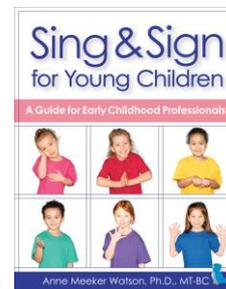


## BOOK REVIEW

# Sing & sign for young children: A guide for early childhood professionals (Meeker Watson)

Reviewed by Beth Pickard

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**Title:** Sign & sign for young children: A guide for early childhood professionals **Author:** Anne Meeker Watson **Publication year:** 2022  
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It was a pleasure to review this resource, as a UK-based music therapist and researcher with experience of using sign language in my practice. I studied some basic British Sign Language (BSL) and trained in SignAlong (SignAlong, 2022) to support my practice with children, young people and adults who have learning disabilities. Therefore, my engagement with sign is distinct than the main intention of this book, which is to teach sign through song and play to typically developing, hearing infants. It feels pertinent to state that American Sign Language (ASL) and BSL are independent and distinct languages. As such, readers are encouraged to engage with a sign language relevant to their own culture, in order that the potential for engagement between hearing children and d/Deaf<sup>1</sup> children in their respective communities, as Meeker Watson (2022) proposes, remains.

The introduction to the book's author, Anne Meeker Watson, PhD MT-BC, provides an impressive summary of international experience in the field of music and the early years. An accessible, evidence-based rationale for signing with young children is presented: "teaching hearing children to sign is an extension of the types of nonverbal communication they already use to get your attention: facial expression, gesturing, making noise, crawling, toddling toward an object of desire, and more" (Meeker Watson, 2022, p. xix).

The sub-section 'What Science Says About Signing and Singing with Young Children' references research for those interested to pursue empirical evidence (Brandt et al., 2012; Colwell et al., 2014).

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<sup>1</sup> I use the phrase "d/Deaf" intentionally to acknowledge the two representations and experiences of deafness and Deafness. A lower case "d" is typically used to reference the audiological experience of deafness, or the partial or complete absence of hearing. A capital "D" is typically used to denote someone who identifies as a member of the Deaf community, and all the cultural connotations of that context (National Deaf Children's Society, 2022). I have used Meeker Watson's original wording when she refers to deaf/deafness, throughout.

This elevates this text over other examples which are lighter on their evidence-based foundation (for example Smith & Gilbert, 2010).

While this interesting chapter provides a robust and convincing rationale for utilising sign language with hearing infants, I would be interested to see a section evidencing the potential of this approach for neurodivergent people of all ages. There was a brief reference to this notion: “adding key signed words allows youngsters to communicate with their peers who are deaf or utilise signs as an alternate form of communication due to autism, Down syndrome, or other language disorders” (Meeker Watson, 2022, p. xxxiv). Further encouraging this application could enrich the inclusive potential of the approach. It would also be interesting to consider how the approach could be a rich resource for groups with both hearing *and* d/Deaf children.

Several of the concepts discussed in the opening chapters: attachment, joint attention, communicative musicality, motherese (parentese) and self-regulation, will be familiar to music therapists. While this book is aimed at early childhood professionals, who may or may not have the same knowledge of these concepts, this could be a powerful bridge into signing for music therapists as this language will be familiar, even if signing is not. The impressive breadth of accompanying resources ensures music therapists and early childhood professionals can access the approach with confidence.

In discussing the selection of signs for this publication, it was interesting to read that many early years settings in the United States of America teach ASL to children from birth to two years of age (Meeker Watson, 2022, p. xx). In the UK, sign-supported communication systems, such as Makaton or SignAlong, are often used with young children rather than BSL. Meeker Watson (2022, p. xxi) presents a great rationale for this, suggesting that knowledge of ASL “may come in handy at play centres or on the playground with peers who are deaf or hard of hearing”, enabling wider inclusion beyond the classroom. This echoes the British Deaf Association’s (2022) recent statement, advocating for teaching of BSL to hearing *and* d/Deaf children, describing it as “a natural, rich, visual language that will enable them to communicate with the Deaf community for the rest of their lives”. Meeker Watson (2022, p. xv) acknowledges Nicki Hjelmstad Hutchinson, interpreter, and Charles Golladay, Deaf educator, for their input, as well as Robin Olson, ASL interpreter and early educator. It would have been great to see some further context about d/Deaf culture and the origins of ASL, as the British Deaf Association (2022) has recently acknowledged this is often missing in the development of signing systems and resources. In a similar vein, I would be interested in a d/Deaf practitioner’s review of this book, which would bring insights and perspectives that I am not able to offer.

I appreciated the discussion of potential for practitioners to learn their country’s respective sign language themselves (Meeker Watson, 2022, p. xxxv). This increases the potential for adults as well as children to communicate more inclusively in their communities, as well as assuring the accuracy and understanding of the signs performed. This would also support the development of wider repertoire to enable flexibility and spontaneity. I appreciated the clarification which accompanied certain sign descriptions if they were performed any differently by the d/Deaf community. However, I do wonder whether giving sign approximations throughout sets an expectation that young children cannot master or work towards accurate signing, which is not necessarily true.

In the main body of the book, the wealth of resources provide for a breadth of holistic educational experiences. The clear structure of the resources presented and warm, supportive tone enables easy engagement and navigation. While there is an acknowledgement that this resource is not intended to replace or substitute the expertise of a speech and language therapist (Meeker Watson, 2022, p.xxxvi), there is quite prescriptive guidance offered on some topics such as feeding and “picky eating” (Meeker Watson, 2022, p. 2). This felt as though it could be straying into other specialisms. The expanse of imaginative accompanying activities readily makes for several months of playful sessions. The inclusion of an inventory of related picture books is a particularly thoughtful addition, as is the suggestion of providing loans of book bags to ensure that all families can access relevant resources. The phrasing of ‘caring adult’ is inclusive of a myriad of different family structures. One limitation of the Pictorial Sign Dictionary is that without the full sign description, movements which are integral to the sign’s accuracy are missed. I felt the book ended a little abruptly after such careful positioning and context at the outset.

Overall, this is a rich resource for American practitioners to develop a creative, playful singing and signing provision with young children. The model could be developed for other contexts and cultures, through collaboration with d/Deaf children and adults. The resource would be enriched by context about d/Deaf culture. However, the therapeutic context and nurturing approach shines through and provides for an informed approach, written in accessible language. I enjoyed the opportunity to learn from this resource, and my one-year-old son thoroughly enjoyed moving along to the music and practicing his signs in turn!

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