

Todd LaMarr, MA, is a professor in the department of Early Childhood Education at American River College in Sacramento, California. An alumnus of Gallaudet University's Science of Learning Center on Visual Language and Visual Learning, LaMarr has worked at the University of California, Davis and Stanford University researching the language and brain development of children learning American Sign Language.

Access and Equity in ASL Acquisition: Resources to Improve Early Access to Sign Language

By Todd LaMarr, Lisalee Egbert, and Bee Vicars

Ximena and Joaquin have two children, a hearing 3-year-old and a newborn who they just found out has a profound bilateral hearing loss. Like most hearing parents, deafness is a new experience in their lives, and they have much to learn and many decisions to make. While they continue to debate long-term plans, they know that providing accessible language immediately is essential; thus, they have decided to learn sign language. However, this decision opens up new decisions that need to be made while also balancing their family life. For example, what is the best way to learn: online, through books, or by taking classes? On a strict budget, can they afford the classes and resources required? How can they balance family and job responsibilities while devoting enough time to learn and practice a new language? And how can their extended family, some of whom live nearby but some of whom live far away, also learn sign language?*

The experiences and questions Ximena and Joaquin have are common to many hearing parents with deaf and hard of hearing children. Their decision to learn American Sign Language (ASL) so their deaf infant has immediate exposure to an

Right: Research emphasizes that early access to a sign language is critical to a deaf child's long-term language growth.

Photo by Matthew Vita, Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center



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Lisalee Egbert, PhD, professor and coordinator of Modern Languages at the University of Texas at Arlington, researches early education and deaf education focusing on American Sign Language/English bilingual-bicultural education as it relates to literacy. Her work explores the inter-development of language, literacy, and cognition within the framework of social justice and equality. Addressing her Native American heritage and her first sign language, Plains Indian Sign Language, she contributed to an eBook focused on Native Americans.

Bee Vicars, MFA, is an instructor of American Sign Language (ASL) at California State University, Sacramento and co-owner of Lifeprint.com. She is also a Facebook blogger who is passionate about educating the public on Deaf issues and in her spare time enjoys making lists of Deaf content creators and ASL resources.

The authors welcome questions and comments about this article at LaMarrT@arc.losrios.edu.

accessible language is a challenging endeavor (Flowers, Duchesne, & Gaucher, 2022). Like the 95 percent of hearing parents with deaf children, they are unfamiliar with ASL—and they deserve equitable access to learning it. That means they need to find resources that are free or low-cost and learning opportunities that are flexible and allow them to balance their other responsibilities.

Ximena and Joaquin deserve credit for recognizing the importance of early language learning and deciding to learn ASL. When deaf children are exposed to sign language from an early age, they show age-appropriate language development similar to the pattern and rate of growth of native** signing children (Allen &

Moreno, 2020; Berger et al., 2023; Caselli, Pyers, & Lieberman, 2021). Research emphasizes that early access to a sign language is critical to a deaf child's long-term language growth.

However, after the decision is made to learn a sign language, parents like Ximena and Joaquin face new challenges. First, it is difficult to learn another language as an adult and can take years to become conversationally proficient. Second, misconceptions about sign language continue to persist, such as that learning sign language impedes the acquisition of a spoken language and that sign language is not a real language at all (see Humphries et al., 2022, for a discussion). Some parents are fortunate to find



challenge to families. In fact, hearing parents report that two of the major challenges to learning sign language are the costs of resources and time (Lieberman, Mitchiner, & Pontecorvo, 2022).

Free and Low-Cost Online Resources

In the interest of equity of access, some individuals and organizations are creating high-quality sign language learning resources that are free or low cost. These allow parents to practice and learn when they have time, and they do not need to worry about finances.

a Deaf Mentor or a Deaf Mentor Program in their area. This allows them to not only get help learning sign language but also to learn interactional and attention-supporting strategies and to learn about Deaf culture.

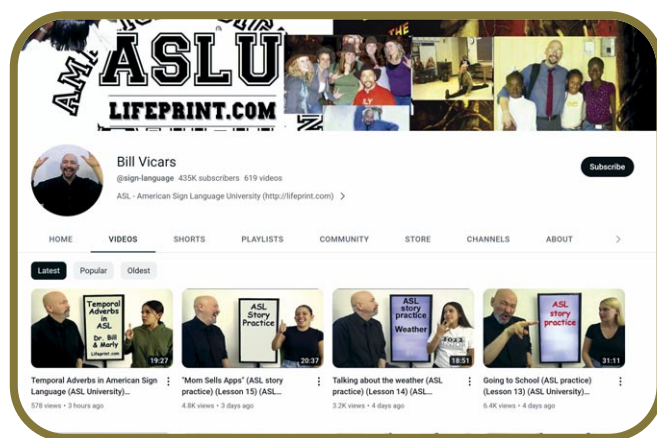
Still Ximena and Joaquin—and parents like them—persist, and the next question they face is perhaps one of the toughest ones: *What is the best way for hearing parents to learn sign language?* Two of the most common ways are self-teaching (e.g., books, videos, computer apps) and taking sign language classes, such as at a community college or university (Caselli, Pyers, & Lieberman, 2021). While most frequently selected, these ways are not always the most equitable as they usually require money, and finances can be a

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Below is a listing of free ASL resources

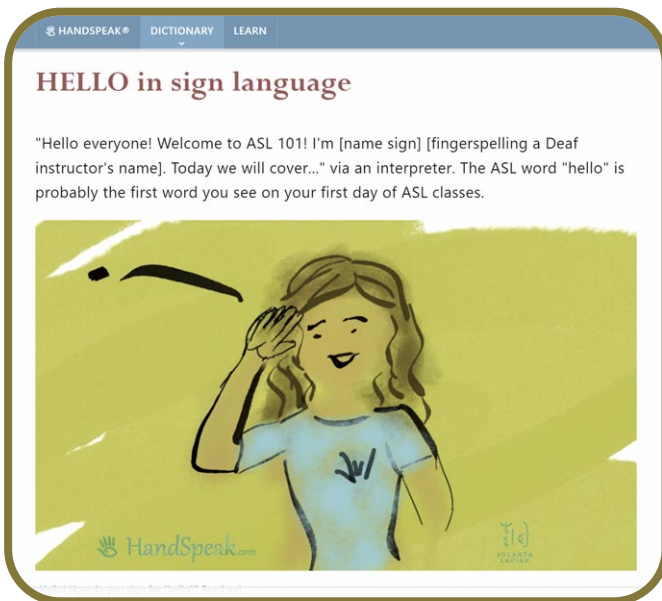
that we find helpful:

- **Lifefprint** (www.lifefprint.com), a website with an ASL dictionary and self-paced lessons
- **ASL at Home** (www.aslathome.org), an online program that offers a family-based ASL curriculum in both Spanish and English
- **ASL Stories Directory** (www.deafchildren.org/knowledge-center/asl-resources/sign-language-stories/), a collection of stories read in ASL sponsored by the American Society for Deaf Children

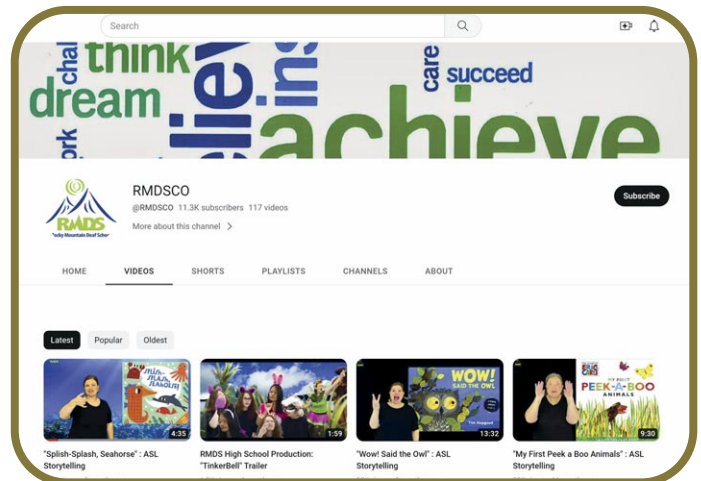


- **Bill Vicars's YouTube channel** (www.youtube.com/@sign-language/videos), a variety of vocabulary videos and other topics
- **Spread the Sign** (www.spreadthesign.com), an online sign language dictionary representing a range of sign languages from around the world, including ASL

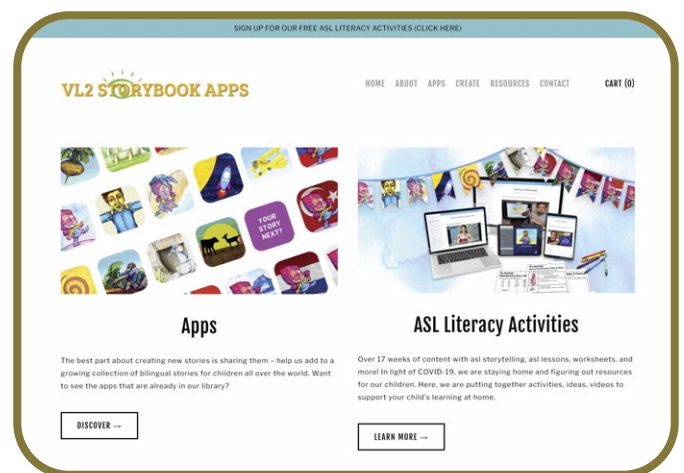
- **Rocky Mountain Deaf School's YouTube channel** (www.youtube.com/user/RMDSCO/videos), including ASL stories, ASL art lessons, ASL vocabulary, and more
- **PopSign** (www.popsign.org), an interactive game app to help learn ASL
- **HandSpeak** (www.handspeak.com), an online ASL dictionary that also incorporates regional signs used in Canada



- **Signing Savvy** (www.signingsavvy.com), an online ASL dictionary and sentence examples with online tutoring

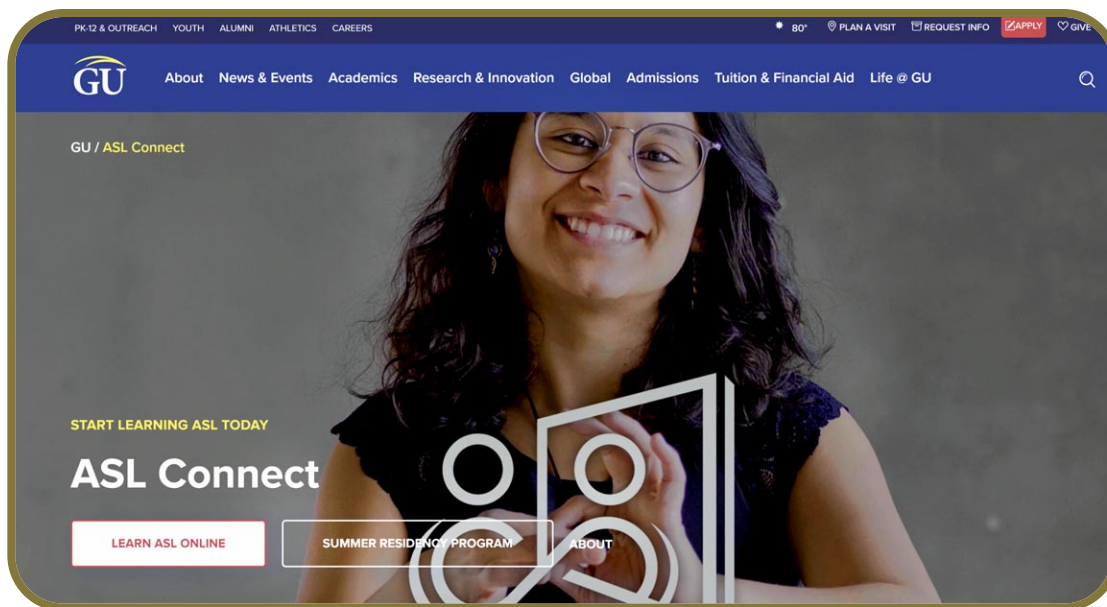


- **Lifepoint's Fingerspelling Practice** (www.asl.ms; mobile version: www.asl.ms/mobile/), an online tool to practice ASL fingerspelling comprehension
- **Lifepoint's Number Practice** (www.asl.bz/), an online tool to practice ASL number comprehension
- **VL2 Storybook app** (www.vl2storybookapps.com), a series of interactive ASL stories and literacy activities for children that are accessible via an app



Some low-cost sign language courses are also available:

- **ASL Connect** (www.gallaudet.edu/asl-connect) provides ASL classes through Gallaudet University
- **American Society for Deaf Children** (www.deafchildren.org) offers online ASL courses for parents in English and Spanish and hosts an annual literacy conference and provides various other ASL parenting resources

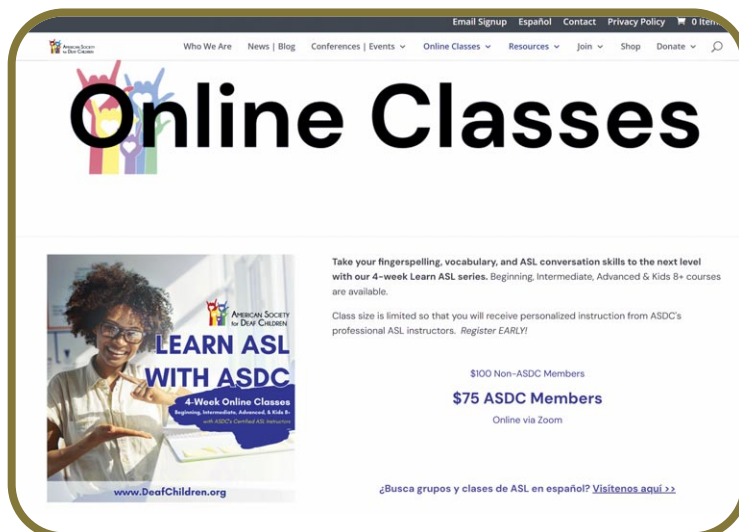


Left and below:
Low-cost sign language courses are available online for parents and others.

- **SignOn Connect** (www.signonconnect.com) presents online language immersion and pairs up ASL learners with a live Deaf language model/tutor

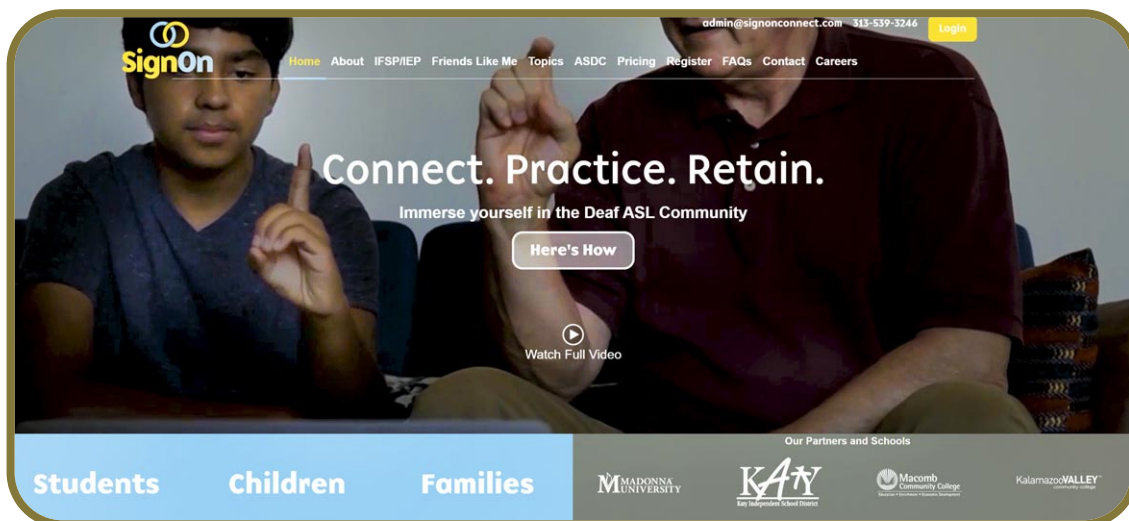
Not only did Ximena and Joaquin find access to free sign language resources, but they also found resources that helped their baby's *papa*, *abuela*, and other family members learn ASL, too. Families like those of Ximena and Joaquin have enough of a challenge learning a new language while taking care of a new baby; they should not have to experience barriers to learning opportunities as well.

When ASL resources are free and/or low cost, it creates more equitable access opportunities for all families to best support the language development of their deaf children.



**Ximena and Joaquin are pseudonyms, and their story is a compilation of parent experiences.*

***Native signers are individuals who use ASL as their first language from birth.*



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