

## Makaton

Makaton is a unique sign language using symbols, signs and speech. It helps develop essential communication skills including attention and listening, comprehension, memory, recall and organisation of language and expression.

Speech is always used alongside Makaton signs and/or symbols, made with your hands and face. Makaton signs are simple pictures, designed to help hearing people with communication difficulties as opposed to British Sign Language, which has grammar and spelling functions and originated as a means of communication for deaf people.

Makaton can help with a range of communication difficulties, for example: children who have little or no speech; children who have difficulties understanding or remembering what is being said; children whose speech is difficult to understand; and children whose first language is not English.

Signing is known to be easier to learn than speech as it is easier to move your hands into a position than your mouth to form words.

Makaton builds on early communication skills such as pointing and gesture and so is known to be an easier form of communication, allowing people with communication difficulties, as well as normally developing children, to express themselves more easily.

Symbols may be a more appropriate form of communication for some children and can be used in different ways to help with expression (for example, as a communication aid) or understanding (for example, a visual timetable). They can also be used to support literacy skills.

### When can you use it?

It's never too early; check out some of the impressive baby signing on the internet. Signing has been proven to develop early communication skills such as attention and turn taking. Children will not start using signs themselves until they understand and recognise them, so you need to start using them first.

### Why use Makaton when a child is verbal?

When we sign we increase the ability of someone to understand the spoken word because we add a visual cue, we slow our speech down and we use simpler language. So it can help people to understand what we are saying. If a child is verbal but his speech is unclear, it gives the listener an additional visual cue to what the child is saying. This means that his communication attempts will be more successful, which in turn could improve his confidence and motivation to communicate.

Makaton is designed to back up speech, and research has shown that using signs and symbols can help with speech and language development.

### How can parents use it?

If you think Makaton might be suitable for your child, first find out whether signs, symbols or both would be appropriate for your child's needs. You may need to contact your local Speech and Language Therapy Service for an assessment of your child's communication skills.

The [Makaton website](#) contains lots of useful resources and information about where you can find Makaton training in your area. Makaton signs are relatively easy to learn and courses offer the opportunity to meet up with other parents and carers who also want to learn Makaton.

If you want to start signing with your child, pick a few signs that will be motivating for your child and that she can use in everyday life and start using them. Don't expect your child to sign back to you straight away; it may take a while for her to learn the signs. Choosing a sign or symbol of the week that everyone will use can be a fun way to introduce new signs. You could also watch [Something Special, a programme on CBeebies](#) which uses Makaton.

### When and how should parents ask schools to use Makaton?

Again, focusing on a small vocabulary of signs which will be useful in that environment is a good place to start. Making sure all the key people know the signs so they can be used regularly and consistently. Visual reminders on the wall may help eg the symbol and line drawing of a sign to remind people to use it.

It is also important that the child's peers are able to sign to help with forming relationships.

Some schools have a particular time of day when all the children are expected to sign, such as during registration. Others set up a small signing group with the child and some of their friends so they can practice signing together. Aim to create a signing environment where everyone is expected to sign key words whenever they speak.