

Learning language by hand:
Gesture's contribution to language learning across developmental milestones

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When people talk, they gesture. Even children, from the earliest stages of language learning, use their hands when they speak. Research has made it clear that gesture is integrated both temporally and semantically to the speech it accompanies, and can convey substantive information not captured by speech. As such, gesture might offer insight into children's conceptual understanding of language before this understanding becomes explicit in speech.

My research focuses on children's earliest linguistic abilities and examines whether precursors of these abilities can be found in children's gestures. More specifically, I examine whether and how gesture can inform us about language learning, from the onset of first words and first sentences to the emergence of first narratives and explanations. I approach this question from a wide variety of angles, by studying both typically- and atypically-developing children, as well as children who are exposed to structurally different languages.

Overall, my research places gesture at the cutting edge of language development—gesture both presages oncoming changes in children's speech and also serves as a forerunner of linguistic advances; it also remains a robust aspect of the language-learning process, remaining preserved across different learners and linguistic environments.