

*Pearl - seven-years old and profoundly deaf
but fluent in French and English with the help of Cued Speech*

Pearl, who is profoundly deaf, lives with her English parents and younger brother in France. Now 7 years old, she is fluent in spoken French and English and signs in French. She has age-appropriate reading age in French and is starting to read in English. She has achieved this through a combination of good audiological support and unambiguous access to both spoken languages through Cued Speech. She also uses French sign language.

Cued Speech is a simple system which clarifies all the lip-patterns of normal speech using eight different hand-shapes in four positions near the mouth. Deaf children can then see every 'sound' of spoken language. Because it is merely a different way of expressing spoken language there is no new vocabulary or grammar to learn and in the UK parents usually learn the whole system in just five days. Cued Speech (or LPC as it is known in France) is very widely used in France and international research shows that children brought up with Cued Speech have age appropriate literacy.

Her mother Tracey explains: 'When our children were born we naturally communicated in English, however Pearl and Eugene (now 5 ½) were exposed to French outside the family. Pearl was finally diagnosed deaf at the age of 2 and we had to make the difficult choice of how to communicate with her. We received much conflicting advice – mum and dad should speak French at home ... just mum should speak her native language and dad French ... use LPC (French equivalent of Cued Speech) and no signing ... use sign-supported French ... the choice was confusing, to say the least.

We chose to follow our instincts, stick mainly with our native language and be guided by Pearl and the way she progressed. As well as starting to learn French Sign Language we also learnt LPC, the French version of Cued Speech, which we inadequately adapted to English.

Pearl has always been very vocal and started to utter recognisable words 6 months after being fitted with hearing aids. We contacted the Cued Speech Association UK to learn English Cued Speech and to our relief, (after attending their brilliant course in Exeter as a family, where grandma also learnt the basics) realised that we could cue anything we said. Like other bilingual cueing families we decided to cue in French with our left hands and in English with our right – to give Pearl an immediate visual support and a clue as to what language we were using. This has proved to be successful, and although Pearl can cue both languages (choosing only her right hand!) she usually communicates using speech.

Pearl enjoys her school work; in the early stages she was moved up a year as she was in advance of her hearing peers. She has an age-appropriate reading age. She is taught in French, with LPC (Cued Speech) and sign-supported French and an additional 3 sessions per week in pure Sign Language one-to-one with a deaf teacher. The French signs we use are an efficient and constant way of bridging spoken English and French. For example, we could sign 'dog' and explain at school they say 'chien' and at home we say 'dog'.

Pearl is tri-lingual and adapts her language to the person she is with. I watch her signing

with deaf children and see the skills of a natural signer – spatial awareness, expression, fluidity, intensity etc. At home however, she prefers English, clarified by Cued Speech, especially for bedtime stories. Despite her deafness she has a strong auditory memory and loves to find rhyming words. She is also an excellent lip-reader and likes to play guessing games with us – mouthing sentences and we all have to guess and take turns. Of course Pearl wins hands down.

Both our children switch from one language to another with complete ease. We have noticed that their English is not yet as sophisticated as that of their cousins in England – I suppose because they speak it only with mum and dad. Conjugations get mixed up or past tenses are based on regular verbs – ‘I broked it’. In French, gender tends to be confused, ‘Is it LE or LA bouteille?’ This doesn’t worry me, it is such a pleasure to hear Pearl saying a perfect sentence like ‘I chose that, it’s exactly the same as Mina’s’ or ‘Eugene did you do that? It’s not allowed!’ and I am confident that it will sort itself out.

Cued Speech has allowed Pearl to understand both English and French. There are drawbacks and advantages to being brought up to be tri-lingual, but I see these languages as a gift and if has to make a choice then she has the means to do so.’

For information about how to make spoken language totally clear to your deaf child through Cued Speech contact:

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