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Language skills of deaf children eclipsing normal hearing peers: Study

Australia and New Zealand is leading the world in its ability to teach deaf children to listen and speak, according to a new study of almost 700 children released today on the eve of International Ear Care Day (March 3).

The data shows that deaf children who receive early intervention services not only develop successful listening and spoken language skills, but their language, vocabulary and speech are better in some cases than their typical hearing peers.

The study* found 83 per cent of deaf pre-school children had better or average vocabulary skills compared to typical hearing children. Almost 78 per cent had better or average language skills and 73 per cent had speech performance in the normal range or better.

The findings have been drawn from one of the largest collections of data on deaf and hearing-impaired children in the world, collected by six early intervention agencies and consolidated and analysed by First Voice.

"This is a remarkable outcome for deaf children and their families," according to Therese Kelly, Chair, First Voice.

"We live in an era where most people still equate deafness with signing," Ms Kelly said.

"However the reality is that most deaf children are taught to listen and speak, attend mainstream schools and live productive lives well integrated into the hearing world."

Ms Kelly said deafness was one of the most common disabilities at birth, affecting about one in 1,000 babies born each year. She said 92 per cent of children with permanent hearing loss were born to hearing parents.

"As the vast majority of deaf babies are born to hearing parents, we are seeing strong demand in Australia and New Zealand for listening and spoken language early intervention services," she said. "The results and outcomes of this work are truly remarkable."

Ms Kelly said early diagnosis of hearing loss and optimal amplification of sound were needed to achieve successful speech and language development. Children needed access to sound during infancy and early childhood to develop speech and language.

She said if people were concerned about their child's hearing, they should take immediate action as timing was critical to achieving successful outcomes.

People can find out more at www.firstvoice.org.au.

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Media information:

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About the study

A summary of the study's findings can be accessed at www.firstvoice.org.au/News-MediaReleases.aspx. Quoted data excludes children with additional disabilities.

About First Voice

First Voice is the regional body for centres providing listening and spoken language early intervention for children with hearing loss in Australia and New Zealand. Member and affiliated centres include Cora Barclay Centre (South Australia), Hear and Say (Queensland), The Hearing House (New Zealand), The Shepherd Centre (New South Wales and Australian Capital Territory), Taralye (Victoria) and Telethon Speech and Hearing (Western Australia).

First Voice collects outcome data annually from children enrolled in its members' listening and spoken language early intervention programs. It consolidates and analyses data to evaluate and improve services and outcomes for children with hearing loss.