

Achieving Success

Personal experiences with Cued Speech

An open letter about language & literacy



An open letter about language and literacy to a Teacher of the Deaf who is unfamiliar with Cued Speech (CS).

By Cate Calder

“ Let me introduce myself, my name is Cate Calder. I was a sign language interpreter originally, but for the last 9 years I have worked for the Cued Speech Association UK. Personally, learning Cued Speech and understanding its remarkable and positive impact on deaf children changed my professional life completely.

The key thing to understand about CS is that although on one hand it is just a simple lip-reading tool (and not 'another language' for the child to learn) this simple system has an extraordinary impact on what really matters, and that is the child's ability to **think** in a full and fluent language. I have worked in the field of deafness for 24 years and I have never found another way of representing spoken language (English in this case) in such a way that deaf children can easily absorb and master it in the way CS does, **regardless** of their level of hearing loss.

I currently spend most of my time working with deaf children for whom BSL is officially their first language and English their second. The reality is far more complex, what actually happened for these children was that their families (usually the mother) 'learnt some signs' when they were very young. These families did this in good faith believing it supported the child's access to **their** language. Of course, when a hearing parent uses a sign they are almost always hearing themselves speak the word in English at the same time so they think they are helping their child understand English. As a Teacher of the Deaf I'm sure

you don't need me to tell you that signs - physical gestures in space - do not in any way 'contain' English words which are made purely of sound - phonemes. The deaf child will learn to connect the gesture with the physical object (cup, cat, rabbit etc, and it usually is nouns that parents learn) but that in no way guarantees that the child has also 'heard' or has in any way grasped what the English word is for these things.

We find that it is very difficult for most parents to get their signing skills beyond the most basic lists of nouns and a few verbs, this of course will support 'communication' in the home but it utterly fails to address the real issue of how to give the deaf child access to full and fluent **language**. The most committed parent will struggle to find a way to learn fluent BSL at a language level quickly enough to benefit their child in those precious baby and toddlerhood years when, as you know, 80% of language fundamentals are mastered.

The children I work with are hugely language delayed in BSL and were pre-lingual in the English language when they started school. Our work with them is to try and get their signing up to language level BSL and begin the process of helping them grasp English through seeing it cued. We are always up against the language delay that sadly occurred for them in those early years when their parents, through no fault of their own were not given the skills to enable their deaf child to access language.



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But children are in a very fortunate position when their parents learn to cue when they are still very young.

*Especially if parents have a deep understanding of the importance of giving access to full and fluent English at language level and are motivated to use CS to clarify their day-to-day language. In this way the deaf baby or child can develop a native fluency in English for himself. Research has shown that the ideal is for him to be cued with at home **and** at nursery/school, the children in this fortunate position are able to develop language and literacy skills on a par with their hearing peers.*



*Personally I have met many deaf people (and they are profoundly deaf) who have no issue with literacy at all and have fully mastered more than one spoken language by having those languages **cued** to them, when you understand the phonology of one spoken language it is no more difficult to 'see' the phonology of another language as it would be for anyone else hearing it. These multilingual*

deaf people were literate in more than one language because they were given full access to the richness of those languages by 'seeing' them cued.

*Cued Speech is a simple system to learn, most people grasp the basics within 4 hours and we say it takes most people about 20 hours of practise to have 'memorised' all the phonemes. If someone says it is 'too complicated' for deaf children I have to say it is usually more a reflection of how difficult **they** think it will be for them to learn! I cue with deaf children with a range of additional needs and processing difficulties, and it is no more difficult for them to learn a cued word as it is to learn a signed word. They do not differentiate and take it all in as a physical gesture initially. But one of the joys of the cued word is that it is so much more than the sum of its parts. When it comes to learning to read and write, the cued word can be segmented and blended and linked to spelling choices with ease, it means that the deaf children can finally draw on the same phonological skills that hearing children and adults use to code and decode speech into its written form. I know that deaf children can and will memorise many groups of letters and link them to individual signs one by one, but I also know that if they can be given the phonology of a language visually through Cued Speech they have an unlimited tool to apply to the whole language.*



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For training and more information about the use of Cued Speech please contact us:

The Cued Speech Association UK (CSAUK)

The Forces, Forces Cross, Blackawton, Devon TQ9 7DJ

Tel: 01803 712853

Email: info@cuedspeech.co.uk

Web: www.cuedspeech.co.uk &

www.learntocue.co.uk



CSAUK is a national charity run by users of Cued Speech (both professionals and parents).

CSAUK—making spoken language visible 2014