

**Talking with Oliver**  
By Gail Grenier Sweet © 2006

My grandbaby Oliver is almost 17 months old and he's been "speaking" in baby sign language for several months now. The theory, as I understand it, is that much of the Terrible Two syndrome can be bypassed if toddlers find a way to communicate their wishes. They don't get so frustrated if they can say, for instance, "I want more."

And they don't have to *whine* to get what they want.

Charlie and Katie had to do a lot of sign-and-speech repetition, sign modeling, and actually holding Oliver's hands to demonstrate... but Oliver caught on pretty quickly.

It's been incredibly handy to know what the little guy is trying to communicate. Plus, it's funny to watch!

Oliver puts his own spin on signs. For example, he uses two hands for all signs even when one would do. The "please" sign is especially funny because it looks like he's scratching his chest with all his fingers.

Oliver's main signs are:

More  
All done/All gone  
Please  
Milk  
Drink  
Eat  
Up  
Down

He's resisting learning the sign for "thank you," which I find odd because he has no problem doing "please." Maybe "please" was more important because he knew it was the only way he'd get what he wanted. Once he had it, why bother with "thank you?"

Do the signs slow down the process of vocalizing words? Maybe. I'm sure some child psychologist is out there testing that theory. However, I can tell you that Oliver has begun to combine sign language *with* spoken words. "MORE" is the big one. He says it like a very drawn-out "Moe" in an upswing, like a question. As he says it, he makes the hand sign.

His words started really spilling out when he hit 16 months old, although a few expressions made their appearance earlier. Here they are, in approximate order of appearance:

Uh-oh

Oh no

Oh wow (The first three utterances were all *dramatic*.)

No (This was his loudest, firmest, and most logically declaimed word at the time of its origin. I love how kids can say “no” without emotion. It’s not an argument; it’s a fact.)

Hi

More

Mama

Memere (That’s me – it sounds like “Mem – ay,” accent on the first syllable. It’s a French Canadian word for grandma. I had a Memere and a Pepere.)

Anna (Lucky for me, he said Memere and Anna the same day – I would have been in trouble with Anna if he said my name first. I *was* in trouble with Charlie, because Charlie’s name came later.)

Moo (Again, a loud, firm, logically declaimed sound, in response to “What does a cow say?” Oliver speaking this word marked the first time I saw him figuring out that he could make people laugh. He laughed right along, enjoying being the comedian.)

Horse/Cat sound (They sound about the same, like a quiet whine.)

Brrrum – brrrum (truck/car sound)

Papa

Pee pee

Poo poo (Katie asked Charlie “How do you feel about being in the same group as pee pee and poo poo?”)

Bye bye

Ball

Hot

You know how you’re never supposed to compare kids? That’s pretty easy for me, since I don’t remember much from when my kids were little. But there is one landmark etched indelibly on my brain, and I’ll be watching to see if Oliver can come close....

When Charlie was almost two, we were sitting in a food court eating something when an old lady paused in her shopping to admire our little guy. She asked him, “Are you two?”

Charlie answered, “No, I’m one.”

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