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BSL assessments: a sign of things to come

*Assessment of language and thinking development for children who use British Sign Language has lagged well behind that for their hearing contemporaries. But, says **Gary Morgan**, vital changes may be on the way*

Parents of young children generally have a set of expectations of when their child will start to talk and how quickly their skills should develop. If their child has not started to say recognisable words or to join them together by a certain age, they will probably seek out books, professional guidance and support. This is because there has been a large amount of research into how children develop language, and so a set of normal milestones has emerged. However, there has been very little research in this area for deaf children who use British Sign Language (BSL), spoken English or, as in most cases, both. This has meant that a set of fine grain, normal milestones has not been established and, therefore, it is more challenging to assess deaf children's sign language development.

Most deaf children are born into hearing families, with no prior experience of deafness. With the introduction of the NHS Newborn Screening Programme in England, all babies are screened within six weeks of birth to find out if they are deaf. Parents face issues around their child's deafness much earlier, and intervention for the child happens much sooner. For parents who choose to use BSL with their babies, there is currently not enough information about early BSL development. How do parents know what to expect from their deaf child's development of BSL? What are the first signs they are likely to use? How many signs should they have learnt in their first three years? Is their development "normal" or should

parents be seeking support? Recently the Government has put significant funding into developing a Family Sign language Curriculum which will produce resources for parents to learn child appropriate BSL. In developing this resource the major challenge for the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) was to find out what is "normal" in sign language development (see Further information below).

There is also a lack of information about deaf children's cognitive development. There has been many years of research into how hearing children develop abilities in thinking about physical, biological and psychological concepts. However, we know relatively little about how these skills develop in deaf children. In terms of theory of mind (the ability to understand that other people have beliefs that differ from your own) much research has pointed to significant developmental delays in deaf children from hearing families who do not use sign language (Meristo et al, 2007). While parents, teachers and policy makers are currently concerned about the over testing of children during their early school years, there are no standard tests in place that can properly assess children whose first language is BSL. Language assessment tools for deaf children need to be established, not only to ensure that deaf children are reaching their academic potential, but also so that the communication support programmes for deaf children can be properly evaluated and developed.

How are language and cognitive scientists addressing this problem? The vast majority of research studies on language and thought are based on languages which are spoken and heard. In 2006 the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Deafness, Cognition and Language (DCAL) Research Centre was established at University College London (UCL) and City University London. Their research provides a unique perspective on language and thought based on deaf people's 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 working on several projects to investigate deaf children's sign language development.

As deaf children start school, it is vitally important that, like every other child, their language abilities are assessed adequately. Assessing a deaf child's BSL can be difficult because, often, they have come to language late, as their parents are not native BSL users. Researchers are looking at how to measure specific things like a child's vocabulary, as well as at broader communication areas, such as how deaf children communicate with their families and develop their understanding of the social world around them, and the extent to which memory skills affect deaf children's development of BSL.

A wide range of areas is now under research, including how deaf children learn BSL and English at the same time, deaf children's development of speech reading skills and deaf children's development of theory of mind abilities. In one large project, research is looking at specific language impairments (SLI) in signing deaf children. Children with SLI may have problems in one of more areas of language, including syntax, phonology, vocabulary, pragmatics, motor skills, memory and grammar. 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 seven per cent of the general, hearing population have been found to have SLI, then this may also be true for the population of deaf, sign language users. Although this work is ongoing, early findings indicate that this may indeed be the case. This has obvious implications for speech and language services and the support that they need to provide for deaf children (Morgan, Herman & Woll, 2007).

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.

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Further information

Gary Morgan is a professor at City University London and Deputy Director of University College London's Deafness Cognition and Language Research Centre, 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. For further information visit:
www.dcal.ucl.ac.uk

For information about I-sign visit the National Deaf Children's Society website:
www.ndcs.org.uk

For support and general information about hearing impairment visit:
www.rnid.org.uk

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