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Utilizing American Sign Language in the Early Childhood Setting

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Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

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This research project will explore the benefits of using American Sign Language (ASL) in a general education classroom as a tool for classroom management, as well as a way to create an inclusion setting for deaf and hearing impaired children. There are many benefits to bilingualism not just in adulthood but also in the development of young children; whether in fine and gross motor skills or cognitive development. These skills are especially enhanced with the implementation of Sign Language from a young age. There is evidence that Sign Language, when used before a child can speak, helps that child to express themselves with gestures; this ability can have long-term benefits on children’s social emotional capabilities and their ability to express themselves orally in the future. Through observations and research, it is evident that there is a lack of inclusive classrooms that pair hearing students with hearing impaired students. This is a disadvantage not only for the deaf and hearing impaired, but also for the children in the general education classroom. General education students are missing an opportunity to learn another language, use it in their daily lives, and gain the benefit of being with children who have much to share.

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Utilizing ASL in the Early Childhood Classroom

Introduction

American Sign Language

Defined

According to *American Sign Language* by Deborah Kent (2003), American Sign Language (ASL) is defined as “a manual language that developed among deaf people in the United States, based in part upon French Language” (p. 55). This is a very technical definition of ASL. An individual from ASL University defines it as “a visually perceived language based on a naturally evolved system of articulated hand gestures and their placement relative to the body, along with non-manual markers such as facial expressions, head movements, shoulder raises, mouth morphemes, and movements of the body." Another definition from American Sign Language University (“ASL: A Brief”, n.d.), provides a more informed depiction of what ASL is and how it works (“ALSU”, n.d.).

A Brief History of American Sign Language

To find the roots of American Sign Language, history sends us back to Europe in the sixteenth century. Although we can say that sign language has existed, in some capacity, ever since deaf people have been a part of society, it wasn’t until 1620 when Juan Pablo de Bonet (inspired by Italian physician, Geronimo Cardano) published his first book on sign language that it started to become the language as we know it. The next big stride in the sign language community did not come until 1755 when “Abbe Charles Michel de L’Epepe created the first sign language school that was at no cost to the students. His ideas led to the creation of

fingerspelling, and gestures that represented whole phrases or words” in Paris. (Lewis, 2003, p. 32) It wasn't until 1817 that sign language made its way to America. It was brought over by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet who had studied it in France and upon his return to America, opened a school for the deaf in Connecticut with a Frenchman, Laurent Clerc, who was deaf and a teacher of sign in France. When their school first opened, children were taught French Sign Language but the students had their own words and rules of grammar to add to the FSL, and American Sign Language was born. (Kent, 2003, p. 21). By 1863 there were twenty-two schools for the deaf in the United States and in 1864, the first college (Gallaudet College) for the deaf in the world was founded in Washington DC. (Lewis, 2003)

Looking back upon the roots of sign language, there were many thoughts about the idea of a language based in gestures that could make one wonder why it was not more common then, and why it is still not more common now. When you think deeply about the way we communicate, it is evident that a substantial part of spoken conversation is actually the hand gestures, body language, and facial expression that accompany the spoken words. In the book *Nonverbal Behaviors: Perspectives, Applications, Intercultural Insights* (Hogrefe, 1984), this idea is supported, writing that “If the expressions of a man born deaf and dumb were studied...we would gain much insight into the natural ordering of thought. The order of thought, as expressed in spoken language, was altered to fit the linear nature of language and the artificialities of its particular conventions. Gestural expression in the deaf on the other hand, was not constrained in this way “ (p. 77). Gestures are really a natural form of communication, more natural than spoken language.

At this time in our society, the deaf community and ASL is really a culture of its own. As Deborah Kent says in her book *American Sign Language (2003)* “because they share a language and life experiences in common, deaf people who sign feel a deep sense of community. ASL carried the traditions, humor, and poetry of Deaf culture from one generation to the next” (p. 9). It’s important in discussing the history of ASL and Deaf culture to note the difference between the term “deaf” with a lowercase “d” and “Deaf” capitalized. “The term ‘Deaf’ with a capital D is reserved for those who consider ASL to be their primary language.” (Kent, p. 10) This distinction falls in line with Deaf culture being just that, a culture, such as American, French, or Latino as opposed to a disability.

Using ASL in a General Education Setting

Language Development

For children just entering the classroom, whether it be daycare, nursery school, a 2/3s classroom, or any other environment where language is ripe for development, studies have shown that the simultaneous presentation of words visually, kinesthetically, and orally enhances a child’s language development (Daniels, 2001, p.33). Having this knowledge should encourage educators to use basic signs in the classroom to help the growth and development of children’s oral, visual, and physical skills.

One way of using sign language is to teach the alphabet. Having children use their hands as they visualize and speak the letters (note: it is crucial that children say the letters or words out loud) adds a layer to the way their brain will process the information that they are learning. “By letting students *experience* the curriculum through their bodies, we help them make deeper

emotional, interpersonal, and kinesthetic connections to academic subjects” (Griss, 2013, para.1). Considering this, sign language can be utilized in other areas of language arts such as spelling as well as second languages, and math. If we think about children who are just learning math, they take advantage of the fact that they know how to use their fingers to help them understand the material. If we teach children to use their fingers and hands to understand other subjects, their experiences will only benefit. “From a neurocognitive perspective, finger counting provides multisensory input that conveys information on both cardinal and ordinal aspects of numbers” (Moeller, Martignon, Wessolowski, Engel, & Nuerk, 2011, para. 1).

This illustrates that the incorporation of physical movement in combination with visual and verbal cues, enhances the opportunity of understanding for children. To further prove the point, neurophysiologist Carla Hannaford explains that movement anchors thought because “every time we move in an organized . . . manner, full brain activation and integration occurs, and the door to learning opens.” (Hannaford, 1995, p. 97). With this information at hand, we can conclude that using sign language with children to teach spelling and writing can only stand to enhance the learning experience in the classroom.

With such a plethora of information as to the benefits combining physical movement with learning through words and visual cues, it is also helpful to remember that children are ready to learn hand gestures for letters and words before they are able to speak them. Especially with very young children, studies have shown that the use of ASL in the classroom hastens speech development, reduces frustration in young children by giving them a means to express themselves before they know how to talk, increases parent-child bonding, and lets young children communicate their needs.

Classroom Management

Often in the early childhood classroom the noise level can increase at a faster rate than we would like, and it can sometimes be challenging for teachers to bring the volume down. If we have a knowledge of signs that we can teach our students to read and know how to interpret, that is a tool we can use for quieting the room or bringing the focus where it needs to be without adding to the noise level yourself. One example of how to do this would be using signs to express emotions and joys such as raising hands while shaking them instead of clapping. This keeps the noise level down from the outset while simultaneously giving the children a way to express their excitement for something.

Another way to use signs in the classrooms is to teach the children the signs for things such as; bathroom, water, and washing hands. This can be beneficial for the students and the teachers because it is a way for children to say what they need, and ask for permission without having to change the subject of a discussion or wait for a teacher to call on them. Teaching students how to sign simple requests that are common in the classroom can be beneficial in so many ways. Knowing signs can be especially helpful when children are contributing answers to questions or comments during rug time so that not everybody starts shouting “me too me too”. Instead they can sign it and then the conversation can seamlessly progress. This kind of communication creates a calm but still social environment. A strategy like this gives children the opportunity to productively use their bodies in times where they should be sitting still.

Along those same lines, if a teacher is in the middle of a conversation with an adult, another child, or perhaps a parent, and a student needs to know if they can do something, instead of waiting for a break in the conversation or having to interrupt, the student can sign to the

teacher what it is that they need. At that point, the teacher can sign back permission or pause the conversation if it is something they need to attend to immediately.

ASL in the Special Needs Classroom

As discussed previously, there are many ways to use ASL in a general education classroom, but there are also many ways that ASL can enhance the experience of students and teachers in a special needs setting; not only when being utilized with children who have communicative impairments such as down syndrome, aphasia, and autism, but also with children who have social emotional issues. Teachers who use ASL in their classrooms have reported seeing tremendous growth in the literacy and speech development of their special needs students as well as social emotional growth from communication skills and self-control in students who really needed an alternate outlet.

Many children who live with these communicative impairments benefit from the use of ASL because they have difficulty processing verbal information. ASL gives them a way to process language through visual communication, which is often easier for them to understand and to respond. Research was done amongst a group of children with developmental variations that demonstrated the use of ASL in in the special education classroom. This study had the teacher using sign language in her classroom and because of this, the children were able to correlate signs with written words and phonics to read for pleasure. The teacher expressed that this would not have been likely for these children without the instruction of ASL (Daniels, 2001).

Another part of this research was studying the use of sign between parents and their children with communicative impairments. Daniels reported that parents credit sign to their children's capacity to attend. "They also believed that sign aided comprehension and served to facilitate communication exchanges" (2001, p. 94) thus demonstrating the continuing benefits of using ASL. Even children whose variations are motor deficits are able to find a way to work with ASL. They "may find it challenging to use sign accurately but because of their exposure to sign language, they have the ability to express novel ideas through gestures that can be interpreted by primary communicative partners" (Ricamato, 2008).

Teacher Laura Feltzer of East Los Angeles has been using sign language in her reading classes for the past ten years. In this time, she has found that using sign is a "successful strategy for teaching her intellectually disabled students to read [because] certain motions trigger certain words." (Daniels, 2001, p. 95). Let's bring this full circle and remember that some of the benefits to using ASL in the classroom for students across the board is that it gives children another strategy to help their reading development. Now not only is it through seeing, hearing, and speaking, but also through signing. Feltzer's routine to teach children new words is a model that teachers all over the country might benefit from. "When she is teaching a word, she says the word, shows the child a card with the written word, displays an action or object that represents the word, and teaches the child the ASL sign for the word" (Daniels, 2001, p. 96).

In 1999, the Boston Globe featured an article about the Walker School in Needham, Massachusetts which provides services to children with emotional, behavioral, and learning disabilities. When one of the staff speech therapists, Ira Kittrell, realized that his students could benefit from learning and incorporating ASL, he made it a part of the curriculum to "compensate

for their lack of functional pragmatic communication skills” (Ingalls, 1999, para. 3). Through ASL, Kittrell noted that students would be more equipped and receptive to learning “academic and social communication behaviors, focusing skills, spatial relations, eye contact, turn-taking, and verbal expression” (Ingalls, 1999, para. 7). These are all such important qualities in the development of the whole child and to think that this one tool can help in all of those areas is an argument in itself for the implementation of sign language being a more mainstream education.

Kittrell, of the Walker School, also made the following statement, which makes very clear some crucial technical benefits to ASL for children with many variations:

If you sign and use a different facial expression that doesn't correspond to the gesture, it has a different meaning. It teaches students to choose the appropriate expression that eventually gets carried over to the verbal statement. It is a great way to teach and produce communication cues and to elicit responses in others. Additionally, appropriate proximal distance must be respected if communication is to take place. If you don't have space to move your hands or to watch the other person's move, you can't express or receive messages. (Ingalls, 1999, para. 14)

It's important to remember the multifaceted benefits to using ASL as a tool in a special needs classroom. As discussed in this section, research has shown that it is a wonderful tool for teaching literacy as well as speech. It is also an amazing way to help children find confidence in themselves and their ability to communicate with others. This is an important part of social emotional development and knowing the benefits, we should strive for ASL to be a more common tool in every classroom. When the “child is able to see that they are in fact, a communicator, and that their message is received and acted upon within their environment...The power to be understood and to send messages that are received readily fosters more intentionality

and the desire to make more meaning within one's world; they become more empowered the more they feel understood by others" (Ricamato, 2008, para. 7).

Other Benefits of ASL

As has been discussed throughout this paper, American Sign Language (ASL) is a wonderful teaching tool as well as classroom management strategy to use in the early childhood classroom. Of course, its uses may vary depending on the age group you are working with and how your school responds to having ASL as part of the curriculum (in the ideal setting the school would be very receptive and implement it across the grades), but no matter the age, there is a place for Sign Language. Beyond its technical uses, studies have shown that introducing sign language from a young age can help children in their coping skills, social emotional development, self-awareness, and more.

Researchers have found that introducing sign language to children from a pre-verbal age, can help in the social emotional development of children. When we consider why babies cry, one of the first reasons that comes to mind is that they are upset. Upset about what? Perhaps they're hungry, or tired, or need to go to the bathroom; all of these things take time for children to learn to vocalize. However, from what we know about the development of language, we can conclude that babies can learn gestures before spoken language. If they are taught the signs for these needs, they can communicate them through signs with caretakers before they can vocalize them, helping them to develop the ability to ask for the things that they need or want.

Having the ability to express oneself from such a young age, can lead to a superior sense of self and personal awareness as well as social skills. When a baby learns through sign

language how communication works, that child is encouraged to share thoughts, participate in conversation and use gestures in a productive manner. (“Psychological and Emotional”, n.d.)

Introducing sign language to a classroom is also giving students the opportunity to learn another language and culture. Diving into ASL and all that it encapsulates is a wonderful way to introduce children to people who are different from them in the way that they communicate, hear, and learn, but remind them that they have so much in common and give them a chance to communicate and understand from another perspective. Not only that, but “along with the knowledge of a new language... students can now interact with each other more thoughtfully and really look at each other during a conversation” (Clark, 2008, p. 11). If you have been a teacher sitting in front of or in a circle with young children, or any age for that matter, there will undoubtedly be times that getting them to focus on what you are saying is trying. Bringing ASL into these times creates a very tangible need for children to be focused on you. They need to be watching you, paying attention to you. In a similar fashion, when children use ASL to speak to each other, it requires that they focus their attention on the person they are communicating with. It is logical to conclude from this that using introducing and using conversational ASL can help children develop valuable skills in focusing and listening to others.

Another aspect of teaching ASL that we should consider is the way it makes children feel to accomplish something that they can teach to or share with others. As observed by Christine Lack of Park Forest Elementary School in her study on ASL in the classroom, “first and second graders do not often have the opportunity to teach others information. I was very proud of my students and their ability to teach others a new language.” (2008) After her semester of implementing sign language gradually into her classroom, Christine reported seeing many

benefits, “including a stronger classroom community, academic support and the knowledge of another language and culture” (Clark, 2008, p. 12).

Applying sign language in the classroom opens up opportunities for children to learn how to listen with focus and intent. If a teacher is sitting in front of the class using signs to communicate, the children have to focus their attention on the teacher. If they are not focused, they will miss what is happening. The same goes for when students are communicating with each other. Through the use of sign language, they are required to give their undivided attention to each other, because they have to be watching the “speaker”. Developing this habit in conversation as well as in listening to a teacher or authority figure speaking, is sure to set children on a path of superior social skills and ability to focus their attention where it should be.

Seeing Results

All of the knowledge this paper has presented from science and practice demonstrates the many benefits of using American Sign Language as a multipurpose tool in many different classroom settings. With the plethora of information we have, it wouldn't be complete without seeing some of these ideas in action and being able to evaluate what occurs in a classroom that utilizes ASL. The following are some studies that have been done which will put into perspective some of the benefits to American Sign Language in early childhood classroom.

Researcher/Author: Dr. Marilyn Daniels

About Dr. Daniels: Daniels is a professor of communication arts and sciences at Pennsylvania State University. She has been one of the leading authors and researchers in the use

of American Sign Language since the 1990's. She has published 19 research studies and two books on the topic of ASL. Her research has taken place all over the world with hearing children and the deaf community.

ASL as a factor in acquiring English. This study was conducted in the fall of 1991 and spring 1992 in a classroom of 14 hearing children who learned ASL in preschool. All of these children have one or more Deaf parents with the exception of one student. After a year and a half of learning ASL along with English the children took the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. They all scored higher than hearing children who have not been immersed in sign.

The effect of Sign Language on hearing children's language development. For this study, there were sixty prekindergarten students in four classes. The classes were the same size but at two different schools which had comparable socioeconomic status. At one of the schools both classes received sign instruction and the other school neither class received it. Aside from this, the curriculum was the same for all four classes. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test was administered at the end of the year to see the effect of sign on language acquisition. The scores from both signing classes were significantly higher than the scores received from the classes that did not include ASL.

Words more powerful than sounds. This study was an observation of seventy-six hearing children in prekindergarten. Half of the children participated in sign language instruction and the other half did not. Again, the children who received ASL lessons received higher scores on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test.

For more information on the research done by Marilyn Daniels:

Daniels, M. (1993). ASL as a factor in acquiring English. *Sign Language studies, 78, 23-29.*

Daniels, M. (194a). The effect of sign language on hearing children’s language development. *Communication Education, 43, 291-298.*

Daniels, M. (1994b). Words more powerful than sound. *Sign Language Studies, 83, 1-12.*

Daniels, M. (1996a). Bilingual, bimodal education for hearing kindergarten students. *Sign Language Studies, 90, 25-37.*

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Daniels, M. (1997). Teacher enrichment of prekindergarten curriculum with sign language. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 12 (1), 27-33.*

Amy Brereton

Alana: How one hearing child used sign language to move from “disruptive” student to a classroom Expert. This is the observation of a preschool student named Alana whose classroom teachers use a combination of Signing Exact English and spoken English. In the beginning of the school year, Alana had a hard time expressing herself; that lead to conflicts with peers. It was also difficult for her to sit still in class and that cause a lot of disruption for her learning as well as for others. By the end of the year, Alana had developed many skills in Signing Exact English, which helped her in all areas. She was now able to use signs as a way of communicating feelings, she felt accomplished by helping others with their signing, and during situations where she needed to keep her body still she was still able to sign which gave her the movement she needed.

Joyce Chang and Bethany Larson

Enhancing Hearing Children’s Memory with American Sign Language. In this study, there were 33 preschoolers and they were randomly split into a control group or an experimental group. Over a four-month time period, both groups were read the book *Quick as a Cricket*. The control group got only facial expressions and voice inflection with the reading while the experimental group got both of these plus ASL. The researcher spent time reading the book with each child individual using the appropriate method for the group he/she was in. Although it was not significant, there was a slight increase in the amount of vocabulary from the book that was retained by the children in the experimental group.

Conclusion

There are many reasons for making the study of American Sign Language a part of your classroom. No matter the age of the children you work with, there are surely benefits to the application of ASL in their lives. Ranging from behavioral management and social emotional development to increased focus and literacy skills, children stand to gain so much from having it as a part of the classroom. On top of the benefits for the students, it is a great way for teachers to bring something new and exciting into the classroom. Studying American Sign Language can be a multi-subject curriculum. It is a language, a culture, a way of teaching tolerance; we can incorporate it into social studies through classroom meetings and into our reading and writing lessons. The possibilities are as endless as they are flexible. The ASL study can be applied and adjusted to fit the needs of classrooms that vary in age, gender, and ability.

Reflection

The purpose of this thesis was to have a finished product that would be useful and easy to implement in my classroom-bonus if it did the same for other teachers. I think that I have done just that. I chose this topic because I have always been intrigued by American Sign Language; that was it, that was the whole reason. Once I decided this might make a good thesis, I started watching for sign language being used in classrooms. I saw it in only one, and that was only for a few simple words such as “water”, “bathroom”, and “me too”, but my interest was sparked as to how teaching ASL might be more than just learning another language and that’s where my research began.

I started reading articles and watching videos about how teachers were using ASL as a classroom management technique. They were using signing to keep the noise level down and to give children ways to ask for things they needed immediately. This was extremely intriguing and made so much sense to me. I started thinking that there must be more ways to apply ASL in the classroom. Sure enough, as I began to research, I found more and more studies by teachers, scientists, and researchers, and with that, I found myself coming up with ideas of my own for how I could use ASL in my classroom.

From my research and findings, I do believe that I could take this paper and all of its information and suggestions to seamlessly begin a study in ASL with the next class that I teach. Not only have I been able to think creatively and suggest ways to implement the ASL study, but there is also sufficient research to aid in explaining to parents, administration, and other faculty, why this is such a wonderful study for young children.

Recommendations

Teaching Materials

Peterson, J. W. & Ray, D. K. (1977). *I have a sister, my sister is deaf*. New York: Harper & Row.

A wonderful way to help children see and understand that these girls, who happen to be sisters, have so much in common regardless of the fact that one of them is deaf. In the book, the younger sibling explains that because her sister is deaf, they do not hear noises the same. She also explains that despite that, her sister is able to navigate through daily life and communicate through expression.

Gaynor, K. & Quirke, K. (2009) Quirke. *A birthday for Ben*. Dublin: Special Stories.

This book is a beautiful way to introduce children to some of the challenges faced by people who are hearing impaired in a way that builds understanding and empathy. These are feelings that can lead to classroom discussion about what makes us similar and what makes us different. Children can draw their own conclusion from that book which leads us to recognize that we can make a more inclusive community where everybody feels like they belong.

Millman, I. (2004). *Moses sees a play*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

There are so many takeaways from this children's book about a deaf child, Moses, who goes to school for the deaf and hard of hearing thus communicating in sign language. Moses's class will be joined by a class of hearing students who are learning ASL to see a play by the Little Theater of the Deaf. When the two classes come together, Moses meets a child who does not speak English or ASL and tries to communicate with him using gestures and teaching simple signs. Not only is this book a wonderful introduction to simple signs (they are introduced to the students in the book!) but also a lesson in ways to communicate with others and learn about people who are different from you.

*This book might also be helpful as a starting off point for a service learning project!

Bassett, C., & Clare, A. (2003). *Walk like a bear, stand like a tree, run like the wind: Cool yoga, stretching and aerobic activities for cool kids ages 6-12*. [U.S.]: Nubod Concepts.

This is a great tool to really get your students engaged with their minds and bodies. Teachers can use this children's book of yoga poses and incorporate the simple signs to go with the names of correlating poses. There are different ways to do this that would depend on how you have approached yoga and ASL in your classroom from the beginning. Here are some examples-use

as you see fit. If students are familiar with the ASL vocabulary, sign “tree” and let the student come to tree pose, if students are familiar with tree pose have them take the stance and then sign “tree”.

Ways to implement ASL

The Buddy Program (within the school). If your school has a buddy program in place, take this opportunity to have your students re-teach what they have learned. They can work as a class before meeting with their buddies to discuss the ASL that they know, as well as what they are working on. When they meet with their buddies (presumably), give them the opportunity to give a one on one ASL lesson. They can start off with showing their buddies how to sign their own names, and then teach the buddies how to sign their names. For younger children to have the opportunity to teach something new and interesting to an older friend in the school is a great way to boost confidence and excite them about what they are learning.

If there is not an existing buddy program in the school, you can take it upon yourself to set-up meetings between your class and an older group of students. Perhaps it is the whole classes meeting together, or the teacher from the older grades sending groups of students at different times throughout the week or month. There are many ways to adapt this plan to work for your community. The important thing here is to give your students the platform to teach what they have learned to this older group of kids in the school. It creates a relationship between the two age groups as well as reinforcing the lessons you are teaching in your class.

The Community. One of the most wonderful parts of implementing American Sign Language in your classroom is the opportunity that it gives your students to learn about people who are different from themselves. I believe it that in teaching ASL, it is important to introduce your students to those who live this culture that you are teaching. Find a school to partner with that caters to children who are deaf or hearing impaired. This relationship is something that can be comprised of a few field trips back and forth letting your students practice their ASL but also giving them the chance to meet people who need to use ASL and see how their schools work. It's wonderful to introduce your students to children with variations and allow them the chance to discover their similarities and differences.

Service Learning. There are many ways to use ASL as a tool for service learning. Through conversations about the deaf and hearing impaired, you may be guided, by your students, in one direction or another. If it is possible to follow that guidance, I highly recommend letting your students run with an idea if it fits the bill.

As the teacher, you can also guide them in a direction. I would suggest finding a nonprofit organization to work with that supports the deaf and hearing impaired community. They might need volunteers for activities in which case the children would have the opportunity to use the ASL that they have learned in the classroom to help out where it is necessary.

The organization you choose may also need financial support. This could be an opportunity to have the children do fundraising and use this as a way to teach practical math skills. Counting money, graphing, and estimating are examples.

Another way to use ASL as a service learning tool would be to partner with an assisted living home. You can teach your students different songs in ASL and then let them perform for the community at the home. You can add on to this by making time for the children to have lunch or a snack with the people there and teach them some of the ASL that they have learned.

Parent Involvement. Getting parents involved in the school and with their children's education is an important part of creating a sense of community. Schools and teachers can use ASL instruction to invite parents to come to campus and learn sign language. This will give them the opportunity to learn what their children are learning, learn something new for themselves, and be active members of the community.

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