

Cued Speech, cochlear implants and astonishing literacy levels.

A parent's story of a profoundly deaf three year old

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My little boy Z. was diagnosed as profoundly deaf at just eight days old. I have to admit that at the time I was absolutely devastated and overwhelmed. I had no experience of deafness and felt stripped of my ability to communicate with my darling baby. I never thought then, that I would be in the situation I am in now; marvelling at my little boy's progress and being able to communicate with him as easily and naturally as I can with my other two hearing children.

Before my son was born I had completed a level 1 BSL course and started to use as much as I could straight away with him. I was immediately aware however of the affect my limited knowledge was having on the quality of my communication and enrolled for a level 2 course as soon as one became available. I am now studying level 3 BSL and still I know I am far from fluent and this inevitably impacts on my ability to give my son a complete language. BSL is a beautiful language that I would love to become fully proficient in, but like any language it takes time and exposure to it to become fluent. With my little baby changing in front of my eyes daily I realised that if I hoped to give him a full language, time was not on my hands and I desperately searched the internet for additional ideas.

It wasn't long before I chanced upon Cued Speech. It seemed to be offering me everything I wanted for my son, my family and myself. It seemed almost too good to be true. So taking a leap of faith and holding on to 'nothing ventured, nothing gained' I gathered together enough people for a level 1 course to be held in our home town. My little boy was just 3 months old and as I was breast feeding he came on the course too. I remember finding it quite emotional, for as the course went on I began to realise that Cued Speech really did have the potential to give me everything I had been looking for. I was actually going to be able to speak to him using my native language as easily as I could my other two children, albeit with a bit of practice to build up speed and fluency. I shed a few tears on that first course, the sense of relief and re-empowerment was quite immense.

To cut a long story short I went on to do an improvers and advanced course and from the time of my son being three months old I used Cued Speech as much as my ability allowed at that time. I also continued to use as much BSL as my abilities allowed because I felt that it was an easier expressive language for very young children. Generally I would cue to him and he would sign back. The combination worked really well. It also meant that his brother just two and a half at the time could communicate with him with sign, whereas his older sister 13, learnt to cue.

Just after my son's second birthday he received a cochlear implant. I think this was when I really began to marvel at what Cued Speech had given him. Just 5 days after 'switch on' he began to respond to sound that had simply not been accessible to him before. Within a couple of months he had literally mapped the new sound onto the Cued Speech that he was used to seeing. I found that day by day I was able to cue less and less. He was already completely familiar with seeing English through Cued Speech and quickly became used to hearing it. He didn't have to learn English from scratch. He had already internalised it. It was literally just a few weeks before he started talking and at just one year post implant had caught up the language gap and had age appropriate expressive and receptive language. I don't doubt that without Cued Speech he would not

At two and a half he started to notice letters and words around him and his big brother's 'Jolly Phonics' homework and school reading books. I put each written sound his older brother was learning on the kitchen wall and then added a cued graphic to each one too. By three years old Z. knew all his letter sounds and names; again he seemed to simply map the visual representation of a sound he had through Cued Speech onto a new visual representation of the written letter. By three years old he had started sounding out consonant-vowel-consonant words for himself and was able to read them. I remember being amazed at the time by what he was able to do; and again by what Cued Speech had given him easy access to. My amazement just continued to grow however as he quickly started reading more complicated words and over a period of six months zoomed through the 'Jolly Phonics' using Cued Speech. He has now become an amazing little reader far exceeding everything my two hearing children were able to do at that age. When Z. was first diagnosed as deaf, one of my greatest fears was about whether he would be able to learn to read. Stories and books are such an important part of day to day life in my family; I feared that he would find them really difficult to access fully. As it turned out I really had nothing to worry about. Z. at three years seven months has just had a reading test with an Educational Psychologist and has come out with a reading age of seven and a half! If I hadn't witnessed it myself I'm not sure if I'd actually believe it possible. Undoubtedly Z. has a love of and talent for the written word, but I know this talent would not have been realised if he hadn't had access to Cued Speech.

Funnily enough I rarely use Cued Speech with Z. now as he really doesn't need it anymore; his implant is giving him a level of hearing I never thought possible and he had already learnt to understand and think in English long before he got his implant. The transition from a visual language to a spoken language was an easy and quick one for him to make. I guess the fact that I don't need it anymore is a testament as to how well it has worked for Z. Names available on request.

Literacy - What 'A parent's story' (above) tells us

In the 'Parents Story' above Z. learnt to read by tying in the phonemes (sound-based units) of language that he could see through Cued Speech, and later hear through his implant, with the letters of written English. He learnt to read using phonics. Because he also understood full sound-based language, first through Cued Speech and later his implant, he could **understand** the words and sentences he was able to 'de-code' with phonics.

Hearing children throughout the UK learn to read in the same way; by linking phonics with the language they know. These two main aspects of literacy, language comprehension and word recognition, were identified by a government report (the Rose Report) into literacy. In other words, children need both to understand the English language and to have the skill to associate the sounds of spoken English with the letters of written English.

No wonder deaf children who do not have Cued Speech have literacy problems! Their deafness cuts them off from spoken language in its entirety and the phonemes which are the component parts of spoken language and so necessary for literacy.

On the other hand research shows that deaf children brought up with Cued Speech have reading levels which equal that of hearing children.

Looking again at the Rose Report it is easy to see why: Cued Speech gives access to complete, whole English language as it is spoken by clarifying the ambiguous or invisible lip-patterns of speech. Because it gives access to spoken language sound-by-sound it also gives access to phonics. It can be used on a whole language level and on a phonetic level. Deaf children

brought up with Cued Speech entirely fit the Rose Report criteria of skills needed to be good readers.

Literacy levels years in advance of chronological age are common amongst children brought up with Cued Speech. Research shows that Cued Speech use will give full literacy; the puzzle is, why don't teachers offer it to all deaf children?