

Too many deaf children are still failing to learn to read, says new study

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Credit: City University London

The British education system is neglecting the needs of severely and profoundly deaf children, many of whom have major reading difficulties, according to new research from City, University of London.

In one of the largest studies of its kind, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, the researchers found that over half of the [deaf children](#) involved who communicated using spoken language and four fifths of those who used [sign language](#) had reading difficulties at least as severe as those faced by [hearing children](#) with dyslexia, and in some cases they were more severe.

There are almost 49,000 children with [permanent hearing loss](#) in the UK, many of whom have reading difficulties. This is because reading is based on spoken language, which many deaf children struggle to acquire.

As hearing difficulties are often seen as the primary issue for deaf children, underlying reading difficulties can go unnoticed, and diagnosis of dyslexia is rare. In contrast, hearing children with reading difficulties are more likely to be described as dyslexic, and once diagnosed, can benefit from evidence-based specialist [support](#) and interventions.

To investigate the impact of deafness on reading, the researchers took 129 deaf children aged

between 10-11 in their final year of [primary school](#) (Year 6), 79 of whom communicated using spoken language (oral deaf), while 50 used sign language (signing deaf). This is larger than samples included in other studies.

Specifically, the report found that literacy scores in both oral and signing deaf children were lower than expected for their age. Scores were also lower in the signing group compared to the oral group, with 48% of the oral group and 82% of the signing children reading below age level, although signing children with two deaf parents scored at the same level as the oral deaf group. Scores for spelling were better in both oral and signing groups, but were still below average. In both groups, language skills were particularly weak.

The researchers established that reading and dyslexia-sensitive tests developed for hearing children could be used successfully with oral deaf children, and many tests were also effective with signing deaf children. The authors suggest that interventions that address deaf children's key deficits of language and phonics could help improve their reading. However, there are currently no specific reading interventions for deaf children, and reading [intervention](#) research typically excludes deaf children. Appropriate, tailored support is urgently needed to prevent such children unnecessarily falling behind their peers.

Dr Ros Herman, Reader in Deafness and Communication at City, University of London and a co-author of the report, said:

"Our research findings highlight the scale of reading difficulties among deaf children and the different profiles of struggling deaf readers. The fact that some children were reading at age level shows that poor reading is not an inevitable outcome.

"All the children in our study were in their last year of primary school. Many are clearly ill prepared for

the challenges of secondary education and are in urgent need of support to develop their literacy. Our findings suggest that these children will benefit from the specialist literacy interventions currently offered to hearing children with dyslexia, and in addition, deaf children require ongoing support to develop the [language](#) skills that underlie literacy.

"Earlier identification of deafness and advances in hearing aids and cochlear implants have undoubtedly improved the outlook for deaf children, but as more deaf children than previously have excellent speech and now attend mainstream education, there is a danger that teachers may overlook their need for support.

"More research is essential to identify effective reading interventions that address these issues so that teachers can provide the vital support needed to prevent deaf children from unnecessarily falling behind their peers."

More information: Reading and Dyslexia in Deaf Children: www.city.ac.uk/_data/assets/p...-Kyle-2017-FINAL.pdf

Provided by City University London

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