Infant Signs, Symbolic Gestures, Naturally Occurring Gestures, and Sign Language: A Conceptual Examination

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The conceptual model below illustrates how the terms infant signs, symbolic gestures, natural gestures, and sign language are related in order to better understand the connections between them.

**Infant Signs**
- Infant signs do not include any naturally occurring gestures, however, since infant signs are taught or modeled by an adult for use by preverbal children (Goodwyn & Acredolo, 1993).
- Infant signing is the “use of gestures as symbolic representations—makes infants’ communicative cues visible to both scientists and caregivers” (Vallotton, 2009, p. 353).
- A popular term researchers use to describe symbolic gesturing by infants and toddlers (Vallotton, 2012).

**Natural Gestures**
- Shaking or nodding the head, waving a hand, and pointing (McCauley & Foy, 2006).
- The only two terms that do not overlap are infant signs and natural gestures. The reason for this lies in the definition for infant signs. Even though Vallotton (2009) refers to infant signing as the “use of gestures as symbolic representations” (p. 353) for communication purposes, she further describes infant signing as involving an adult intentionally modeling signs to a child (Vallotton, 2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011b). Therefore, the two terms do not overlap.

**Symbolic Gestures**
- The “use of gestures as symbolic representations [in order to] make(e) infants’ communicative cues visible to both scientists and caregivers” (Vallotton, 2009, p. 353).
- The term symbolic gestures, which represent their referents in their absence, carry their meanings in the manual form and may even resemble reference concepts (e.g., throwing or rolling a ball as a symbolic gesture for “ball”; Goodwyn et al., 2000; Werner & Kaplan, 1963).
- Represents a broader term, which may include some of the naturally occurring gestures as well as some infant signs, as modeled by an adult, hence the overlap.
- Symbolic gestures also make up part of the manual language used in official sign languages such as American Sign Language (ASL), which is also represented by the overlap in Figure 1. For example, the ASL sign for “entire” consists of making a wetting motion with one hand while the other hand acts as the paper, hence becoming the referent as seen in symbolic gestures. The same is seen for the ASL sign “house.”

**Sign Language**
- A visual language that uses a system of manual, facial and body movements as the means of communication. Sign language is not a universal language, and different sign languages are used in different countries. The same is seen for the ASL sign “house.”
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**References**

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