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# Community Page

## ASL program for babies a sign of the times

By **STEPHANIE THIESSEN**  
*The Champion*

While most babies were still crying to make their needs known, Miltonian Leslie Lang's 10-month-old son was taking a different route — he was using sign language.

As impossible as it may sound, sign language for hearing babies is becoming popular not just with movie stars like Debra Messing, but with everyday parents who want to avoid frustration and communicate better — and earlier — with their pre-verbal children.

"I was fascinated with the level of communication I achieved with him," Ms Lang said, adding, "As a parent, it decreased the level of frustration because you can have two-way communication instead of guessing what they want."

Ms Lang is president of Little Hands Talking, which is one of two baby signing programs being offered in town. The other is Milton Signing Babies, which is offering the WeeHands program at HearSay Speech and Hearing Centre on Commercial Street.

Little Hands Talking opened in January and teaches the KinderSigns program through a set of two workshops held at the Milton Leisure Centre, the Milton Seniors' Activity Centre, and soon the Milton Community Resource Centre.

It's not as if babies learn to sign entire sentences, Ms Lang clarified. Rather, they gradually learn easy signs such as 'more', 'milk' and 'dog', so they're able to convey what they're thinking before they're able to speak the words.

During the two 90-minute sessions — the first of which parents attend without their babies — parents learn about 50 signs to teach their children. The program uses American Sign Language (ASL).

There are workshops for babies aged six to 12 months old, and those for babies aged 13 to 36 months.

In the first session, parents learn how to teach their children the signs. In the second session, the babies attend with their parents, and learn through games, songs and stories, Ms Lang said.

"We talk about the fun ways parents can incorporate (signs) into their regular routine," Ms Lang said.

Some babies are ready to sign as early as five months of age, while others aren't ready until they're 10 months or older, Ms Lang said. She began teaching her son, Nathaniel, when he was seven months old, but had to wait two-and-a-half to three months more before he did his first sign.

But the wait was worth it, she said.

"We were eating breakfast and I gave him his cereal. I got up to go to the sink, and he made some sounds and did the sign for 'more'. I was shocked and happy and, of course, gave him more cereal," she said, laughing.

By the age of 10 months, Nathaniel could not only sign that he

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**LESLIE LANG**

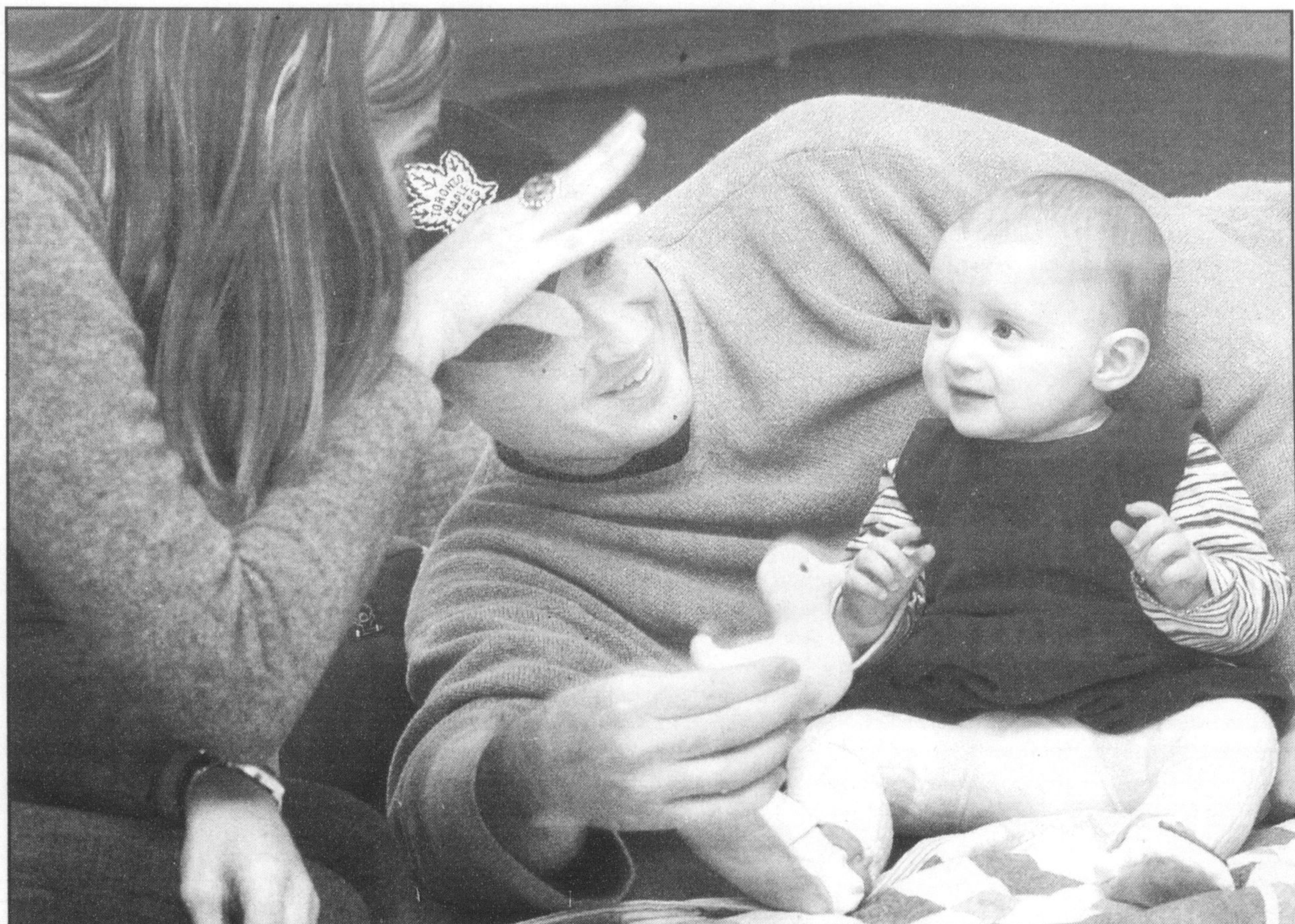


Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

**Mom Shannon Paret signs a duck to daughter Brooklyn, who's 10 months old, as dad James holds a rubber ducky.**

wanted more, but also communicate what he wanted more of.

Some parents worry that signing will prevent children from talking. This fear is unfounded, Ms Lang said. As children begin talking, they mix the words they know with the signs for words they can't yet speak. As they begin to speak the words, they drop the signs.

Ms Lang added babies who sign tend to talk earlier than their peers. Since he's always been an eater, Nathaniel quickly picked up food signs. The sign vocabulary will differ according to each baby's wants and interests, Ms Lang said.

Through signing, parents can learn where their children's interests lie, Ms Lang explained. For example, if a child learns and uses lots of animal signs, it's a good indication the parents have an animal-lover on their hands.

For more information or to register for a Little Hands Talking workshop, call Ms Lang at (905) 876-2547, e-mail her at [littlehandstalking@cogeco.ca](mailto:littlehandstalking@cogeco.ca), or visit [www.littlehandstalking.ca](http://www.littlehandstalking.ca).

Parents looking for a longer weekly program rather than a workshop might want to look into Milton Signing Babies, which teaches the WeeHands signing program and uses ASL. The program runs for eight weeks. The first session will begin May 12 from 10:30 to 11:15 a.m. Thursdays at the HearSay Speech and Hearing Centre, 311 Commercial St., suite 109.

Each week is based on a theme, and 20 signs will be taught per week, plus one to two signing songs based on the theme. Classes are limited to 10 babies.

The cost for the class covers the entire family plus baby, so the whole family can get in on it.

The WeeHands program was founded by Sara Bingham, a Whitby resident, in 2001. Ms Bingham said she'd used ASL with some kids who had Down's syndrome and autism, so she was familiar with its benefits.

When her son was born, she said she began telling him nursery rhymes using sign language and when he was nine months he signed the word for 'fish'.

"That night we got a goldfish," Ms Bingham said, laughing.

She began teaching her program — based on the strategies of Joseph Garcia, who wrote 'Sign with Your Baby' — to parents and babies in her living room, which soon grew too small. It's been expanding to surrounding communities ever since.

"For some reason, Milton is booming with this," she said.

Yvonne Oliveira, speech/language pathologist and audiologist at HearSay, said the WeeHands program ties in with the normal speech and language development of a child.

Ms Oliveira said she's looking forward to enrolling her own nine-month-old daughter in the first class at HearSay. "I think it'll be great. It's educational, but it's also fun," she said.

To register for Milton Signing Babies, call (905) 875-3345, e-mail [hearsay@hearsay.ca](mailto:hearsay@hearsay.ca) or visit [www.weehands.com](http://www.weehands.com) or [www.hearsay.ca](http://www.hearsay.ca).

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**Cogeco Cable Channel 14**

**Programming Schedule — Tuesday, March 22 - Monday, March 28, 2005**

Tuesday, March 22	Wednesday, March 23	Thursday, March 24	Friday, March 25	Saturday, March 26	Sunday, March 27	Monday, March 28
5:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA 6:00pm Osler Health Connection 6:30pm Optimist TV Bingo 7:30pm Simply Halton 8:00pm Halton Hills Awards & Council - Mar 21 11:00pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA	4:00pm - 6:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA 6:00pm Simply Halton 6:30pm Milton Sports Celebrity Diner 8:00pm Auto Experts (Live) 9:00pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA	1:00pm - 6:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA 6:00pm Simply Halton 6:30pm Osler Health Connection 7:00pm Living Healthy - Kidney Disease 8:00pm Georgetown Hockey Council Awards (2005) 10:30pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA	3:00pm - 4:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA 5:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA 6:00pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA 7:00pm New Life Church's Easter Cantata: "AD" 8:30pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA	8:00am - 4:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA 4:00pm TVCogeco Sports Jr. A Hockey Playoffs - Teams TBA 7:00pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA	10:30am TVCogeco Sports Jr. A Hockey Playoffs - Teams TBA 1:30pm - 5:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA 5:00pm Living Healthy: Kidney Disease 6:00pm Osler Health Connection 6:30pm Plugged In! EXTRA 7:30pm Simply Halton 8:00pm New Life Church's Easter Cantata: "AD" 9:30pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA	1:00 - 6:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA 6:00pm Living Healthy: Kidney Disease 7:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA 8:00pm New Life Church's Easter Cantata: "AD" 9:30pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA

New times for Wednesday LIVE Shows: Swap Talk, 7pm and Auto Experts, 8pm