

Shrink Rap Radio #134, January 25, 2008, Sign Language for Babies

Dr. David Van Nuys, aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Nancy Hanauer

(Transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Kaylie Drew)

Excerpt: *“There have been amazing long-term studies that have shown that babies that sign often have higher IQs, better reading and spelling skills, more interest in books, and much more sophisticated understanding of language overall. And again it’s because of that early jump-start on language. And then the added benefit, like I mentioned, of the right and left brain coordination, that it being a visual language taken on the right side of the brain but stored and processed on the left. And as you mentioned, studies have shown that when a child is exposed to a second language early in life, it makes learning any language, any time later in life much easier because again, it is laying those pathways and firing up the synapses for early language development.*

I really hope it gets to the point where signing with a baby is just the norm—it’s just what you do. Just like parents now realize that breastfeeding is generally the norm and one of the most beneficial things you can do for your baby. I really hope that American Sign Language for babies becomes such a norm as well.”

Introduction: That was the voice of my guest Nancy Hanauer BA. Nancy Hanauer is a pioneer in the field of American Sign Language for hearing families. Nancy was one of the first teachers creating and providing classes in North America. Her business has been featured in numerous newspapers and magazines. In 2005, she was quoted in an article about infant sign language in the *Life* magazine insert of the *Chicago Tribune* and the *LA Times*. She was named “Seattle’s Best-Known Baby Sign Language Instructor” by the *Seattle Post Intelligence Surf* and the “Person You Should Know, Baby Whisperer, and Infant Sign Language Communication Expert” by *Seattle Magazine*.

Nancy began her baby sign language business, formerly known as Signing with Your Baby, on a part-time basis in September of 2000. Due to the amazing response to her classes and workshops, the business quickly became a full-time venture. It took Nancy two years to teach her first 200 families, just two months to teach the next 100 families, and less than five years to teach more than 1,000 additional families throughout the Seattle area. Now, here’s the interview.

Dr. Dave: Nancy Hanauer, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Nancy Hanauer: Thank you Dave, I’m thrilled to be here.

Dr. Dave: Well as I’m sure you know, having explored the site, that this show is all about psychology and people might wonder why I’ve invited you, a non-psychologist, as a guest. But the communication between parent and infant is really

the foundation upon which all later psychological development rests. So I think you're a very relevant guest.

Nancy Hanauer: Well thank you. Yes, I thought the same thing as I perused your site. I thought, "Oh my goodness, I'm the only person that doesn't have a Ph.D.," so thank you for inviting me."

Dr. Dave: Well, I'm not sure you're the only one. For example, I interviewed a Tibetan llama and I don't think he had a Ph.D. (laughter)

Nancy Hanauer: Well, I'm definitely in good company, that's for sure.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, and they with you. So why don't we start out by having you tell us how you got into teaching infants and their parents sign language.

Nancy Hanauer: Well, I started my career about sixteen years ago and I was a special education teacher and I started out teaching deaf and hard of hearing kids. And right out of college, I had deaf pre-schoolers. And they would come in sometimes from recess and they would be crying and I'd sign "What? What?" And they would look up at me with just big tears rolling down their eyes and a blank look on their face and even though they were three and four years old and some of them had been in school already for up to two years, they didn't have the language skills...even the sign language skills to tell me what was going on yet. So they would expect me to act out and sign and guess and pantomime everything that I thought could have happened on the playground to make them cry. Which is a lot of things. And a lot of things that I'd never even thought of. And sometimes we'd go through that big procedure for about ten minutes and still I wouldn't know what they wanted. And they would just walk away totally frustrated. I was frustrated. And I thought "Oh my goodness, I've chosen the wrong career. I have no idea what these little people want."

And at that time, I heard about a book that uses a system of made up gestures with hearing parents and hearing babies to aid early communication and reduce frustration and I thought, "What an amazing concept. Hearing families are going through that same frustration with their hearing babies before they can speak that I'm going through with my deaf pre-schoolers before they can sign." So I filed that away in the back of my mind, and I continued on in special-ed. Eventually I started teaching art on the side and seven years ago I left special-ed to teach art on a full time basis. I developed a baby sign language class completely on a whim. I threw it into the mix of classes that I was offering throughout the community and that just exploded. That was seven years ago and more than 1,400 area families have passed through my four week classes in that amount of time.

Dr. Dave: Wow, that's got to be very gratifying. Now it sounded like you said "teaching art."

Nancy Hanauer: Exactly.

Dr. Dave: A-R-T

Nancy Hanauer: A-R-T. Yes, I taught art on the side for a little while.

Dr. Dave: Oh, okay. So you taught both art and this ASL to babies.

Nancy Hanauer: Um, well the art was generally elementary-age kids and some toddler classes.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Nancy Hanauer: Um, I haven't taught art to little tiny babies yet. That would be an interesting concept to look into. (laughs)

Dr. Dave: (laughs) Yeah...right. So let me just back up a little bit and ask, what—I gather you—first you started out in special education and for some reason you decided to learn ASL, American Sign Language, to work with the deaf. How did you—what drew you to move into that direction? I mean that sounds like a big learning project right there just to acquire that language.

Nancy Hanauer: Well my degree specifically was—or my certification I should say, was specifically in Deaf and Hard of Hearing. So my degree is in Special Education and—I went to school in Wisconsin, which is where I grew up—and each certification in Wisconsin is specific to the area you'd like to teach in. So, as part of my college curriculum, I had to learn American Sign Language. So I took about two years of American Sign Language in college and went into the field of special-ed intentionally just planning on teaching deaf and hard of hearing kids. Eventually when I moved to Utah and taught there and then taught here in Washington State, I did teach other areas of special education. But—I got into it, you know, and that's odd because most people that end up in the field of deaf education or as a sign language interpreter or working with the deaf in some capacity have some link to deafness in their past—

Dr. Dave: That's what I was wondering.

Nancy Hanauer: Exactly...either a deaf friend or you know a playmate as a child or a cousin growing up—and actually that came about as part of an aptitude test in high school. We were given aptitude tests for future possible careers, and teacher of the deaf was on my list of possible professions. And I thought, “Oh, that's interesting.” It was so specific, but I thought, “Probably just like teaching hearing kids but through sign language” and actually it's not because most deaf kids also have additional handicaps. So, I worked with multi-handicapped hearing impaired kids. So it was very intense work and that's one of the reasons why baby sign language, I think, has been so gratifying to me because, oh its just so much easier and its just the pay-off is so immediate. So much more so than with special education.

Dr. Dave: Yes. Now you mention that you had encountered a book that, in which they developed some kind of special language just for the process of improving non-verbal communication between parents and child. But you've been using the standardized American Sign Language. Were you the first person to do that or were there other people who were already using ASL to teach hearing parents and infants?

Nancy Hanauer: Um, there were other folks doing it. There were two books that came out about the same time—again, about sixteen or seventeen years ago. And one was based on the system of made up gestures and then one was based on American Sign Language. When I had the idea to teach sign language classes for hearing parents and babies, I actually didn't know about the one book based on American Sign Language, I just knew about the created gestures.

I'm a strong proponent for American Sign Language for several reasons. First of all, it's a legitimate second language. Twenty million people in North America rely on it as their main means of communication. So if you start teaching your baby or your toddler American Sign Language, chances are they are going to encounter others that use it as their main means of communication by the time they are in elementary school. And as a former special education teacher, I know that. I know the amount of main-streaming and interaction between special needs kids and normally developing kids.

American Sign Language is a legitimate language. It's an unlimited language and they've actually done studies that have shown that babies prefer American Sign Language over pantomime. And they've looked at brain activity and babies seem to understand that this is a legitimate language and is stored appropriately as a language versus when, you know, babies are exposed to made-up gestures or pantomime.

So I'm a strong proponent for American Sign Language. And since then, there've been several books that have come out. I'm in the process of writing a book myself and I've published two sets of reminder cards for parents, so there's a lot of materials now. Pretty much everything else is geared towards the use of American Sign Language instead of the main gestures.

Dr. Dave: Okay, that's all very fascinating. Now pardon my ignorance here. Certainly I've heard of ASL, American Sign Language. That almost suggests just in its name, "American" Sign Language that there might be competing systems or a different one for each other country or language. Is that the case? Are there lots of different sign languages, you know, one for each country or language group? Or is American Sign Language—has that sort of spread across the globe much as English is doing?

Nancy Hanauer: That's a great question. Most people do assume that it is universal, and sadly it's not. American Sign Language is used in the US and Canada and then any other country that you go to will have its own version of sign language. There is some cross-over, however. If you have a group of deaf people that don't speak each other's language in a room together and a group of hearing people that don't speak each other's language together in a room...definitely the folks, the hearing impaired folks, the deaf people, would be signing and communicating much more effectively before the hearing people would. Much of American Sign Language is iconic and there are some signs that are the same in other cultures and [dead air] crucial in any language. So, sadly it's not universal.

Dr. Dave: I think your call-waiting just cut out a little segment, but that's okay.

Nancy Hanauer: Oh, okay. I didn't hear it...

Dr. Dave: I was on your website and I noticed that you changed the name of your company from "Signing with your Baby" to "Hop to SignaRoo". Where did that come from and why the change?

Nancy Hanauer: Well, initially, when I started out seven years ago, what I was doing was so unusual that I had to make it blatantly obvious to people what I was doing. So "Signing with Your Baby" was the generic name of my classes and my business. And it was funny because in the beginning people still didn't understand. I remember the first center where I offered my classes, when people were calling in to register, the woman at the front desk kept trying to convince them that it was *singing* with their baby and they clearly had not read the job—excuse me, the course description. And about a year later, one center advertised it as "*swinging* with your baby". And I was like "No! No! Signing with your baby!" And eventually I got to the point where I needed to create a company identity and a brand and "Signing with your Baby" was just too generic and too much of a generic phrase. So I came up with the "Hop to SignaRoo" and the little kangaroo--the baby kangaroo that's signing "I love you" and created a brand. So my goal, of course, is for that to become a nationally known brand. I'm very well known in the Washington State area, but big plans to take it national.

Dr. Dave: Okay, we'll come to those plans, more—I'll talk about that more as we...towards the end.

Now many of us have probably seen the movie, *Meet the Fockers II*, hope I said that right, in which they show a signing baby. And if any of my listeners have not seen that, be sure to rent it. It's a hilarious comedy starring Ben Stiller, Dustin Hoffman, Robert De Niro, and Barbara Streisand and they're each marvelous, I think. So how accurate a depiction was that in that film? I'm assuming you've seen it.

Nancy Hanauer: I have. It's been a couple of years but there are a couple of things that stuck out in my mind immediately. Some of it is accurate, some of it is not. Initially, the movie starts out with Robert De Niro flashing flash cards at the baby in a make-shift classroom. So that was my first concern because I didn't want parents to think, "Oh my goodness, this is this whole other, you know, big production, procedure that we need to add to an already busy day." Babies don't learn through flash cards. Adults learn with flash cards, but babies don't. Babies learn the signs when they're modeled throughout the context of their normal day. So as you feed the baby, you sign "milk" or feed—"eat," excuse me or "food" and the baby will start to associate the signs with the activity and eventually sign the signs back. So that's the first misnomer, as you don't have to sit down with your baby and flash flash cards to them. That's not going to work.

The other thing that I thought was very funny was at one point, the baby in the movie signs, "I'd like to eat more please then I wanna go potty and take a nap." And I'm sitting in the theater thinking "Oh my gosh, no one is ever going to come to my classes" because parents think that they can't sign all that. And then if they do, after four weeks with me, they're going to say, "Nancy, we want our money back. Our baby is not doing complete sentences with sequencing and [preferencing] like in *Meet the Fockers*." So that was a little bit of a misnomer. The babies initially start out signing one, two, maybe three signs per sentence. The babies will start to string the signs together by themselves as early as eight, nine, ten months of age. But we're not working on complete sentences. But there are some really great examples where the baby is signing appropriately. So it's a little bit of a mixed bag, some of it is pretty accurate; some of it's a little bit embellished for Hollywood.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, so that's interesting. So the baby really was a signer; had been taught to do it to some degree.

Nancy Hanauer: Exactly! The baby, actually, was two babies. It was a set of twins and mom was a speech therapist and had been signing with the babies since the time the babies came home because she knew American Sign Language. And so those were little one year olds...two little boys that played the role.

Dr. Dave: Well that concept had never even occurred to me until I saw it in the film and then it raised the question in my mind "Gee, I wonder if this really does go on, or not?" So I was excited to learn of your work and to, you know, find out that, "Hey this is the real thing and it's really happening." And then I was talking to my own daughter about this and she said, "Oh yeah, they have classes and that around here." So I guess it's something that has spread to some degree.

Nancy Hanauer: Yes, it is taking it off. I was one of the first in North America teaching classes. I've said, when I started out seven years ago, it was pretty obscure. There were probably only about three of us teaching across the country and now there's hundreds of folks teaching classes. And again, most people are

teaching based on American Sign Language. There are some programs based on the made-up gestures. So you do have to be careful and become an educated consumer and parent and decide which tract you really want to take.

I think there's a lot of benefits to teaching American Sign Language, as I mentioned earlier it being a legitimate language, teaching a sensitivity at an early age for others who use it as their main means of communication. Babies who sign actually use their brain in a very unique way because American Sign Language is taken in on their right side of the brain because it's visual but it's stored and processed on the left side of the brain. So babies that use American Sign Language open new synapses and pathways between the right and left hemispheres in a completely unique way. So, there's a lot. And I know parents have a lot on their plate when they're deciding which classes to take and what sorts of things to try with their baby, but it really helps to be an educated consumer, because there is a lot out there now and people jumping on the bandwagon just because it's the new trendy thing to do.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Well let me ask you a really basic question and you've already spoken to it in many ways, but there might be more to say, and that is, what's the reason for teaching parents and babies American Sign Language? You know, I'm a parent, why would I want to do that?

Nancy Hanauer: The main reason is to reduce everyone's frustration. As early as five, six, seven months of age, babies understand far more than we have ever given them credit for. They have much higher cognitive skills than we had initially realized. They have an understanding of language. They have a very strong desire to express language. However, their vocal cords are not going to be fully formed until at least sixteen months of age. But as early as five, six, seven months of age, babies have the manual dexterity, the cognitive ability, and the memory to execute sign language and use that as a temporary means of communication. So initially, the goal was to reduce everyone's frustration. Get that communication, that two-way communication between baby and parents started much earlier than typically anticipated. Even though babies are speaking a little bit at twelve, fourteen, sixteen months of age, the things they say are going to be very baby-centric and they're really not going to be that relevant to parents and there are going to be some speech sounds that are still not intelligible until closer to two years of age. So most babies' first words are things like "ball" or "doggy,"—or in my case "shoes." I absolutely love shoes so that was my first spoken word as a baby. (laughter) I had one client who said her little one's first word was "lawnmower" which is quite a mouthful and that's all they heard all day "lawnmower, lawnmower, lawnmower." So with American Sign Language, you empower the baby to say "feed me," "change my diaper," "my head hurts," "I've got an earache," "I've got a tummy ache," all those really parent-centric basic needs. And then beyond that, they've—there are amazing long-term benefits that researchers have stumbled upon.

Dr. Dave: That's all very helpful. And when you talk about reducing frustrations on both sides, I guess you're referring to the situation where baby can't communicate its needs and so it just cries, or whines, or makes some kind of annoying noise and the parent is kind of grasping for different alternatives to quiet the child down, but doesn't really know what it needs. Is that right?

Nancy Hanauer: Exactly. Exactly. And that's what happens. That's what happens from the time you bring them home from the hospital. That's all they have is just to cry and eventually they get to the point where they are able to point or gesture. And as early, like I said, as five months of age, those babies have those skills. They have control of their hands. They have the manual dexterity. They start getting very frustrated because, again, they are understanding so much of what you're saying. I don't think we ever really realized that babies at five, six, seven months of age were understanding as much language as they were. And now researchers are doing all sorts of studies in baby brain development and language acquisition and that sort of thing and realizing that "Oh my goodness, they are understanding and they are creating higher level thoughts of their own, and they just don't have the vocal cords to express that," so the frustration sets in very quickly.

Dr. Dave: Interesting. So do you start at five months or--what age do you start the teaching?

Nancy Hanauer: I recommend my families start any time from five months on, and there are a couple of reasons for that. Babies don't have complete visual acuity until about four and a half months of age. Again, at five months they are starting to figure out they have control over their hands. They are starting to understand so much more language, memory is really kicking in, and also that gives the parents a little more time to ease into it and make it part of their daily routine without feeling a lot of pressure. Sometimes I get calls from parents at seven, eight, nine months of age, and you can certainly start at that point, its not too late, but what the parents find at that age is that the baby is extremely frustrated because, again, the baby has been understanding their parents language for, you know, two, three months at that point and they don't understand why their parents don't understand their crying or their whining or their babbling.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm

Nancy Hanauer: So my classes are devised for parents in the five month to two-year-old range. And I get people pretty much in the five to eight month spectrum, I would say, the largest—excuse me the smallest gap, that most folks are coming to me at that point.

Dr. Dave: Do you have any sense of what the impact is on the relationship between parent and child? Because I would expect that this would have some implications for their relationship and how they get along and bonding and all of that.

Nancy Hanauer: Exactly. That's been one of the amazing long-term benefits. People started doing this because they wanted to reduce their frustration, but now researchers have done long-term studies and some kids have been followed for up to sixteen or seventeen years now. And they've found that in many cases, the parents and now teenagers are much more bonded and have a much better relationship and sense of communication and that only makes sense, because think about it, if you're able to communicate with your child, your baby, at a very early age, in a couple months into their life, you're able to communicate in a very positive way, that's going to set the stage for your relationship with your child for the rest of your life. And so I've only worked with kids, like I said, the babies for seven years now. But I've had many parents report back when they go off to kindergarten saying "Oh my gosh, my child is so much calmer than the other kids in the kindergarten class. My child makes eye-contact, my child knows how to interact with adults much more positively and we're convinced it's because of the sign language because the child had this ability very early to connect with adults in a very positive way." And I can't wait to hear from my parents in another ten years and hopefully hear that they are much more connected with their teenagers than their peers because that's what research has found; that it really sets the stage for a much better relationship from the beginning.

Dr. Dave: Wow, this is absolutely fascinating, and it really makes sense to me that it would play a very positive role in terms of brain development. For example, we know that people who learn two languages, who are multi-lingual early on, learning two or more languages, they actually score higher in IQ—standardized IQ tests. So we know that it's good for intelligence. It's good for the brain. And American Sign Language is, as you pointed out, evidently it is a complete language in itself and--But then there's this added dimension of the physicality of it, so that its developing as you pointed out, also the right side of the brain as well as on the left side.

Nancy Hanauer: Exactly. There've been amazing long-term studies that have shown that babies that sign often have higher IQs, better reading and spelling skills, more interest in books, and a much more sophisticated understanding of language overall. And again it's because of that early jump-start on language. And then the added benefit, like I mentioned, of the right and left brain coordination, that it being a visual language taken in on the right side of the brain but stored and processed on the left. And as you mentioned, studies have shown that when a child is exposed to a second language early in life, it makes learning any language, anytime later in life much easier because, again, it's laying both pathways and firing up the synapses for early language development. So there have been amazing long-term studies and I think the studies will just continue.

I really hope it gets to the point where signing with a baby is just the norm—it's just what you do. Just like parents now realize that breastfeeding is generally the norm and one of the most beneficial things you can do for your baby. I really hope that American Sign Language for babies becomes such a norm as well.

Dr. Dave: Interesting. Yeah. For sure. Why not? Now do you typically teach in groups or individually?

Nancy Hanauer: I typically teach in groups. I teach through some local hospitals here in the Seattle area and then I also go into clients' homes. So if four or more families get together, I'll come out and teach the four week series in their home—it's much more convenient for them. Schedule a time that works for them. And again, in the comfort and convenience of their own home. Some folks do choose to come to me through the hospitals and I do some private instructions, some one-on-one instruction. Generally I teach a four week class but then some folks don't want to make that four week commitment and they just want some basics, so I also offer a two hour intensive workshop. And what's been nice, is that I've tapped into two of the local library systems. So I've been doing a lot of presentations through the local libraries and meeting parents that way and also doing some training for the children's library so they can start integrating some American Sign Language into their story hours.

Dr. Dave: Well, I wonder if in the process of doing this now, for many years as you have been, if there are any incidents that stand out, any stories that come to mind of either frustrations, break-throughs, funny things, anything come to mind?

Nancy Hanauer: Oh, there are so many. That's one of the things that I love most about my job is that I hear back from my parents often. And because I've been at it for seven years, I think one of the most common comments that comes back to me are the families that contact me after they've had a second baby and they say "Oh, we took the class four years ago when our toddler was a baby and we now have a second baby and we haven't signed with our first baby in I don't know two, two and a half years. Once the little one started speaking, we phased the signs out and now we're starting to sign with our second baby and our toddler is saying, 'Mommy, you're not doing it right! Daddy you forgot to sign with the baby!'" So, parents are amazed and I've been amazed at how many of these babies remember these signs un—you know, when they're four, five years old and suddenly there's a new context to use them with a new baby brother or sister and family has a built-in tutor because these little guys are pulling the signs out of their back pocket and signing with the babies—the new babies. So, that's been quite fun.

Gosh there've been a lot of stories. There was one dad who called me, he was a pediatrician, and so he really understood kids, and he called me when his little boy Sam was, I think nine months old, and he said "Nancy, you're never going to believe what Sam did today!" He said, "Sam was trying to put a square peg into a round hole and he eventually got frustrated. He put the block down and he signed, 'all done' and he crawled away from the block." And I said "that's great, he told the sign—he told the block off in sign language!" And dad said, "Yeah, not only that, but, we had never used 'all done' in any other context other than food. We used it whenever he was finished when we were about to take him out of the high

chair.” So dad was completely blown away that his nine month old took this abstract concept of “all done” and applied it to a completely different situation that he’d never even seen it modeled in.

Stories like that just give me the chills because I realize that babies understand far more than we’ve ever realized.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. You know I had twins some time back—

Nancy Hanauer: Oh my goodness.

Dr. Dave: —and so I’m wondering, what would it have been like, you know, if they could’ve communicated with each other early on? Have you had any experience with twins?

Nancy Hanauer: I have. I’ve had a couple families with twins and several of them have said, “Yes, we need to take this class. Someone’s always waiting. Someone is always twice as frustrated. We’ve got, you know, two little crying babies on our hands instead of one.” So sign language is great with twins. I personally have not seen any of the twins signing between each other...

Dr. Dave: I was wondering about that.

Nancy Hanauer: ...I did see that, however, when I was a pre-school teacher. I had kids as young as three years old when I was teaching deaf pre-schoolers would sign with each other. So I think it’s quite possible. I’ve heard stories from other folks of twins signing between each other as early as a year and a half old. So it not only creates an amazing bond between the parents but a much more positive bond between those twins as well.

Dr. Dave: Yes. You know it also, as we were talking about research and you were telling the story about the little one trying to fit the square peg into the round hole or maybe it was visa versa, it kinda brought back some dimly recollected studies with monkeys or with apes where they talk into sign.

Nancy Hanauer: Exactly.

Dr. Dave: —and as I recall, the monkeys, or maybe they were chimps, showed some surprising—you know there’s always a debate going on...are they really, have they really acquired language or not? But, you know, some of that research to me was very compelling to believe that in fact they had acquired language and sometimes they put together unique sequences such as the one you described that seemed very suggestive of abstract thought.

Nancy Hanauer: Exactly. There’s a center in eastern Washinton called Chimposium, and they were one of the pioneers in doing—teaching sign language—doing

research with chimps and teaching sign language to chimps to see if they did indeed understand. And just about two or three months ago, I think the first chimp they ever signed with, her name was Washoe, she just died. She was forty two...

Dr. Dave: Oh sure! Washoe is famous!

Nancy Hanauer: Yes, exactly! I felt bad I didn't get up to see her before that, and many of my clients had, and they said, you know "it is phenomenal." They said—would see the monkeys—excuse me, the chimpanzees signing.

And like you mentioned, the copious research, and what I have read is that they did realize that indeed the chimps did understand sign language and did understand language to a point. It certainly wasn't to the extent that humans can understand and express language but one of the things that proved that there was an understanding was that the momma chimps would teach the signs to the baby chimps. And so they were passing that along without any intervention from the researchers.

And also the chimps would make up their own signs which were iconic. So if they were not taught a sign, I think "fan" for example was a sign that they were not taught. And so the chimps made up a sign that mimicked the movement of the electric fan. And that was one of the ways that they could prove that the chimps understood.

And from what I understood, Washoe, one of her favorite signs was "shoes." She was also obsessed with shoes, so again, a woman after my own heart.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, really soul sisters. (laughs)

Nancy Hanauer: —get up to see her. That's what I tell people, if chimps can do it, well certainly babies can do it. I mean, I think one of the things that surprises me at this point are the parents that are skeptical. I think that skepticism comes from the fact that they still just don't acknowledge that their babies understand and are trying to express so much more than we ever thought as early as five, six, seven months of age. So I think parents are often shocked that there's higher level cognitive thinking and memory and intuition and thoughts percolating up there at such a young age.

Dr. Dave: I'm surprised to hear that you run into skepticism. I could—you know parents are so motivated to do well by their children. You know, they take them to soccer and get them into violin lessons and just get them in a schedule right up to the neck and —here's something that I would think would just have a great appeal to parents and that you'd be flooded with quite a bit of business.

Nancy Hanauer: I do have a lot of business and that is fabulous. I have a lot of business, unfortunately nights and weekends because the clients are napping half the afternoon so—

Dr. Dave: (laughs)

Nancy Hanauer: —it's a tough gig when your clients are napping most of the day. I think, like I said, that the skepticism comes from the fact that parents are overwhelmed and this little alien has been dropped into their lives and I think they are a little fearful of the fact that they understand as much as they do.

And then one little, gosh, nagging old wives tale, I guess is what it would be. One little nagging old wives tale that I still hear is that parents are afraid that if they teach their babies to sign, it's going to slow down their speech.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm...

Nancy Hanauer: There's a couple of reasons why that isn't the case. The system of made-up gestures that I mentioned earlier does have some fabricated gestures that involve sniffing, panting, and blowing instead of movement of the hands. And personally I do believe that's going to slow down a baby's speech because if you teach your little one to sniff, pant, or blow as a means of communication, they're not able to engage their mouth in a typical speech attempt. It's also very hard to discern as a means of communication.

In American Sign Language, you would speak to the baby as you normally do and then you just engage your hands. And so babies have the opportunity to engage their hands and continue to work on their babbling and their speech as they normally would. And hearing babies hear an average of 4,500 words throughout the course of the day. And I always tell my parents, "Believe me, you're not going to be signing 4,500 words throughout the course of the day." So your infant is never going to think, "Wow, this thing with my hands is so much more effective than what I've been trying with my mouth, I'm not going to talk anymore."

And actually speech is a natural reflex in all of us, even deaf babies babble until it's no longer self-stimulating. And we all came to the planet with the ability and the desire to speak every language imaginable. And babbling becomes culturally specific by about seven months of age and is just what is reinforced by what they're hearing on a regular basis. So there's really never a point where a hearing child is going to choose American Sign Language over speech. They realize very quickly that they can do much more with their mouth and not everyone knows sign language anyway. Although the attempts that they use, to sign with everyone is amazing. I've seen babies sign in parent's homes, "Eat more, eat more" when the dog is eating. So they're even trying to communicate with the dog in sign language.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I was wondering if they would get frustrated with other adults who don't understand them.

Nancy Hanauer: Yes, definitely. And that's why I really encourage my parents to get grandmas and grandpas, and day-care providers and all of the significant people in that are in the baby's life—they need to be on board. They need to be signing consistently as well, because the babies will start to believe, at least in the beginning, that if mom and dad understand the “milk” sign or the “eat” sign or the “change my diaper” sign then that pretty lady I'm with all day long while mom and dad are away at work should certainly understand it as well. After a while they'll figure out that the dog isn't on board and the family cat doesn't care. But grandma and grandpa and babysitters and nannies should definitely be on board.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, interesting. So is there a point, as they begin to acquire spoken language, does the ASL begin to drop out? I mean it would be wonderful, you know, if they would retain it because it would open up a wider communication with the deaf, it could open up later career possibilities...

Nancy Hanauer: Exactly. Most of my families report back and say just that happened. As the babies were intelligible, as the babies were learning to speak and once they—the babies realize mom and dad understood them, the babies would naturally drop the sign. And that's usually a year and a half to two years of age. And on average, babies that sign actually speak sooner and again, because there was this jump-start on language, so once the vocal cords are fully formed, some of my babies are often speaking in two and three word utterances from the very beginning. So often times, the babies will drop it. And the parents in some cases have been disappointed. Some parents have said “You know we wanted to keep up with it. It's such a beautiful second language, but our little one said ‘No! I'm a big girl; I don't need to sign anymore.’” So I tell families to let it go. Respect that. Respect that the child realizes that they're a hearing child and they can speak and bring it back if you have a second baby or bring it back in the toddler years with music and stories...stories...and you know, fun little games. So many families have done just that.

And like I mentioned earlier, some families report back that the first baby brings it back with the second baby whether mom and dad wanted to. The first baby, who's now a toddler, is signing with the second baby in the family. Or one of my favorite stories, I had a client e-mail, and she said “Gosh, we took your class when our baby was seven months old and by nine months she was signing quite a bit and by fifteen months she was speaking.” And she said “It was absolutely phenomenal. We just phased the signs out once she was able to speak.” And she said “She's two and a half now and speaking incredibly well and she simply”—mom said “we haven't used the signs in about a year but occasionally when I don't meet my daughters needs immediately, she'll use the sign thinking I didn't understand her.” So one day the little girl asked for a cookie verbally and mom said “No honey, no more cookies.” [So the little girl thought,] “Oh wait, let me show you the sign,” and so

she did the sign for cookie like ‘silly lady you don’t remem—you don’t understand what I’m saying. Here let me show this to you...this worked a year ago.’ So, it’s astonishing what they’ll remember.

Dr. Dave: Mmm...well it does sound like you’ve got a wonderful career going here and you said that you’d like to see it spread all over so that it becomes a natural thing that everybody does for their children, so I would assume that there’s room for others in this field. How would they get into it?

Nancy Hanauer: Um, you know, you’re right. It has taken off and other people have gotten into the field and one of the things that I have—I guess I have a big concern about is the quality level and—because this has become such a trend in parenting. I sometimes see people jumping on the bandwagon that I think are not qualified or materials that are coming out that really aren’t respectful of the deaf community and that’s a big thing. Like I said, I’m a proponent for American Sign Language and twenty million people in North America rely on ASL as their main means of communication. So we’re borrowing from that culture and that language used in this capacity. So I really encourage people, if they’re interested, I would hope that people are fluent in American Sign Language, have an understanding of deaf culture and the community that we’re borrowing this from, have experienced teaching, and an understanding of child development. I think if people with those credentials, continue to keep the industry afloat, that would be great. But unfortunately I’ve seen some people come along that maybe learned 60 or 65 signs and then call themselves a sign language teacher. And I’ve always used the analogy, if you learn 65 Spanish words, would you call yourself a Spanish teacher not understanding the whole language and the sentence structure and the culture that it came from? So I just really encourage people that are going to get into it, to really do the legitimate foundation work to have an understanding—and also parents as consumers to choose programs that are based on those sorts of credentials.

Dr. Dave: Okay, well that’s an excellent caution for us to wrap things up with here. Nancy Hanauer thanks so much for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Nancy Hanauer: Thank you Dave, it’s been wonderful speaking with you.