Young children and the emergence of ASL
The age distribution of students at the American School for the Deaf, 1817–1867
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The role of young children in the emergence of sign language
- Young children can impose systematically on relatively less systematic linguistic input (Singleton & Newport 2004)
- They elaborate new grammatical structures that were not present in their linguistic input or that were present less systematically (Senghas & Coppola 2001, Senghas et al. 2004)
- The ability to systematize and elaborate language may peak in childhood—roughly, by age 10 (R.J. Senghas et al. 2005, Senghas & Coppola 2001)
- In Nicaragua, adolescents are thought to have driven the formation of the Nicaraguan deaf community (Polich 2005); pre-adolescents are thought to have played the principal role in driving the evolution of Nicaraguan Sign Language (R.J. Senghas et al. 2005).

American School for the Deaf, 1817–1867
Here we report a quantitative analysis of historical records pertaining to the first school for the deaf in the Americas, the American School for the Deaf (ASD) in Hartford, CT.
- 1700 students (942m, 758f) enrolled at ASD during the school’s first 50 years.
- 8 years old was the lowest age for admission to ASD, according to the school’s admission policy during this period (and during the rest of the nineteenth century).

The ASD student population from 1817–1867 included few young children—just one child under age 6. How did ASL emerge?

Student age at enrollment

Age at enrollment by year

Most students enrolled during adolescence
- Average age at enrolled = 14.4 years (SD=5.2 years, median=13.2 years).
- 71% of students enrolled between ages 10 and 20.

Young children did not play a role in ASL’s emergence while at school because few students enrolled as young children.

But, young children likely played a role in ASL’s emergence while at home because many students had deaf family members.

Many students had first-degree deaf relatives—i.e., parents and/or siblings
- 31% of students (526 of 1700) had deaf parents or siblings.
- 17 students with deaf parents who had never attended a school for the deaf.
- These 17 students likely arrived as 2nd-generation homesigners.

How many students had been exposed to emergent ASL before enrollment?

Discussion
Adolescent and young adult students played a crucial role in the formation of the New England Deaf community:
- New England Deaf community was dispersed: Mean distance between hometowns of the N. E. Gallaudet Association leaders (all ASD alumni) was 99.9 miles.
- Adolescents and adults were likely better able to maintain ties over long distances—by writing letters, visiting one another, joining Deaf associations, and marrying.
- Marriage rate: 553 ASD students (32.5%) married another former ASD student.

Young children could not have played a role in the early emergence and elaboration of ASL while at school. None were there.
- But, young children likely played a role in the language’s emergence while at home, where many may have acquired early ASL from parents and older siblings who had attended ASD.

Our candidate for the first native signer of ASL in New England: Sarah Allen was the first student to enroll who had alumni parents. Sarah was age 10,3 when she enrolled at ASD in June 1843; thus, she had had 10 years of exposure to early ASL before arriving.

References: