

## **An Ethological Approach to Communication**

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Raised like deaf human children, infant chimpanzees acquired signs of American Sign Language from humans in patterns resembling human children and as adults they used signs to communicate with humans and each other. The success of sign language studies with chimpanzees rests on the ethological approach. Gardner and Gardner and subsequent researchers considered first the nature of chimpanzees. Chimpanzees communicate with gestures naturally in face-to-face interactions. Earlier experimenters attempted to teach chimpanzees to talk with little success; chimpanzees lack the anatomy for speech. Later projects used artificial systems, including arbitrary symbols. Those studies provided limited information about chimpanzees' capacity for syntax, but little about conversational skill, which is the foundation of human face-to-face communication. The project's humble approach asks first what the other being brings to the table? How organisms interpret and interact with their world? This was easy for chimpanzees, with close evolutionary ties to and many similarities with humans and it would be more of a challenge for extraterrestrial beings. The success also rests on the Gardner's use of naturally occurring systems rather than arbitrary and artificial ones. This may pose another challenge without knowing the nature of beings beyond Earth.