

Actions speak louder than words for these local babies

By **KIM HAYES**
Sentinel reporter

They might not have much to say now, but it won't be long before Gabby Meyer, Sadie Goss, Madelynn "Maddy" Smiley and Eden Smith are talking up a storm, even if they do so in silence.

The four young ladies are participating in the Baby Signs Program, which teaches hearing babies simple signs based on American Sign Language so they can communicate with those around them before they are able to speak.

Marlene Tooley, of Belleville, is an independent certified instructor of the program and leads several small groups each week. Jonah, the younger of her two sons, participates in the classes as well, which began the first week of December last year.

Tooley says that most of the time, babies who are taught to sign generally pick up the concept around the age of 12 months; however, as with anything new, signing is a learning process and each baby learns at a different rate. Many babies sign at 8 or 9 months. Some indications that a baby might be close to signing include pointing at items and watching the hands of the people who sign with them, as if to ask, "What is that and what is the sign for it?"

There are several reasons these babies have been enrolled in the program. According to research information on www.babysigns.com, the benefits of teaching hearing babies to sign are numerous. Immediate results — that is, after the child learns signs — are reduced frustration for both parent and baby, reduction in aggressive behaviors like biting or hitting and insight on an infant's perception of the world, which allows a parent to correct a mistaken child and understand his or her thought processes better.

Reduced frustration is a big reason Eden and Gabby participate in the program.

"I've been friends with Marlene since high school, and I saw what she could do with Aiden, her oldest," Erica

Smith says. "I've seen the frustration with nieces and nephews. Even when they could speak, if you couldn't hear them, they would get frustrated. We figured we could avoid the frustration."

Eden is 11 months old and knows and uses the signs for dog, eat, book, cereal, stars, all done, bye bye, yes and no. Smith, along with her husband, Steve, her mother, her sister and the babysitter, started signing with Eden when she was 6 months old. Smith says Eden did her first sign — dog — about a month and a half later. She says dog was quickly followed by eat.

"Eden's very food motivated, so she does the sign for eat. when she's really hungry, she'll do it faster to emphasize it," Smith says.

Sadie's mom, Jenny Goss, says Sadie gets a great deal of joy from communicating with those around her.

"Whenever I can figure out what she wants, and she knows that I can figure it out, I see her eyes light up when I can connect with her. If she can sign to me and let me know, it would definitely make her happy," Goss says.

At this point, Sadie does the sign for milk, but it's not yet consistent. At the age of 8 months, Sadie is interested in the world around her, especially if the world around her happens to be around the dinner table as well.

"Sadie definitely watches hands, especially around meal time," Goss says. "She seems to be most driven by food, so if it's time to eat, she's watching."

Five-month-old Gabby is a little young to actually be signing, but her mother, Mattea Meyer, brings her to class all the same.

"I wanted to be able to know what was on Gabby's mind without her getting upset," Meyer says.

While it may seem a bit early for Gabby to participate in the program, her attendance at the group sessions is valuable.

"It's all about persistence," Tooley says. "There's a lot of repetition." That repetition —

the consistent exposure to the signs, the sounds of the words, and the social interaction of being with the other babies — will likely help Gabby in both the near and the distant future. She may start signing long before she would have if she would have started the program in a few months. Even at 5 months old, Gabby already communicates using gestures, which is a first step to signing.

In addition to the short-term effects of the program, research shows that long-term benefits include increased trust between babies and their parents and caregivers, positive emotional development for the children because they are understood, and advanced intellectual development.

The program's research is supported by the National Institutes of Health. Conducted by doctors Linda Acredolo and Susan Goodwyn more than 20 years, the research showed that children who learned to sign as infants were talking, at age 3, at a 4-year-old level. At age 8,

Continued on Page 3



Sentinel photo by KIM HAYES
Eden Smith holds a flashcard while her mom, Erica, receives instructions on signing the word shoes.

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