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South Bay babies who are learning sign language could be on the fast track to communicating

Byline: By Melissa Heckscher, Daily Breeze

When 11-month-old Sophia Nowlen wants more milk, she doesn't have to cry. She just asks for it.

Tapping her tiny fingers together in the American Sign Language gesture for "more," the doe-eyed, blond-haired baby from Culver City uses her hands to express what her vocal cords cannot yet speak.

"She says, 'more.' She says 'all done,' " said Sophia's mother, Rebecca Nowlen. "She tries to say 'Change my diaper,' but it never has anything to do with whether her diaper is dirty."

Sophia is not alone. As more and more parents strive to boost their babies' potential with classical music and pre-preschool, Sophia is one of a growing number of babies learning American Sign Language.

The goal, said Daryl Heater, a music therapist who teaches a baby sign-language class at the Wondernation Discovery and Enrichment Studio in Manhattan Beach, is to help babies develop language skills at an earlier age and to alleviate the frustration babies -- and their parents -- feel over not being able to communicate.

"There are babies who will tell you they're afraid of something in their room," Heater said. "If the parents know what it is they're afraid of, they can take that thing out."

While it has only recently entered the mainstream, the benefits of signing for babies were first noticed in the 1970s when researchers found that hearing