

Auslan or spoken English early intervention for children who are deaf or hard of hearing: Why not both?

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Among parents of children who are deaf or hard of hearing, there has been a resurgence of interest in learning Auslan (Australian sign language) (Kecman, 2019; Ching et al, 2018), as shown in a recent survey of parents enrolled in an online Auslan course offered through the NextSense sign bilingual program. For some children, cochlear implantation does not provide full access to spoken language and these children benefit from exposure to and assistance in learning signed language (Hall et al. 2017; Spellun & Kushalnagar, 2018); this is also the case for children with late diagnoses and/or later age of cochlear implantation (Lyness et al. 2013).

However, some parents have chosen bilingualism to support not only language development and learning, but also social identity and inclusion (Kecman, 2019). This choice aligns with the view of Deafness as a cultural and linguistic identity (Chijioke, 2008; McIlroy & Storbeck, 2011; Young, 1999; Riddell & Watson, 2003).

A number of case studies will be presented of young children with cochlear implants who were supported with both spoken and sign language development in the early intervention period. The introduction of Auslan was associated with improved language and communication development across both signed and spoken languages, pointing to potential to support cognition, social and emotional development (Wong et al, 2018). Positive parental reports further supported this notion. These findings suggest that a bimodal bilingual approach in early intervention may alleviate the risk of language deprivation and associated adverse impacts on cognition and psychosocial wellbeing. Further research regarding the psychosocial benefits of bimodal bilingualism in early intervention programs is indicated.

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Presenter bio:

Katherine Phelan is a certified practising Speech Pathologist with NextSense, working primarily across North Rocks school and preschools. She supports the spoken language development of clients who are deaf or hard of hearing and use Auslan as their first language. She has clinical experience in cochlear implant (re)habilitation and use of AAC. Katherine has also worked as a translator and editor, and completed an internship with the United Nations in Chile. Katherine identifies as hard of hearing and is one of many family members with adult-onset deafness.

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