

Communicating without words

At about 5 months old, my daughter Melise learned how to blow raspberries (that rude noise made when you stick out your tongue and blow air through). She figured out quickly that when she blows a raspberry mommy and daddy just might blow one back! Our family would have whole conversations consisting only of raspberries!

Teaching our infant raspberries might make some of you cringe, but Roy and I felt that the call-and-response game was an important seed in learning how to communicate. We also wanted her to know that when she talks, we'll listen.

One day Melise developed a special way of communicating her frustration. She scrunched up her face and made a heavy snuff, snuff, snuff through her nose. For over a week it was considered the ultimate negative response, just short of crying.

I took her on a drive that she didn't appreciate and heard the snuff, snuff, snuff coming from the back seat. After my gentle words of comfort did nothing for her, I snuffed back! There was a long silence. Then a hesitant snuff. I snuffed with vigor! Did I hear a giggle? We snuffed and giggled all the way to our destination!

I decided to teach my baby some basic sign language so I could better understand her needs until she learned words. The first sign I taught her was "milk" so that she could let me know when she needed to nurse. I made this sign for many months whenever I nursed her. Suddenly, one day, she made the sign back. I was so proud!

Unfortunately, she was interpreting the sign a little more broadly than I was. Not only would she make the nursing sign to me, she'd make it to her father, her favorite toys, and even the cat! To Melise, we decided, the sign stood for anything that made her happy. I hated to break it to her that it had a more limited meaning, but she eventually learned that there are signs for everything she loves!

The Laughing Mom: humorous tales of motherhood

Written by Susan Pfaltzgraff

Melise came up with her own sign for “I love you.” A friend taught us a game in which you say a little chant while keeping eye contact and leaning toward your baby. At the end of the chant you bump foreheads (gently). After a few repetitions, Melise was leaning right into it. The surprise later was that each time I held her close and made eye contact, she started bumping her forehead into me. It was so very sweet . . . unless I wasn’t paying attention. It even became normal to feel a little head-bump on my chin or nose when I held Melise. It also became normal to hear me say “Ow! I love you, too, Melise.”

At 14 months old, Melise started throwing tantrums. Where did she learn that? With each tantrum, I take a deep breath and remind myself that it’s her way of conveying frustration. Not a pleasant form of communication, but highly effective!

You know, communication is such a funny, complicated thing. Parents will understand that fact more than anyone else. Babies come into this world with one basic form of communication. Crying. We plead, “Oh please, please tell me what you need!” We rack our brains and go through the constant checklist: diaper, food, burp, cuddle, repeat!

Things inevitably improve, but the improvement is not one-sided. Our babies break us in and teach us how to communicate without words! A baby’s grunt, a screwed-up face, a wiggle in just the right way will have mom and dad jumping-to with the correct response. That, I believe, is the true beginning of communication.