



Assessment Gap for Deaf Children

Deaf children who use British Sign Language (BSL) are slipping through the net when it comes to assessing their language development. Researchers at **ESRC Deafness, Cognition and Language Research Centre (DCAL) based at University College London (UCL)** are working on a number of projects to develop assessments of the language skills of deaf children and to start to address this problem.

Parents of young *hearing* children generally have a set of expectations of when their child will start to talk and how quickly their skills should develop. This is because there has been a large amount of research into how hearing children develop language and so a set of normal milestones have emerged. However for deaf

children using BSL there has been very little research in this area until recently.

The vast majority of research studies on language and thought are based on languages which are spoken and heard. In 2006 the ESRC Deafness, Cognition and

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Language (DCAL) Research Centre was established at UCL. Their research provides a unique perspective on language and thought based on Deaf people's

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communication. DCAL places sign languages and Deaf people in the centre of the general understanding of how language and communication work within linguistics, psychology and child development. A key area of their work looks at language, cognition and the development of deaf children. For example how does sign language unfold in early and late sign learners? What are the effects of delayed language exposure on wider cognitive abilities? How do deaf children learn spoken and written language? How does the developing deaf brain process signed and spoken language. Working alongside researchers at a number of British universities they are now undertaking several projects to investigate deaf children's sign language development.

As part of the *Positive support in the lives of deaf children and their families project* DCAL researchers have worked on producing a BSL version of the MacArthur Communicative Development Inventory, a checklist that contains words and gestures used and understood by children aged 8-36 months. This research also studied English and BSL language development in deaf children and found that learning BSL has no negative impact on learning English – an important finding for education services for deaf children.

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As deaf children start school it is vitally important that, like every other child, their language abilities are assessed. DCAL are currently developing a vocabulary test for 3 – 13 year olds which is delivered on the web through films and pictures. The method is being piloted with several schools and once feedback has been received it is hoped it will become commercially available. DCAL researchers and colleagues at City University previously developed the only standardised language assessments for children learning BSL (the BSL Receptive Skills Test and the BSL Productive Skills Test).

Developing assessment tools for children whose first language is BSL is an important strand of DCAL's work. Studies that are currently being undertaken are looking at: how deaf children communicate with their families and develop their understanding of the social world



around them; how much memory skills affect deaf children's development of BSL and how many children who use BSL also have specific language impairment (SLI). In the past, studies looking into SLI have excluded deaf children due to their deafness. It was believed that deafness would be a contributory factor in language learning problems. However, if 7% of the general, hearing population have been found to have SLI, then this may also be true for the deaf, sign language users' population. Although this work (being carried out with City University) is ongoing, early findings indicate that a similar percentage of children have SLI in sign language. This has obvious implications for speech and language services and the support that they need to provide for deaf children.

The development of assessment tests for deaf children who use BSL is a crucial area of work to ensure that parents and teachers are able to measure the development of this group of children. It enables the progress of individual children to be accurately measured and acted upon as well as ensuring that education outcomes are improved for deaf children who are in specialist and mainstream settings.

The Deafness Cognition and Language Research Centre (DCAL) is based at University College London. DCAL is a world renowned centre of excellence for research on BSL. The centre brings together leading Deaf and hearing researchers in the fields of sign linguistics, psychology and neuroscience. <http://www.dcal.ucl.ac.uk> DCAL is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council <http://www.esrc.ac.uk>



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