



Exploring the Benefits of Auslan in Early Intervention Approaches for Deaf Children

Summary of research

Per Capita
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We acknowledge the traditional owners of country and pay respect to past, present and emerging Elders.

We also acknowledge and respect the members of the Deaf community in Australia, who preserve their rich heritage, culture, and our language; Auslan (Australian Sign Language).

We also acknowledge our custodians of Auslan, promoting awareness, equality, and access through our sign language. Through Auslan, we inspire future leaders in our Deaf community to continue our legacy and heritage.

View the full
report and Auslan
translations here



Deaf and hard of hearing children face greater challenges in the acquisition of language, but guidance relating to different interventions is often confusing.

The parents of children that are pre-lingually deaf or hard of hearing (that is, born with hearing loss or acquiring hearing loss before learning to speak), face complex decisions about the type and timing of intervention best able to support their child's language acquisition.

It is well established that early acquisition of language is critical to children's cognitive, social and emotional development. However, insofar as deaf and hard of hearing children are concerned, the choice of whether, and when, to begin Auslan education with their child is often made harder by intervention choices being presented as either/or decisions.

Deaf Connect and Deaf Australia commissioned Per Capita to explore some of the impacts of delayed Auslan intervention on Deaf and hard of hearing children.

This report seeks to estimate the benefits of timely intervention. It employs highly conservative modelling assumptions. The report also explores both the benefits and potentially detrimental impacts of timely Auslan intervention.

Research shows critical benefits associated with Auslan pertaining to developmental progress, cognitive development, and most critically, as a source of protection against the risk of language deprivation or dysfluency.

The available research suggests that there is a critical window for primary language acquisition in early childhood, a time at which children's capacity for language development is strongest. Failure to facilitate intervention during this critical window appears to be associated with atypical neural language processing, and poorer cognitive and developmental outcomes.



The evidence supports the conclusion that sign language provides benefits to cognitive development and learning processes that are broadly consistent with the benefits of oral forms of communication. There is no evidence that sign language has any negative effect on the cognitive development of learners employing a bi-cultural/bi-modal approach to their learning – that is, for children simultaneously learning sign language and accessing oral/aural interventions. Sign language may result in better educational outcomes for bi-cultural/bi-modal learners than deaf children employing oral strategies in isolation.

Language deprivation is associated with poor mental health outcomes. Conversely, sign language usage appears to be positively associated with children’s emotional development, and their capacity to engage and relate to others. Early Auslan intervention can provide children with a strong sense of identity and self-efficacy and treats intervention as capability enhancing, rather than as a ‘curative’ response to disability. It also aligns with a culturally affirmative model of mental health care that acknowledges Deaf culture.

As such, sign language is a harm minimisation mechanism ensuring that, alternative interventions notwithstanding, users can establish a viable language foundation that protects them from potential language deprivation and dysfluency and mitigates the risk that oral/aural interventions may be ineffective. Bi-modal bilingualism and sign language access is an appropriate intervention to support improved social and economic outcomes for Deaf people.

While the benefits of language acquisition are broad and systemic, some of the gains can be estimated in terms of specific metrics, both educational and economic. We find that:

Delaying childhood Auslan intervention by two years produces a learning deficit of approximately 20% by the age of ten, compared to their peers. This learning deficit is a significant opportunity cost.

The lifetime opportunity cost of delaying early Auslan intervention by two years from age 5 to age 7 is between \$128,245 and \$171,474, or roughly 2.4 to 3.3 years of median income.

Intervention in year one rather than year five yields a lifetime benefit to the child of between \$273,782 and \$367,445.

The benefits of timely Auslan intervention are significant, and the most critical benefit appears to be as a protective factor within the life of a deaf child. The attainment of Auslan as a primary language serves as a source of protection against limited language ability, or dysfluency, that can result from the unevenness of outcomes from other forms of intervention. For example, while cochlear implantation is beneficial to many children, the results of implantation are mixed and uneven.

Auslan as part of a bi-modal bilingual intervention approach provides the child with significant protective benefits should alternative oral/aural strategies be ineffective. Where Auslan is not part of an intervention strategy there is significant risk that the child will not establish a viable language foundation during the critical window for language acquisition.

Consequently, the language acquisition window should be perceived as the critical intervention time for deaf and hard of hearing children to commence Auslan education. Ensuring that children are provided with suitable interventions during this critical window is essential, with Auslan presenting notable and unique defensive benefits against limited language ability, or dysfluency.

Critical support for early intervention programs is essential. Investing in Auslan as part of a suite of early intervention solutions is critical if children are to realise the protective benefits of Auslan.

Further research

This research note is a summary of our full report, *“Exploring the Benefits of Auslan in Early Intervention Approaches for Deaf Children”*.

This report follows our earlier report exploring the economic benefits of Auslan, *“Our Culture, Our Value: The Social and Economic Benefits of Auslan”*.