

EARLY EXPOSURE TO LANGUAGE

Most agree that the earlier you expose a child to a language, the easier it is for that child to pick it up. The same rules apply for deaf children.



According to a joint study by La Trobe University and University College London, early exposure to sign language in addition to spoken language for all deaf children is the best way to maximise linguistic and cognitive skills to overcome any delays or difficulties due to deafness.

La Trobe University's Dr Adam Schembri—Director of the National Institute for Deaf Studies and Sign Language—and colleagues examined the effects of age of acquisition in deaf adults who use British Sign Language (BSL).

'This study is focused specifically on deaf adults and reports significant accuracy differences for those who acquire sign language as a delayed first language between 2 to 8 years of age, but also significantly slower response times for those who acquire sign language as a second language in later life,' says Dr Schembri.

The study showed children that develop sign language skills from birth had better grammatical judgement in BSL. For adults who reported learning BSL from the ages of 2 to 8 years, the study found it harder for people to acquire the same language skills.

'One thing that seems very clear is that successful early

acquisition of a first language is crucial, whether that language is natural signed language, such as BSL (or Auslan in Australia), or a spoken/written language such as English,' says Dr Schembri.

The current study supports many others showing that early exposure to accessible language is much more likely to result in successful language acquisition than later exposure.

'The advantages of early sign language exposure remain clear even with rapid advances in hearing aids and cochlear implants.'

According to Dr Schembri, an approach using both sign language and a spoken or written language will be the most beneficial for children to make the most of their linguistic skills.

'Bilingual education is the best way of ensuring that deaf children have early exposure to both a signed language and a spoken/written language, which will provide the deaf child with the best chance for successful language acquisition, in either or both languages.'

'We know that bilingualism comes with a range of cognitive benefits, so we would advocate early bilingualism in both signed and spoken language for all deaf children,' says Dr Schembri.

MORE INFORMATION

Further information on research opportunities in the National Institute for Deaf Studies and Sign language can be found at:

latrobe.edu.au/health/about/schools/departments/national-institute-for-deaf-studies-and-sign-language