

MICHIGAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

Adding American Sign Language to Children's Storytime Programs

Simple, respectful ways to make storytime more visual, interactive, and accessible.

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BREAKOUT SESSION • 60 MINUTES



Today's plan

40–45 minutes of ideas + 15–20 minutes to experience it together

WHY

Why ASL belongs in storytime

HOW

A repeatable method
librarians can use

BUILD

Design a sign-friendly
storytime

DO

Practice signs + story
demonstration

Goal: practical enough to use tomorrow — thoughtful enough to use well.

A little about me

Why this topic is personal and professional

Educator

ASL professor since 2015
Program coordinator / lead instructor
M.S.Ed. in Special Education

CODA + author

Child of Deaf adults (CODA)
Co-author of an ASL textbook
Author of Deaf, like David

Founder

Signing Courses
“Communication for All”
Focused on practical ASL access

My lens today: respect the language + make the first step feel doable.



My Simple Signs™

7-STEP METHOD

1

LEARN

Learn the sign and what it means.



2

SHARE

Teach the sign to everyone who supports the child.



3

MODEL

Say the word and sign it during everyday routines.



4

ENCOURAGE

Give the child opportunities to use the sign.



5

RESPOND

Acknowledge and respond when the child signs.



6

WAIT

Be patient. Give communication time to develop.



7

REPEAT

Keep using the sign, then add new signs.



Communication for All

01

WHY ASL IN STORYTIME?

Storytime is already visual, rhythmic, repetitive, social — all things that pair naturally with signing.



Storytime is more than listening

Children are already learning with their whole bodies



SEE

pictures + faces

HEAR

words + rhythm

MOVE

motions + songs

SIGN

meaning with the hands

What signs can add

Not a replacement for speech. Another way to participate.

- A visual cue attached to meaning
- A predictable way for children to join in
- A communication option before or alongside spoken words
- A natural movement break without leaving the story
- A bridge to conversations about Deaf people, language, and culture

ASL is a language — not a collection of gestures

AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

A complete natural language with its own grammar, structure, history, and community. 5 Parameters

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR US

We can teach a few accurate signs in storytime without pretending that a signed keyword version of an English story is “ASL translation.”

RESPECT THE LANGUAGE

A quick language check

Small wording choices matter

Say

Deaf person / hard-of-hearing person

Say

American Sign Language / ASL

Say

sign / signed language

Avoid

“hearing impaired” as a default label

Avoid

calling ASL “hand signals” or “gestures”

02

KEEP IT SIMPLE

You do not have to sign every word. Choose the signs that give children something useful to notice, repeat, or say.

The biggest beginner mistake

Trying to sign every word while reading

READ + **SIGN
EVERYTHING** = **TOO MUCH**

Instead: pick a few high-value signs and create moments for children to use them.

LESS TO REMEMBER • MORE TO REPEAT

Start with 3–5 signs

Choose signs with a job to do

CORE WORDS

MORE • HELP • STOP • ALL DONE

STORY WORDS

BEAR • EAT • SLEEP • FRIEND

FEELINGS

HAPPY • SAD • SCARED • EXCITED

ROUTINES

BOOK • SIT • WAIT • GO

How to choose the right signs

Use the R.E.A.D. test



REPEATS

Does the word happen several times?



ENGAGES

Can children do something with it?



ACCESS

Could it help a child communicate?



DRIVES

Does it matter to the story?

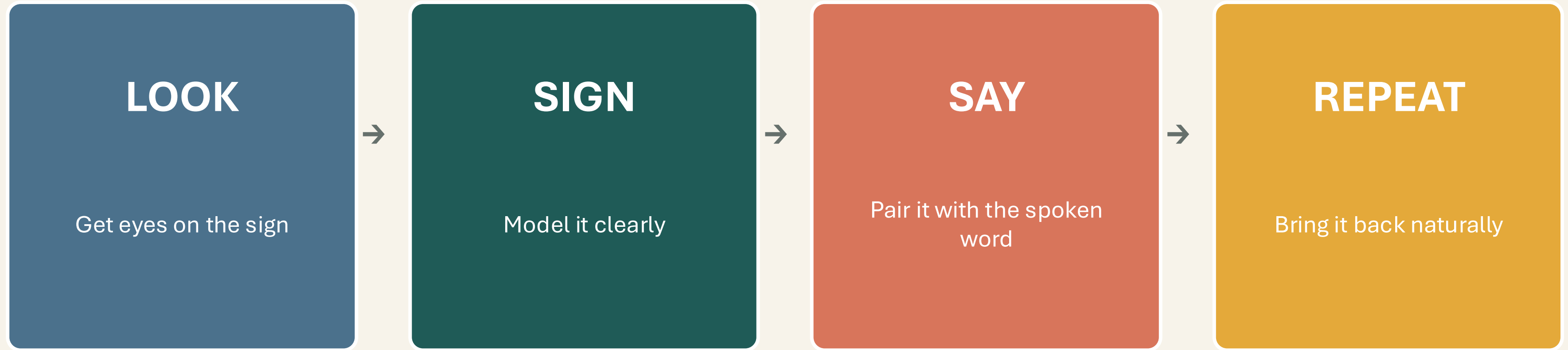
Teach the sign before the page needs it

Preview → notice → use → repeat

- 1 SHOW** “Here is our sign for MORE.”
- 2 COPY** Everyone tries it together.
- 3 READ** Continue the story naturally.
- 4 PAUSE** When MORE appears, invite the sign.
- 5 REPEAT** Use it again later — no quiz required.

The 4-step rhythm

A simple pattern you can repeat all year



03

BUILD THE STORYTIME

Keep the structure librarians already know. Layer signs into the places where participation already happens.



A 30-minute sign-friendly storytime

One possible flow — not a rigid formula

0–3	WELCOME	Hello + name + 1 routine sign
3–8	SONG	2–3 repeated signs
8–18	BOOK	3–5 target signs
18–23	MOVE	Action song / rhyme / sign game
23–28	BOOK or ACTIVITY	Repeat familiar signs
28–30	GOODBYE	Review + goodbye sign

Where signs fit naturally

Look for the participation moments you already have

- Greeting + name
- Repeated line in the book
- Animal / action words
- Feelings and predictions
- Song chorus
- Movement cues
- Goodbye routine



Reading a picture book with signs

Keep the book — and your face — visible

PAUSE

Finish the phrase, then sign.

POSITION

Keep hands where children can see them.

FACE

Expression carries meaning too.

PACE

Slow enough to notice; not so slow the story disappears.

REPEAT

Invite, don't demand, children to copy.

Songs are your easiest entry point

Repetition does the teaching for you

OLD MACDONALD

FARM
COW / PIG / DUCK
MORE

TWINKLE, TWINKLE

STAR
SKY
WONDER / BEAUTIFUL

WHEELS ON THE BUS

BUS
GO
STOP
BABY

Choose 2–3 signs. Keep the song recognizable.

Transitions can become communication

Use the same signs every week

SIT

Time to gather

WAIT

A brief pause

LOOK

Something to notice

HELP

Ask for support

MORE

Continue / again

ALL DONE

We are finished

What about children who don't copy the signs?

Participation does not have to look the same for everyone



- Watching is participation.
- Approximate handshapes are okay for learners.
- A child may understand a sign before producing it.
- Never force hand-over-hand signing.
- Model, repeat, and keep the experience joyful.

Including Deaf & hard-of-hearing children

Access is bigger than adding a few vocabulary signs

VISUAL ACCESS

- Good lighting
- Clear sightlines
- Face visible
- Reduce visual clutter

COMMUNICATION ACCESS

- Ask families what works
- Use qualified interpreters when appropriate
- Share materials ahead when possible

CULTURAL RESPECT

- Include Deaf characters + creators
- Learn from Deaf-led resources
- Don't present keyword signing as full ASL

Choosing books that work well

The best “sign-friendly” books give you something to repeat

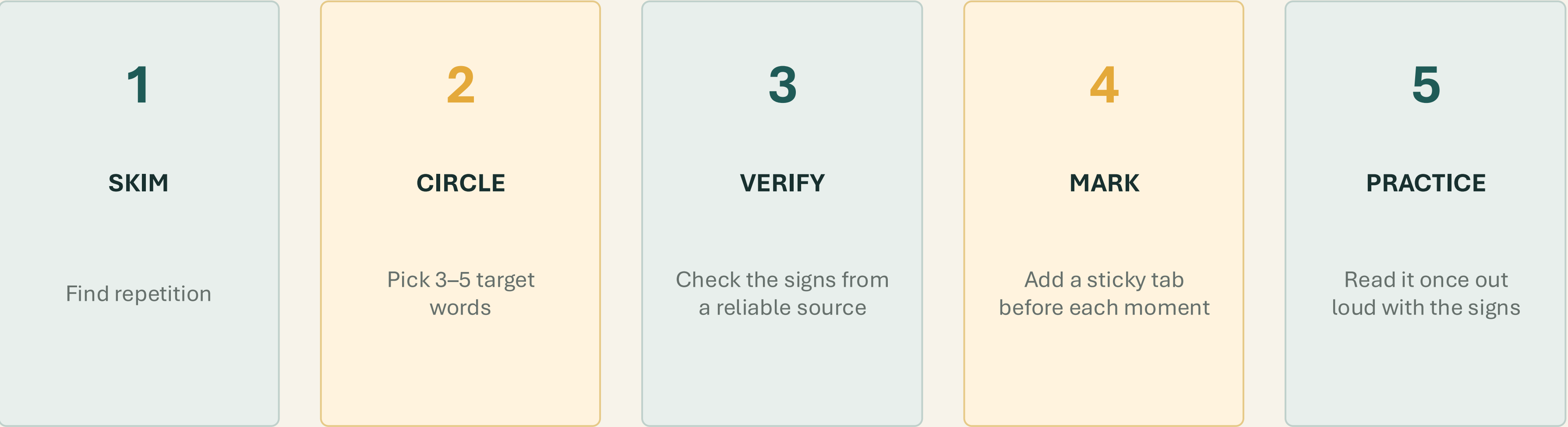
- Repeated words or phrases
- Strong pictures with clear actions
- Predictable sequence
- Animals, feelings, routines, or movement
- Opportunities to pause and predict
- A manageable amount of text

QUICK TEST

**Can I circle 3–5 words in
this book that children
will see or hear again and
again?**

Prep a book in 5 minutes

A sticky-note method



04

LET'S TRY IT

The best way to understand the rhythm is to experience it as a participant.

Practice set: 10 useful storytime signs

We'll learn these together — not from the slide

HELLO

MORE

HELP

BOOK

EAT

PLAY

HAPPY

SAD

WAIT

ALL DONE

Watch me → try it → use it in a tiny phrase.

Micro-storytime challenge

Turn three signs into an experience

BOOK • MORE • ALL DONE

1. Introduce the three signs.
2. Read 30–60 seconds of a familiar story.
3. Pause where MORE makes sense.
4. End with ALL DONE.
5. Notice how little “extra” time signing required.

Live demonstration: Deaf, like David

Watch for the method — not just the signs

AS YOU WATCH

Which signs did I preview?

Where did I pause?

How did I invite participation?

What did I repeat?

READ 3–5 MINUTES

Then debrief the choices you noticed.

BOOK DEMO

Your next storytime

Don't build an ASL program tonight. Add three intentional signs.

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc} \text{3} & + & \text{1} & + & \text{1} & = & \text{START} \\ \text{SIGNS} & & \text{BOOK} & & \text{SONG} & & \end{array}$$

Consistency beats complexity.

A simple planning card

Screenshot this

BOOK

TARGET SIGNS

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

REPEATED MOMENT

SONG / RHYME

GOODBYE SIGN

Keep learning from reliable sources

Accuracy + community matter

DEAF-LED RESOURCES

Prioritize Deaf educators and native/heritage signers when learning.

ASL DICTIONARIES

Use reputable video dictionaries to verify vocabulary — and remember context matters.

LOCAL CONNECTIONS

Build relationships with Deaf organizations, interpreters, schools, and community members.

BOOK COLLECTIONS

Include books featuring Deaf characters and books — beyond one themed week.

Questions + practice

What would help you bring this into your library?

ASK ABOUT...

- A sign you want to learn
- A book you want to adapt
- A tricky storytime situation
- Deaf / hard-of-hearing access- Interpreting Services
- Where to start with staff training- The Signing Leader



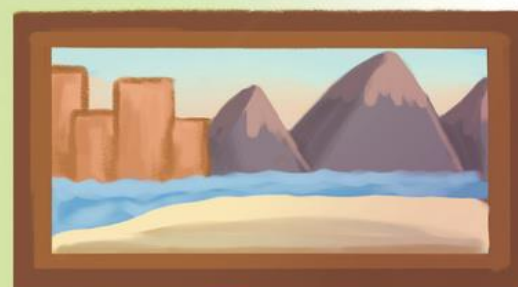
Deaf, like David

Sordo, como David



Written by Jennifer Stewart
Escrito por Jennifer Stewart

Illustrated by Courtney Crider
Ilustrado por Courtney Crider



That cute little baby is me, David!
I was born in the month of April, when the cherry blossom trees were in full
bloom in Vancouver.
My Mom and Dad held me tight and chose the perfect name for me.
“Let’s call him David,” Mom said.
David.
A name full of promise.
A name meant for something great.
Dad smiled and whispered,
“You’ll grow to do wonderful things.”

¡Ese bebé tan bonito soy yo, David!
Nací en el mes de abril, cuando los cerezos estaban en plena floración en Vancouver.
Mi mamá y mi papá me abrazaron fuerte y eligieron el nombre perfecto para mí.
—Vamos a llamarlo David —dijo mamá.

David.
Un nombre lleno de promesas.
Un nombre hecho para algo grande.
Papá sonrió y susurró:
—Vas a crecer para hacer cosas maravillosas.

Sign LOVE with Me!

Cross your arms over your chest like a hug.

¡Señala AMOR conmigo!

Cruza los brazos sobre el pecho como si te dieras un abrazo.



Thank you

Make it visual. Make it joyful. Make room for more ways to communicate.



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Signing Courses • signingcourses.com

Questions • Signs • Storytime ideas

