

Early Intervention Key to Improving Literacy Skills for Deaf Children

25-May-2011 8:00 AM EDT, by [Ryerson University](#)



Ryerson University

Early intervention key to improving literacy skills for deaf children, say Ryerson University researchers Kristin Snoddon (pictured right) and Kathryn Underwood (left).

Newswise — TORONTO, May 25, 2011 – “One more story” is a common refrain in families with young children who love to read. But children who are deaf or are hard-of-hearing often miss out on this activity because their parents may not know how to use American Sign Language (ASL) when they read to them. Early findings from a Ryerson study show deaf and hard-of-hearing children may benefit greatly when parents read to them using ASL.

Kristin Snoddon, a postdoctoral fellow in Ryerson University’s School of Early Childhood Education (ECE), is leading a 10-month research project to teach hearing parents of deaf children how to read children’s classics using American Sign Language.

“Shared reading and parent-child interaction are critical supports for improving literacy skills,” said Snoddon who is deaf. “This recognizes that reading, writing and ASL development can happen concurrently. Through this process, children’s literacy skills can improve by being simultaneously exposed to ASL storytelling and reading with their parents.”

Supervised by ECE Professor Kathryn Underwood, Snoddon is running a series of workshops for parents and preschool-age children taught by deaf instructors who are proficient in both ASL and English. Held in Ryerson’s Early Learning Centre, the instructors teach strategies for shared reading to hearing parents and their children.

Some of these reading strategies include teaching parents how to use ASL to retain their children's visual attention, encourage them to ask questions, elicit their contributions to the reading process and discuss the illustrations to expand their vocabulary and world knowledge. As a result, noted Snoddon, "children who have books read to them using sign language are exposed to a greater range of vocabulary than is available through conversation only."

According to Snoddon, programs for supporting shared reading with ASL have seldom been offered in Canada. Moreover, clinical professionals in Ontario frequently do not support young deaf children in learning ASL, believing that it will prevent them from learning how to speak. "Research actually shows that ASL has a positive relationship to spoken language development in deaf children," said Snoddon.

Participating in an early intervention program, however, may do more than improve deaf children's literacy skills. For example, families in Snoddon's study are becoming more involved in the deaf ASL community and are meeting other parents who wish to learn ASL to support their deaf children.

"Parents also meet with several deaf adults who have expertise in bilingual (ASL and English) education, and learn about ASL and ASL literacy," said Snoddon. "Regularly meeting with deaf adults provides parents and children with first-language and cultural models. They benefit from enhanced communication and social development."

Snoddon also said that deaf professionals, such as educators, administrators and psychologists, are key to the success of early intervention programs, and must be involved at every stage of the process – a level of involvement that's currently missing in Ontario.

"Dr. Snoddon's research provides an alternative perspective to the dominant discourse in early childhood intervention for children with hearing loss," said Underwood. "I am pleased that the voice of the deaf community is being represented in research on early language development for deaf and hard-of-hearing children."

Snoddon's work has received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Her forthcoming book, *American Sign Language and Early Literacy*, is based on her PhD study of parents and children participating in the ASL Parent-Child Mother Goose Program.

Ryerson University is Canada's leader in innovative, career-oriented education and a university clearly on the move. With a mission to serve societal need, and a long-standing commitment to engaging its community, Ryerson offers more than 100 undergraduate and graduate programs. Distinctly urban, culturally diverse and inclusive, the university is home to 28,000 students, including 2,000 master's and PhD students, nearly 2,700 faculty and staff, and more than 130,000 alumni worldwide. Research at Ryerson is on a trajectory of success and growth: externally funded research has doubled in the past four

years. The G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education is Canada's leading provider of university-based adult education. For more information, visit www.ryerson.ca