

12 May 2016

MEDIA RELEASE

Early intervention for childhood deafness results in near normal speech and language skills by pre-school

Children with permanent hearing loss have every opportunity to listen and speak as well as other children by the time they reach pre-school, according to a report on 628 hearing-impaired children from across Australia and New Zealand.

The findings from *Sound Outcomes: First Voice 2014 Speech and Language Data* confirm the benefit of:

- early diagnosis of childhood hearing loss,
- remediation with hearing aids or cochlear implants, and
- intensive listening and spoken language early intervention therapy.

The study found the vast majority (74-87%) of hearing-impaired children tested scored within or above the normal range for typically hearing children of the same age. Measures included total language, auditory comprehension, expressive communication, vocabulary and speech performance.

The findings were consistent with previous outcomes data on children enrolled in listening and spoken language programs through First Voice member centres.

First Voice is the umbrella organisation for Australia and New Zealand centres that focus on the provision of family-centred, multi-disciplinary listening and spoken language therapy services.

“The outcomes data for 2014 is another validation of the important work our member centres perform with children and their families,” First Voice chair Mr Michael Forwood said.

“In particular, we focus on educating and empowering families to create enriched home environments that foster their child’s listening and speaking skills.”

Children in the study were diagnosed with hearing loss at an average age of seven months and fitted with hearing aids or implants between 5 months and 3 years.

Most (74%) had bilateral hearing loss with severity ranging from mild to profound.

Many children had received bilateral hearing aids (42%), one quarter were fitted with two cochlear implants, and another 17% had a single hearing aid. A small proportion of children (5%) had both a hearing aid and a cochlear implant.

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Children were typically enrolled in early intervention programs at about 12 months of age and had been receiving therapy for about two years.

“The advantage these children have received in terms of age-appropriate listening and spoken language skills will hold them in good stead for future educational attainment,” Mr Forwood said.

“The challenge is to ensure every child with hearing loss is diagnosed early and has timely and affordable access to sound amplification technology and individualised therapy programs.”

Hearing loss affects about one in 1,000 infants each year.

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For more information:

The full report can be accessed at: www.firstvoice.org.au
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