

Key Word Sign – Alpacas with Maracas

What is Key Word Sign?

Research tells us that 1 in 600 people cannot speak or have speech that is difficult to understand.

Key Word Sign (KWS) is one of the most widely used strategies for people of all ages who cannot communicate by speech alone. KWS incorporates signs from the local deaf sign language (Auslan in Australia), but unlike Auslan users, we use speech with sign, and the signing used is more simplified. KWS can help children with speech and language delays develop functional communication until their speech develops, or can provide an alternative means of communication if it does not. Many adults with intellectual disability or speech difficulties use KWS as a primary means of communication, or a backup system when their speech cannot be understood. KWS products, resources and training support the effective use of KWS.

What is the Difference between KWS and Auslan?

The best way to think about this is in terms of who the signs are being used with.

Auslan is the language of the Deaf community and is generally not used with speech. It has different grammatical rules compared to spoken language, so the words/signs are often used in a different order than if they were spoken.

On the other hand, KWS is used by and with people with communication difficulties as a tool to support their communication. It can help with understanding what other people are saying and in getting a message across when a person cannot use speech or if their speech is difficult to understand. Using KWS means that we sign the “key” or main words of what we are saying while we speak in normal grammatical sentences. Natural gesture and facial expression are important elements for adding information when communicating with signed and spoken language and are incorporated when using KWS.

Signing Story Books with Key Word Sign

Key Word Sign can be used to enhance the book reading experience of early emergent readers and encourage their interest in books and text, an early literacy strategy. These are children who are beginning to understand the basic concepts of print and books. KWS can support the link between spoken words and text with the use of signs and natural gesture.

A book like “Alpacas with Maracas” is ideal for use with any child to encourage the development of an interest in story and print. Key Word Sign provides an added visual component to the story telling experience. Only the main words in the text are signed, and all the words are spoken. This helps to engage the child and provides a visual gesture/sign for the main words that are read. “Alpacas with Maracas” highlights many of the concepts that encourage the development of literacy. There are rhythm and rhyming patterns, a controlled and repeated vocabulary, large print, wide letter spacing, limited amounts of text per page, strong picture support and familiar concepts.

The selection of Auslan signs or the natural gestures depends on the underlying meaning of the text. Sometimes there is no Auslan sign for the word or concept that is being presented. KWS will sometimes use a sign that reflects the meaning of the word and is easier to understand. The question for the person reading the story to the child becomes “Is there an alternative that makes sense visually?”

In this story using KWS, we have:

- Used a British sign where there is no Auslan sign for the specific word e.g. alpaca
- Chosen an alternative word/sign eg “earnest” = “serious”, “gallant” = “brave”
- Mimed or used a natural gesture eg “strumming”, “thrashing”
- Finger-spelled names the first time they are said, after that only the initial letter is used e.g. “M” for Macca; “A” for Al
- Occasionally used one sign for a whole spoken phrase e.g.. “give it a go” = “try out” when it reflects the meaning better
- Used a fist movement to mirror head shaking for “no” rather than one of the range of Auslan signs for “no/not”
- Used a particular regional variation eg the southern sign for “morning”. You will need to look up the northern version if you are from NSW or Qld

Please also see the accompanying document “Alpacas with Maracas – Key Word Sign” that gives you more information on the signs used and links to videos of the signs.

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For more information on KWS products and training, go to: www.scopeaust.org.au/kwsa

Or contact KWSA: keywordsignaustralia@scopeaust.org.au

Thanks and acknowledgement to Auslan and the Deaf community for use of signs from their language.