



The Speedy Sloth

- Key Word Sign Information Sheet

What is Key Word Sign?

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 only the key words of the message are signed. KWS can help children with speech and language delays develop functional communication until their speech develops, or it 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.

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

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. Sign language incorporates sign, facial expression, gesture, non-speech sounds and body language into a rich visual language that may vary across contexts and locations.

On the other hand, KWS is used by and with people with communication difficulties who can hear. It can help with understanding what other people are saying and in getting a message across when a person cannot speak or has speech that 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 gestures, body language and facial expression are also important elements for adding information 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 gestures.

A book like “The Speedy Sloth” 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. “The Speedy Sloth” 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.

Selecting signs

The selection of Auslan signs or the natural gestures for the key words in the book depends on the underlying meaning of the text. Our primary source of Auslan signs is [Auslan Signbank](#). Signbank is a great resource for learning new signs, but it’s important to check the regions in Australia that the sign is used in, and the particular “flavour” or contextual meaning to get the most appropriate sign. Sometimes there is no Auslan sign for a specific word in a book. In that case a sign that reflects the meaning of the word will be chosen (eg for “speedy” we selected the sign “quick”), or a natural gesture will be used. Sources for the key signs are reflected in the accompanying document “The Speedy Sloth Key Word Sign – Sign links”.

It’s important to note that there is not one “right” way to use KWS sign while reading a book. The important considerations are to choose signs and gestures that make sense, slow down, produce the signs and gestures clearly and add some dramatic flair!

In this story using KWS, we have:

- read the story slowly, with emphasis on the rhythm of the wording;

- finger-spelled the first letter of the name of a character eg “Spike” = “S”, “Loris” = “L”+ “animal”;
- chosen an alternative word/sign for some words in the book eg “skill” for “technique”, “wool” for “fur”, “reward” for “pays”;
- mimed or used a natural or descriptive gestures eg for “flipping” we used “stand” and then rotated the sign, for “there” we used the natural gesture of pointing;
- employed the principles of “directionality’ and “placement” used in natural gesture and in Auslan to modify the production of some signs eg signs for “lined up”, “overtake“, “flew” and “soared”;
- used expressive facial expressions and tone of voice;
- used the southern regional variation when there was no national sign eg “dinner”. You will need to look up the northern version if you are from NSW or Qld;
- used the same sign for several words in this book that have similar meaning, ie “tiger” for “cougar/cheetah”, “quick” for “fast/speedy”.

Please also see the accompanying document “The Speedy Sloth Key Word Sign - Sign links” that gives more information on the signs used for the key words in this book.

Key Word Sign Australia

Please go to our [website](#) for more information on KWS products and training.

Or contact KWSA: keywordsignaustralia@scopeaust.org.au

Key Word Sign Australia thanks and acknowledges Auslan and the Deaf community for use of signs from their language.