parts of North America. It has the various grammatical characteristics typically found in spoken languages and is a morphologically complex language. Deaf children go through similar stages of language acquisition as those of their hearing counterparts. ASL, like with other languages, emerges in the child in a "rapid, patterned and above all, linguistically driven manner."

- #1. **ASL babbling** – sequences of gestures that resemble signs but are not recognizable or meaningful; child plays with hands but has not associated the hand play with meaning
- #3. **Basic handshapes** (B, A, O, S, C, 1, 5) are the most natural possible handshapes with geometrical shapes. They are among the first handshapes mastered by Deaf children acquiring ASL from their parents. They have greater variety in how they may contact the body or the other hand to form signs and they may take on the role of the passive hand for two-handed asymmetrical signs.
- #8. **Number incorporation** is "incorporation" of a number right onto the sign itself rather than signing two separate signs for a number and a noun.  
Weeks – for numbers 1-9, the number is incorporated with the sign for week  
Months – for number 1-9, the number becomes a part of the MONTH sign by letting the number handshape slide down the index finger  
Hours – numbers 1-5 are incorporated with the HOUR sign

### Cardinal

Age – palm facing out  
Telephone/house# – palm out  
Weight – palm out

### Ordinal

Counting – palm facing in  
1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> – palm twist  
Place of order – palm twist with movement

- # 9. **Single sign production** – First recognizable ASL signs are produced one at a time in isolation. The one-word sign production tends to continue for several months before multi-sign utterances appear.

- #10. **Two or three-word sign production** occurs in the middle of 2<sup>nd</sup> year and tends to be “uninflected citation forms with stem, derivation and inflectional morphology absent.”
- #12. **Indexing (ASL pronouns/points)** is acquired slowly and with errors as in spoken languages. They go through three stages: 1. use of gestural (nonlinguistic) pointing, 2. use (misuse) of certain ASL pronouns as signs, and 3. correct use of ASL pronouns as a grammatical subsystem.
- #13/14. **Non-manual signals** refer to aspects of ASL which do not involve the hands. They convey grammatical information to distinguish one type of sentence from another in ASL. When asking Y/N and WH- questions, the child makes clear distinctions between raised eyebrows and brow squints. With Y/N questions, the head and/or body is tilted forward.
- #15. **ASL mouthing** functions as adverbs, verbs and modals in ASL. Use of ASL mouthing as well as other non-manual signals “lend authenticity to the language.” They add “clarity and detail” to the signer’s message.  
Some examples:  
PAH = FINALLY  
FISH = FINISH, CUT-IT-OUT  
LR-LR = LOOK-AT  
MM = lips pressed together indicating something happening normally or regularly (LOOK, READ, PLAY)  
INTENSE = lips closed and spread, eyes squinting to indicate great magnitude (many, many)
- #16. **Directional/agreement verbs** in ASL are used to show who is doing what to whom (subjects & objects) or to show movement from one location to another. Agreement verbs are among the Deaf child’s earliest attempt to use morphological markers (inflections). Some examples:
- |         |           |
|---------|-----------|
| ASK-TO  | LOOK-AT   |
| BLAME-  | HELP-     |
| GIVE-TO | INVITE-   |
| PICK-ON | TOUCH-    |
| SHOW-   | SAY-NO-TO |
| FLY-TO  | DRIVE-TO  |
| JUMP-TO | MOVE-TO   |
- #17. **Classifiers used to represent objects or people** function as pronouns. They are used after the signer indicates (by signing or fingerspelling) what the referent (noun) is. Some examples:
- CL : 3 certain vehicles  
CL : 1 upright person, pencil, pole (on its side), cigarette, cannon, log  
CL : CROOKED 1 old person with a bent back  
CL : A mug, trophy, statue, lamp, house  
CL : V (bent) a person or animal in a sitting position  
CL : C cup, cylinder, thick rope, pipe, candle  
CL : C (MODIFIED/two hands) large flat round object like plates  
CL : 5 CLAW hordes of people, group of things  
CL : 4 (two hands) a line of people, people in a circle

- #18 **Classifiers used to show location and movement of objects and people** function as pronouns, verbs and adverbs when they give information about the manner of the action. They also function as locatives (prepositions) when they indicate the spatial location of a thing in relation to something else. Some examples:

CL : X long legs running  
CL : 3 car backing out of parking space at store  
CL : 3 motorcycle zooming between cars  
CL : 2 (CROOKED) animal running  
CL : 1 person walking stiffly and hurriedly  
CL : B leaf drifting to the ground  
CL : V (upside down) a person slipping on the ice  
CL : 1 a bear walking on back legs  
CL : 4 water running from a faucet

- #19 **Classifiers used to describe objects and people:**

Some examples:

CL : "curly hair"  
CL : C (MODIFIED/two hands) hole in the wall  
CL : B texture that is smooth such as the contour of a desert, hills or flat terrain  
CL : F something that is small and round such as a coin, spot, button, eye or piece of candy  
CL : 5 (BENT) texture that is rough or uneven such as rocky mountain peaks or a cart overflowing with apples  
CL : 1 (two hands) outline of a shape such as a window or TV  
CL : "long sleeves," "short sleeves," "sleeveless"

- #20 Signs that share the same handshape, location and palm orientation are known as noun-verb pairs. The sign for a noun and its related verb are distinguished from one another by a change in the movement of the sign. These changes are "systematic grammatical changes in morphology." The noun movement is repeated in a restrained manner. The related verb involves either a single or repeated movement in a continuous, hold, punctative or durative manner. Some examples:

GO-BY-ROCKET-TO	ROCKET
COMB-hair	COMB
PUT-ON-DRESS	DRESS
PRESS-doorbell	DOORBELL
PUT-RING-ON	RING
STRIKE-MATCH	MATCH
TURN-NUT	WRENCH
SPRAY-hair	HAIRSPRAY
BRUSH-teeth	TOOTHBRUSH

- #21 The **temporal aspect** of ASL shows the manner and amount of time involved in a particular activity. It is another form of verb modification (inflection). The movement of signs is altered to show how often or how long.

**Temporal Aspect** continued. Some examples:

SIT *for a long time*  
HURT *continually*  
EAT *repetitively*  
PLAY *for a long time*  
ASK *over and over again*  
STAND *for a long time*  
GO-TO *frequently*  
CRY *repeatedly, a lot*

- #22 Verbs are modified (inflected) to agree with the plurality of nouns (**number**) and to give information about how an activity is **distributed**. \*When a plus sign (+) follows an ASL word, it means the sign is repeated.

Some examples: READ-book+++ (read different books)  
MEET-FRIENDS+++ (meet many friends)  
COLLECT+++ (collects more than one thing)  
COLLECT-all (collects all in one single sweep)  
SELECT-specific (selects specific individuals)  
SHOW-TO each (shows to each individual in a group)  
GIVE-TO all in a group

- #23 **Semantics relations** refer to the relationship of words expressed. It is a basic sentence structure that demonstrates the child's understanding of the relationship between objects and events. The words a child expresses reflect his/her conceptualization of the word. Semantic relations include agent (*baby*), action (*drink*), object (*cup*), recurrence (*more*), nonexistence (*all gone*), cessation (*stop*), rejection (*no*), location (*up*) and possession (*mine*).

**SV** = subject/verb or agent/action (*baby drink*), **VO** = verb/object or action/object (*drink juice*) (**SVO** = subject/verb/object or agent/action/object (*baby drink milk*)).

- #24 Plain **verbs** (as used in **simple ASL Sentences**) are verbs that cannot be changed (modified/inflected) to show directionality/agreement. They tend to be body-anchored signs. Some examples are LIKE, DRINK, ENJOY, LOVE, LAUGH, SMILE, UNDERSTAND, WALK, FORGET, KNOW and GUESS.

- #25 Complex **ASL sentences** includes the following:

**Topicalization** – (topic-comment word order) a sentence structure used when the topic of the sentence is signed first and emphasized with raised eyebrow, followed by a short pause, and then a comment. An example: MY ROOM (signed with raised eyebrows to indicate the topic) "ME PAINT TOMORROW (comment).

**Rhetorical question** – a sentence that looks like a question but is answered by the signer. It is made by putting a WH-question between two clauses to connect them. An example: BOB MARY RUN, WHO WIN (raised eyebrow), MARY.

---

**Relative clause** – sentence used to identify the specific person or thing the signer wants to talk about. It is made with raised eyebrows, a chin raise and a backward tilt of the head. An example: THAT BOY, WITH DOG (chin raise and backward tilt of head), MY BEST FRIEND.

**Conditional** – a sentence that states a condition accompanied by raised eyebrows, head tilt and a pause before describing the result of that condition with lowered eyebrows and head/body shifted in a different direction. An example: TOMORROW SNOW (raised eyebrows, head tilt, pause), ME GO SKIIING (lowered eyebrows and head/body shift).

#26. **Establishing referents** (used to refer to people and objects not present in the environment) in ASL include:

- making the sign (for the referent) in a particular location
- fingerspelling the name of the referent in a particular location
- directing head and eye movement toward a particular location
- using a pronoun (point) right after the sign for the referent
- using the pronoun (point) in a particular location after it is obvious who the referent is
- using a classifier that represents the referent in a particular location

#27. **Role playing** is when the signer “becomes” the character through the re-enactment of a story or an activity. The signer does not tell what the character does but acts out what he/she does. One example: Instead of telling that a character is putting on winter clothes, the storyteller assumes the role of the character and acts out putting on clothes.

#28. **Role shifts** are made when the signer moves his/her body to the left or the right into a location that represents someone. While in that location, everything the signer says or does reflects what that person says or does. The signer also tends to take on other affective or characteristic traits of that person (with facial expressions and stylistic signing variations).

The directed use of **eye gaze** of central importance in character establishment and reference in ASL storytelling. It involves keeping the head at center space while shifting eye gaze straight, to the left, to the right, raise or lowered depending on the roles of the characters.

References:

---

- Bahan, B. & Petitto, L., *Aspects of Rules for Character Establishment and Reference in ASL Storytelling*, Working paper, 1980
- Baker-Shenk, C & Cokely, D., *American Sign Language, A Teacher's Resource Text on Grammar and Culture*, Gallaudet University Press, 1980
- Battison, Robbin, *Lexical Borrowing in American Sign Language*, NSF Grant, 1978
- Bridges, B. & Metzger M., *Deaf Tend Your, Non-Manual Signals in ASL*, Calliope Press, 1996
- Cassell, J. & McCaffrey, E., *ASL Grammatical Aspects: Comparative Translations*, Sign Enhancers, 1995
- Dickson, K., Linder, T., Hudson, P., *Observation of Communication and Language Development*, Transdisciplinary Play Based Assessment, Paul H. Brookes Publishing, Co., 1993
- King, Jess F. & Jan Kelly, *American Sign Language Basics for Hearing Parents of Deaf Children*, Butte Publications, 1995
- Patrick, Sandy, *Facilitating Communication and Language Development*, Transdisciplinary Play Based Assessment, Paul H. Brookes Publishing, Co., 1993
- Sign Talk Development Project, *Discovering Words and Signs, A Resource Guide for Developing a Bilingual and Bicultural Preschool Program for Deaf and Hearing Children*, 1994
- Newport, E. & Meier, R., *The Acquisition of American Sign Language*, NIH/NSF Research Grants, 1986
- Pizzuto, E., *The Early Development of Dexis in American Sign Language: What's the Point?*, From Gesture to Language in Deaf and Hearing Children, Gallaudet University Press, 1982
- Smith, C., Lentz, E., & Mikos, K., *Signing Naturally, Teacher's Curriculum Guide Level 1*, Dawn Sign Press, 1988
- Supalla, S., & Wix, T., *ASL Acquisition Assessment*, Sign Language Studies Program, University of Arizona, 1992
- Supalla, Ted & Newport, E., *Noun-Verb Pairs*, Working paper, 1978

# ASL DEVELOPMENT OBSERVATION RECORD

Early Childhood Education Department  
California School For The Deaf  
39350 Gallaudet Drive  
Fremont, CA 94538

Child's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Name Sign: \_\_\_\_\_

Parents: Deaf      Hearing

Siblings: Deaf      Hearing

A. COMMUNICATIVE INTENT	Emerging	Developing	Proficiently
1. Uses eye contact to initiate/regulate social interaction			
2. Responds to appropriate attention-getting techniques			
3. Uses appropriate attention-getting techniques			
4. Responds to others by smiling, laughing or waving			
5. Communicates distress by protesting or rejecting			
6. Refers to objects by pointing, giving and showing			
7. Demonstrates turn-taking behaviors			
8. Gives consistent visual attention to the signer			
9. Looks in the direction indicated by the signer			
10. Shows interest in conversation between two or more people			
11. Imitates simple movements and facial expressions of others			
12. Communicates with use of gestures			
13. Displays a range of communicative intentions (e.g. expressing feelings, requesting, labeling, commenting)			

B. ASL COMPREHENSION	Emerging	Developing	Proficiently
1. Responds to his/her name sign			
2. Responds to his/her fingerspelled name			
3. Recognizes name signs and commonly used signs for other people (e.g. FATHER, DOCTOR, TEACHER)			
4. Responds to headshakes, frowns, and signs indicating <b>negation</b>			
5. Understands signs for common objects in the environment			
6. Recognizes commonly used lexicalized fingerspelling (e.g. BUS, DO, JUICE, WHAT)			
7. Follows simple commands and statements			
8. Understands and carries out complex commands and requests			
9. Responds to use of pointing to refer to people, objects and places			
10. Responds to use of non-manual signals (e.g. raised/squinted eyebrows) as ASL grammatical markers			
11. Attends to <b>storytelling from 5 to 20 minutes</b>			

C. ASL PRODUCTION	Emerging	Developing	Proficiently
1. Babbles with hands			
2. Imitates handshapes/words signed to him/her			
3. Uses signs that reflect basic handshapes (e.g. B, A, S, O, C, 1, 5)			
4. Substitutes basic handshapes for signs requiring complex handshapes (e.g. HS "A" for the sign APPLE instead of HS X)			
5. Uses signs with complex handshapes (e.g. X, Y, T, R, 3) clearly and accurately			
6. Uses name signs and other commonly used signs to refer to others			
7. Uses headshakes and/or signs to indicate negation			
8. Uses correct form for numeral incorporation (e.g. palm facing out for age, twist of wrist for 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> , 3 <sup>rd</sup> )			
9. Uses one-word signs			
10. Uses two or three-word signs including points			
11. Expands vocabulary from about 5 to more than 250 signs			
12. Uses indexing (points) to refer to self, people, objects and places in the present environment			
13. Uses non-manual markers (e.g. raised eyebrows) to ask YES/NO questions			
14. Uses non-manual markers (e.g. squinted eyebrows) to ask WH-questions			
15. Uses mouth movements as non-manual signals (e.g. CHA = lips round, jaw closed, then mouth opens wide indicating something thick or big: PURSED LIPS – used to indicate something that is very small, thin, narrow or smooth)			
16. Uses directional/agreement verbs (e.g. I-HELP-YOU, YOU-GIVE TO-HIM)			
17. Uses classifiers to represent objects or people (e.g. CL: crooked 2 = person sitting, animal; CL: modified C = large flat round objects like plates or clocks)			
18. Uses classifiers to show the location and movement of objects and people (e.g. CL: 3 = car swerving by; CL: 1 person walks with quick bouncy movement)			
19. Uses classifiers to describe objects and people (e.g. CL: RECT = small rectangular things such as index cards, name tags, Lego blocks; CL: F = flat round objects such as coins or buttons)			
20. Marks noun-verb pairs correctly (e.g. FLY/AIRPLANE, SIT/CHAIR, OPEN-WINDOW/WINDOW)			
22. Uses verb modifications to show number and distribution of action (e.g. me-Give-To-all, me – ASK-TO- "each")			

C. ASL PRODUCTION	Emerging	Developing	Proficiently
23. Uses sign order to show semantic relations (e.g. SV-Mommy work; VO – Drink milk; SVO – Baby drink milk)			
24. Constructs simple ASL sentences using plain, directional motion/location verbs			
25. Constructs complex ASL sentences using topicalization, rhetorical questions, relative clauses and conditionals			
26. Uses referents (points) to refer to people or objects not present in the environment			
27. Uses role playing during conversations and storytelling			
28. Uses role shifts and eye gaze to show change in role during conversations and storytelling			
29. Participates in ASL storytelling and poetry renditions			

Developed by the  
Early Childhood Education program  
California School for the Deaf

For more information, contact the  
ECE Principal  
39350 Gallaudet Drive  
Fremont, CA 94538  
(510) 794-2536