

SECTOR CAPACITY BUILDING PROGRAM

Parent Resource

Understanding Key Word Sign: Supporting communication, not replacing speech



What is Key Word Sign?

Key Word Sign (KWS) is a communication method that pairs spoken words with simple hand movements. Educators use KWS alongside speech to support children's understanding and expression, especially during early language development or when communication is challenging.

While using KWS, educators always speak in full sentences while signing only the key words. These signs add visual information to help children better understand what is being said.



Why Use KWS?

KWS benefits all children, not just those with communication difficulties. It:

- ▶ Creates an inclusive learning environment by increasing knowledge about differences for all children
- ▶ Gives children a variety of alternative ways to express themselves
- ▶ Encourages early communication attempts, especially when speech isn't yet clear

KWS is one of many communication methods that educators use alongside spoken language, natural gestures, facial expressions and visual supports. This range of communication methods allow children to choose the most effective and efficient way to communicate in different situations.

Does KWS Replace Speech?

No, not at all! A common misconception is that using signs will prevent children from talking. In fact, the research tells us that KWS can:

- ▶ Encourage speech development
- ▶ Build vocabulary and confidence
- ▶ Reduce frustration relating to when children are not understood

While using speech to communicate, may be a long-term goal, supporting the child to communicate in the best way for their current communication needs is the highest priority. What matters most is that they have a way to communicate successfully.

Helping Children in Emotional Moments?

When children are upset or overwhelmed, they may find it difficult to speak. If they know some signs, they can still express themselves even when they cannot find the right spoken words. This makes KWS especially powerful in helping children feel heard, understood and safe in emotionally challenging moments.

Supporting Young Communicators?

Young children are still developing their speech and language skills. When their communication attempts are unsuccessful or misunderstood, they may feel discouraged and stop trying. or instead use behaviour to communicate. KWS provides an alternative way to express themselves successfully, encouraging them to keep communicating. More communication = more confidence = more learning.

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How Educators Use KWS?

Educators use KWS throughout daily routines and learning experiences, such as:

- ▶ Mealtimes, free play, story time, and transitions
- ▶ Modelling signs naturally during interactions
- ▶ Pairing signs with spoken language and visual supports
- ▶ Adjusting strategies to meet each child's individual needs

This inclusive approach ensures every child has a voice.

Want to Learn More?

Talk to your child's educators about KWS being used in the preschool and how you can support communication at home. Together, we can help every child feel understood and included.

References

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