

# Cued Speech and literacy



Complete spoken language  
through vision

## Information Sheet 11

**‘Profoundly deaf children with whom Cued Speech is used can achieve reading scores equivalent to hearing children of the same age’. (J E Wandel).**

Deaf people must use the written word to take the place of spoken language in many situations. Literacy is therefore of enormous importance.

Yet the literacy skills of deaf children have long been an area for concern. The Royal National Institute for Deaf people (RNID) recently stated: “The educational achievements of most deaf children remain well below a quarter of the national average for GCSE results and they are leaving school with a reading age of nine.”

In 1966 similar problems occupied Dr R Orin Cornett, Professor Emeritus of Audiology at Gallaudet, the USA’s university for deaf people. Dr Cornett observed that the majority of these exceptionally able deaf students were not competent in written English. Cornett believed that if a

child could have a solid foundation of spoken language on which to draw then their literacy skills and their communication with hearing family and friends could be improved.

Dr Cornett’s aim was to devise an easy-to-learn system which parents could learn and which would enable deaf children to see all the sounds of speech. He drew on his mathematical background to devise Cued Speech which, in English, uses eight handshapes in four locations (cues) in combination with the natural mouth movements of speech to make all the sounds of spoken language look different. Thus deaf children brought up with Cued Speech can acquire an understanding of the phonemic (sound-based) structure of language.

There is much evidence that a phonological awareness of spoken language is crucial to reading success and that deaf children brought up with Cued Speech can use phonemic techniques when they learn to read just as hearing children do.

*Cued Speech is a simple sound-based system comprising eight handshapes used in four positions near the mouth together with the lip patterns of normal speech so as to make all the sounds of spoken language fully comprehensible to deaf babies, children and adults*

### **More information?**

*Video, booklet and more information sheets available.*

### **Learn to Cue**

*Regular courses (some residential) are arranged, with low cost or free tuition.*

### **Contact us at:**

**Cued Speech Association UK**  
Tel, voice and text: 01803 832 784  
Fax: 01803 835 311  
E-mail: [info@cuedspeech.co.uk](mailto:info@cuedspeech.co.uk)  
Web: [www.cuedspeech.co.uk](http://www.cuedspeech.co.uk)

**Call an experienced user now to discuss the benefits of Cued Speech**

## How do we read?

To be able to read with the ease of a typical hearing child, a deaf child should have two ways to attack words. The first is called 'lexical access' where a child recognises the word from a list of all the words he has learned. This 'whole word approach' means the deaf child must learn each word individually in its written form.

The second method is called 'phonological access' where a child must have some way of coding words based on how they sound. Cued Speech gives the deaf child this kind of access as each sound within a word is represented by the combination of cues and lipshapes. This means that deaf children can 'sound out' words they do not know, and also work out how to spell new words that they have seen cued.

### Research which demonstrates how Cued Speech helps:

Research by Jean Wandel in 1989 found that **profoundly deaf students with whom Cued Speech was used were found to read as well as their hearing peers** and better than similarly impaired children educated without cueing in oral or in total communication programs. \*Wandel, Jean E. (1989), 'Use of Internal Speech in Reading by Hearing and Hearing Impaired Students in Oral, Total Communication, and Cued Speech Programs.' Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Teacher's College, Columbia University, New York.

Belgian research by Alegria et al looked at the way in which Cued Speech improves reading. It does so by allowing **deaf children with whom Cued Speech is used to acquire a knowledge of the sounds within words**. When reading, they can use this knowledge to 'sound-out' words they do not know in the same way as hearing children. \*Alegria, J., Lechat, J. & Leybaert, J. (1988), 'Rôle du LPC dans L'Identification de Mots chez L'Enfant Sourd: Theorie et données preliminaires.' [Role of Cued Speech in the Identification of Words in the Deaf Child: Theory and Preliminary Data], *Glossa*, 9, pp 36-44.

Further research showed that **Cued Speech develops, in a deaf child, an internal phonological model of the spoken language that can prime the whole process of reading acquisition**. \*Alegria, J., Dejean, C., Capouillez, J.M., & Leybaert, J. (1989, May), 'Role Played by the Cued Speech in the Identification of Written Words Encountered for the First Time by Deaf Children.'

## Case Study

### Developing Literacy - a personal account

'Our sons are now teenagers and both were born profoundly deaf. After the diagnosis of our older son I read widely about deafness and was dismayed by the low achievements of deaf children, particularly their low reading ages, which seemed to stem from a lack of understanding of the English language itself. I felt that they had a right to understand the language of their own country and family and a right to be literate.

Cued Speech seemed to offer easily accessible English and in use it has been far more

successful than I ever expected.

We started to learn Cued Speech when our older son was about nine months old. Initially I couldn't cue fast enough to cue everything that I said. However, because Cued Speech is a phonemic system, once you have learnt the system you can say anything and conversational fluency comes with practice. As I cued, our son's receptive vocabulary grew very quickly. By the time he was two years old he understood a lot of simple sentences and by three years four months he was using sentences like: "I want to go downstairs to help Daddy." Typically, sentences would include all the 'little' words, but few, if any,

## Case Study, continued

consonants, and sentences would always be spoken not cued.

He was also starting to read. Some time before his third birthday I started to read directly to him from books rather than talking about pictures. He became very interested in the words, particularly words that were new to him, and he loved nonsense words. **As he began to read I started to show him that some of the letters represented sounds and he very quickly made the association between the sounds that he could not hear, but knew existed because of the cues, and the letters.**

Both of our children started to read very early, around the age of three, and both started school with a good understanding of language, nearly age appropriate. Both children have attended their local, hearing school and each have had a full-time Cued Speech transliterator. Their peripatetic teacher has regularly tested their reading ages, vocabulary and grammar. Their reading ages have continued to be one or two years ahead of their hearing contemporaries. When they started school they were both about a year behind with their vocabulary but they have caught up: by 8 our younger son's vocabulary was age appropriate, while at 9 years 7 months our older son's vocabulary was equivalent to that of an 11 year old. Using the Trog test for the reception of grammar their understanding of grammar was found to be, at its best, 3 years ahead of the average for hearing children. Both boys have a hearing loss which their peripatetic teacher said averages about 105-108 dB across the speech range. They both have useful hearing in the lower frequency ranges, and intelligible speech, but not enough hearing to be able to learn language by hearing it alone. They are easy and confident conversationalists one-to-one but find group conversations hard to follow. Both now learn a large amount of new language through the written word. It is obvious from their conversation and writing that they have internalised written and spoken English. The boys' understanding of spoken language is such that they rarely cue to each other, just talk; but I continue to cue new vocabulary and cue in any situation where lip-reading is likely to be a strain.

I do not think that their achievements would have been possible without the use of Cued Speech. I

did feel driven in their pre-school days to try to ensure that their vocabulary was as near age appropriate as possible, but once they started school I did virtually no extra work with them. Our household is not a "pushy" one and the children's acquisition of language has been largely relaxed and unstructured. They are both totally at home with the written word and have an enjoyment of the English language that would be a pleasure in a hearing child, let alone a deaf one. They continue to read a great deal for pleasure and are proud to now be reading 'grown up' books. Their spoken language is accurate, full and expressive; their diction is, at its worst, understandable, and sometimes quite good!

One big advantage of Cued Speech for hearing parents is that it allows you to use your own language in a way that a deaf child can understand, using whatever vocabulary you want; you do not have to learn it first as hearing parents must do if they use BSL to communicate with their children. We are now all learning BSL, and while I think that bilingualism is very important I also think that it must be amazingly difficult to become truly literate, or truly bilingual, if access to written English is through sign. Before Cued Speech was devised it was necessary to approach the learning of English circuitously; this is no longer the case because complete spoken language is now accessible in a visual form.

Our experiences of Cued Speech mirror those of other people and there is research which indicates that my children's achievements are not unusual. The ease with which children exposed to Cued Speech learn to read is well documented and is partly because the phonemic nature of the cued language reflects the phonetic composition of written language.

**From a very early age my children could phonetically 'decode' a written word they had never previously seen and match it with a word that they had never clearly heard, but had seen cued. They had internalised the spoken language, and it is this internalisation, together with the ability to match the phonetic make-up of the written word with that of the words in the mind, which makes independent reading easy for the Cued Speech child.'**

Names available on request.

## Short extracts from work by deaf children who have been helped by Cued Speech

*These extracts have been reproduced exactly as written, including the punctuation.  
In most cases the original piece of work was longer.*

**None of these children are able to hear any sounds of speech, even with a hearing aid.**

*Daniel: aged 5*

“Woooooo” went a noise.  
Polly woke up. “Who made that noise?” It was a ghost.  
Polly saw him and she got frightened and she put the covers over her head.  
“Soooooo”. Polly woke up.  
“Who did that?” It was an owl.

*David: aged 6*

Tomorrow is pussy’s birthday. He will be seven. Pussy will have a birthday cake. I will give Pussy a present. It is a mouse and a ball. Rachel and I will blow the candles out for pussy. Pussy will drink a milk. I will drink blackcurrant juice.

*Yvonne: aged 6*

On June 6th we will go to Hengrove Road street party. I will eat sausages on sticks,

cakes, jelly, cheese and pineapple on sticks and bread. I will drink orange juice. I will wear my long dress. My dress is white. Lorraine, Haley and Steven will play games. I will play statues. Lorraine has a flag. It is white and red and blue.

*Daniel again: aged 10*

Jill, the companion has a cabinet,  
On the wall, full of her miniatures.  
There’s a Toby jug made like Alice,  
From *Alice in Wonderland*.

And a yellow glass box,  
With a swirly silver decoration,  
And the lid is set with jewels,  
Ruby, sapphire, emerald and topaz!

A thimble and a cigarette case  
With an embroidered cloth cover,  
Are some of these little things  
And they go with the wooden cabinet.

## Finally, some information from a school in the USA where all deaf children are supported by Cued Speech.

In answer to a request for statistics about reading levels, Holly Trueblood, Executive Director at Alternatives in Education for the Hearing Impaired at the Alexander Graham Bell Montessori School in Mount Prospect, IL, USA, wrote:

*“We test the deaf children every spring using the same testing instruments used across the country for hearing children. We need someone with some time on their hands to sit down and make comparisons from year to year and follow each child’s progress. I did that project on a two year comparison a year ago and found that using the language, reading and vocabulary scores all of our children except one were scoring within a year of their age-appropriate grade level, and most were well above grade level, some as much as 6 years! Even including those who were on the low end, all children had shown at least a 1.2 year gain during the intervening year, some as much as three years growth.”*

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