

## Rise and sign: Lawrence parents trying signals before speech with youngsters

When her son Aiden was 9 months old, Kari Mack decided to teach him sign language as a way to make communication easier. She used flashcards, books and videos for almost two months but didn't seem to be getting anywhere.

Then one day it happened.

"I had just come home from an exhausting day at work. As soon as he saw me he started signing milk with both hands for the first time, like he was milking a cow. He had such a serious look on his face, I couldn't help but laugh," recalls Mack, who quickly picked up on her son's message and breast-fed him.

Now 18 months old, Aiden frequently uses sounds to express feelings and needs, and Mack has found this has minimized the tantrums that are common to this age group.

Now they're on to other matters.



"We're working on please and thank you and sorry," Mack says, "so when he takes a toy away in play group or makes a mess on the floor he can say sorry."

Holly Storkel [BNCD investigator], an associate professor of speech, language and hearing at Kansas University, says children typically say their first word around the time they are 1 year old, whereas they may make their first sign up to three months earlier.

"You don't need the same level of coordination to produce signs as you do to produce speech sounds," says Storkel, who has found the use of signs particularly helpful in her own family.

When Storkel adopted her now 2 1/2 year old son Alex from China last March, his cleft lip and palate made it difficult for him to produce all the different speech sounds. When added to the impending challenge of learning a new language, Storkel quickly decided signing would be an ideal starting point for their communication.

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### Researchers to establish model center on language and early literacy development

LAWRENCE — Helping infants and toddlers with disabilities develop communication, language and early literacy skills is the goal of a new federally funded project at the Life Span Institute at the University of Kansas.

Dale Walker, associate research professor at the institute's Juniper Gardens Children's Project, and Steve Warren [BNCD investigator], vice provost of research and graduate studies, have been awarded a four-year, \$1.6 million grant to establish a Model Demonstration Center for Promoting Language and Literacy Readiness in Early Childhood. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, the center will provide staff development and technical assistance to early childhood programs in

Kansas City, Olathe and Topeka, Kan., and North Kansas City, Mo. It will be one of only three model demonstration centers in the United States to be funded by the Office of Special Education Programs on the topic of early language.

The center will collaborate with practitioners in home-based and early childhood education and preschool settings on the use of evidence-based techniques to enhance the communication and early literacy skills of children with disabilities and those at risk for language delays.

"This center will evaluate the use of language

*(Language Development, Continued on page 3)*

## Teach sign language to your baby!

Imagine avoiding that potential meltdown due to immediately understanding that your 13-month old is signing that he wants to wear red socks (yes, specifically the color red) and not the blue socks you have already picked out!

You can start teaching your child sign language as early as 6 months. Based on your child's age, you will see your child sign within a few weeks to a few months. Then, the conversation begins! But even before your child signs back, she can understand you and may acknowledge your words and signs through grunts.

- [www.mybabycantalk.com](http://www.mybabycantalk.com)  
Another useful resource on baby signing and also includes a video "dictionary" program.
- [www.signingbaby.com](http://www.signingbaby.com)  
Want to learn American Sign Language? Learn it here, with resources for finger-spelling, ASL dictionary and grammar guides, and baby-signing tips as well. Created by a signing mother, this Web site includes articles, signing stories and photographs of babies signing. Updated often.
- [www.signwithme.com/002\\_browse\\_signs.asp](http://www.signwithme.com/002_browse_signs.asp)  
This site provides short video clips of adults demonstrating various sign gestures. Physical motions behind the correct execution of each gesture are described.



*(Signing with Babies, Continued from page 1)*

"We started using sign language with him the first week we were back in America," she says. "It's been amazing how quickly he has learned. After about 1 month, he was able to produce about 50 different signs. After about 3 months, he produced over 100."

Alex has since had surgery to correct his palate and his speech is slowly improving. Storckel believes the use of sign language has not interfered with his learning to speak, but rather that it seems to help children in general with language development.

"Studies have shown that introducing a new spoken word with a gesture that highlights some aspect of the word's meaning, helps children learn the new word," says Storckel, who points out that many of the sign language programs for children emphasize signs that bear some resemblance to the item they stand for. "For example, the sign for cat indicates the whiskers of a cat. Thus, the relationship between this sign and the animal is more

meaningful."

This may just be the case for 16 month-old Madison Theisen.

"Her favorite sign is 'baby,'" says her mother, Brooke Theisen. "Whenever she sees another child she makes the rocking motion with her arms."

Theisen has been teaching Madison signs since she was 8 months old and is proud to say her daughter now knows more than 30 signs. She says it's important for parents to remain consistent and not give up if their child doesn't pick up on this form of communication right away.

"Just keep doing it over and over again," Theisen says, "and eventually it'll click."

*This article was written by Marlo Angell and printed in the Lawrence Journal-World on December 1, 2008.*

## BNCD INVESTIGATOR HIGHLIGHT

Dr. Catts' research interests include the relationship between spoken and written language development and disabilities. Most recently, he is the principal investigator of a longitudinal study funded by the Institute of Education Sciences. This project concerns the early identification of reading disabilities within a response-to-intervention framework. In this project, Dr. Catts and colleagues are identifying multiple cohorts of kindergarten children at risk for reading disabilities. These children are administered a battery of screening instruments, and scores on these instruments will be compared to subsequent reading achievement. Progress monitoring is also used to examine children's response to small group intervention. The project will examine which combination of screening measures and response to intervention is most accurate and efficient in identify-

ing children with subsequent reading disabilities. Dr. Catts is also involved in several other projects focusing on the nature and early identification of reading disabilities.



Hugh Catts

## Upcoming Events for Parents and Kids!

### Shawnee North Family Aquatic Center Opens

Shawnee North Family Aquatic Center Opens

**When:** 5/23/2009 - 9/05/2009

**Time:** Noon - 8 p.m. Sunday-Saturday

**Where:** 300 NE 43rd Street, Topeka, KS

For more information: 785-286-0676

Or visit: [http://](http://www.scpnrfoundation.org/shawnee-north-facilities/aquatic-family-center)

[www.scpnrfoundation.org/shawnee-north-facilities/aquatic-family-center](http://www.scpnrfoundation.org/shawnee-north-facilities/aquatic-family-center)



### July 4th Celebration

A picnic, music and fireworks extravaganza! Admission is free.

**When:** 7/4/2009

**Time:** Fireworks begin at dusk

**Where:** Sesquicentennial Point Park, Lawrence, KS

For more information: 785-749-1504

### Fiesta Mexicana and Carnival

A Topeka tradition since 1933, the week long Fiesta Mexicana celebration features authentic Mexican foods, crafts, children's corner, mercado, entertainment on three stages and carnival excitement for all ages.

**When:** 7/14/2009 - 7/18/2009

**Time:** 4 p.m. - 11 p.m.

**Where:** Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, 201 NE Chandler, Topeka, KS

Visit: <http://www.olg-parish.org/fiesta/index.html>



### 2009 Douglas County Free Fair

Live music, carnival, 4-H exhibits, demolition derby, antique tractor pull and a variety of races and contests.

**When:** 8/1/2009 - 8/9/2009

**For times, visit:** <http://www.dgcountyfair.com/schedule.html>

**Where:** Douglas County Fairground, 2110 Harper, Lawrence, KS



### Honk! Junior

Honk! Junior is a fun-filled musical about a young duck named Ugly who must find his way home.

**When:** 8/14/2009 - 8/23/2009

**Time:** 7 p.m. Show Friday & Saturday 2 p.m. Show Sunday

**Where:** Topeka Civic Theatre, 3028 SW 8th Avenue, Topeka, KS

For more information: 785-357-5211  
Or visit: [www.topekacivictheatre.com](http://www.topekacivictheatre.com)

*(Language Development, Continued from page 1)*

and early literacy intervention strategies in programs serving infants and toddlers and how to provide continuity of those interventions as children move into preschool," said Walker.

The grant will extend the groundbreaking work by Life Span Institute researchers Betty Hart, professor emeritus, and the late Todd Risley, former professor and senior scientist. Their 10-year study, documented in the seminal 1995 work "Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of American Children," showed that children who heard more language from early infancy through age 3 developed substantially larger vocabularies than those who did not. The differences between children persisted after they entered school and through the third grade according to a follow-up study

by Walker, Hart and fellow KU researchers Charles Greenwood and Judith Carta.

"The early work of Drs. Hart and Risley inspired us to test ways to increase the amount and quality of language learning opportunities for very young children in community-based child care," said Walker. "Their work showed a connection between early educators' use of language-promoting strategies and corresponding increases in children's communication. This new center will permit us to extend this work to infants and young children with disabilities."

The center will work with early childhood educators to evaluate strategies to promote early language and literacy readiness with 225 children with disabilities. The center will ultimately benefit 1,200 young children and their families. More than 150

early childhood educators and other intervention specialists are expected to participate.

The Life Span Institute is one of the largest research and development programs in the nation for the prevention and treatment of developmental disabilities. The institute includes 12 centers and more than 140 programs and projects located on the Lawrence and medical center campuses and in Kansas City, Kan., and Parsons.

*This article can be viewed online at:*  
<http://www.news.ku.edu/2008/april/3/literacy.shtml>

*Published April 3, 2008*

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**About this Newsletter:**

The BNCD newsletter is designed to keep you informed about the ongoing research projects that are being conducted by BNCD researchers at the University of Kansas. Participants who have been part of recent research projects conducted by BNCD researchers, parents who have expressed interest in participating in future research, and individuals from organizations such as schools and daycare centers that have an interest in BNCD studies will receive this newsletter from time to time to keep them up-to-date about the research activities at the BNCD. If you do not wish to receive future newsletters, please call or e-mail the BNCD to have your name removed from our list. Research at the BNCD is supported in part by grant number 5 P30 DC05803 from the National Institute on Deafness and other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) at the University of Kansas.

**Summertime Fun!**

Find the hidden words within the grid of letters.

B U I L D A F O R T K J V U S  
 G O T O B E A C H N V U F W C  
 P L A Y B O A R D G A M E S A  
 V L G R E S Q R G J L P W R V  
 S Y A O T K G F J L G R D E E  
 D G K N O S I N A R I O X A N  
 U N U R T U A B O T K P C D G  
 O I R B M S T N E S B E I B E  
 L P N I T E E S D D G L N O R  
 C M G U K C T E I C I N O O H  
 H A A S R O E C D D R R I K U  
 C C A E R R I L N S E A F S N  
 T B E I F S A R L A R G F R T  
 A S E L B B U B W O L B E T T  
 W S K R O W E R I F C Q G T S

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|-----------------|--------------|------------------|---------------|
| ARTS AND CRAFTS | COLLECT BUGS | PLANT SEEDS      | SING SONGS    |
| BASKETBALL      | FIREWORKS    | PLAY BOARD GAMES | WATCH CLOUDS  |
| BLOW BUBBLES    | GO OUTSIDE   | READ BOOKS       | WRITE STORIES |
| BUILD A FORT    | GO TO BEACH  | RIDE BIKE        |               |
| CAMPING         | JUMP ROPE    | SCAVENGER HUNT   |               |