

New program aimed at preschool children a 'huge win for the deaf community'

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Preschool-aged children in Regina and Saskatoon who are deaf and hard of hearing will have access to a new early learning program this fall.

"This is seen as a huge win for the deaf community," said Nairn Gillies, executive director of Saskatchewan Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services. "This is completely brand new. This is full inclusion for deaf and hard-of-hearing children no matter what their hearing loss."

The program is being funded through the Canada-Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, which is providing nearly \$41 million in funding to early learning and child-care programs. The goal is to improve the quality of early learning for kids aged three and four.

For all children

Gillies's group is partnering with Regina Public Schools for the pilot program, which is not limited to children who are deaf or hard of hearing. Siblings, cousins and friends can apply, too.

Gillies says having access to sign language from an early age can make a huge difference for all children.

"A lot of children are visual learners. So if a child is a visual learner and you open up a sign language gate to them, long before their auditory [ability improves] verbal will take off. They already have logic and reason and can spell words in sign language."

Early intervention

For children with hearing loss, diagnosing the disability early is key.

The Saskatchewan government made great strides in the right direction this spring when they introduced universal hearing loss screening for infants in the 2018 budget.

The screening program will be implemented in the hospitals with the highest number of births by March 31, 2019 and that the first site is anticipated to be up and running by this fall, the Saskatchewan Health Authority said in a statement.

Gillies says it can be hard to know a child has hearing loss without a formal screening: "There are all kinds of things that can hide the fact that the child can't hear."

Before the screening program was in place, Gillies says, hearing loss sometimes wasn't diagnosed until the child was two to three years of age and then it took 16 to 18 months to see an audiologist.

"They're almost five and language hasn't crossed their frontal lobe yet, which is a huge detriment to their development," Gillies said.

Breaking down barriers

Katrina Mitchell wasn't diagnosed with hearing loss until she was in Grade 1. She used hearing aids and an FM system as a child, and received a cochlear implant as an adult.

She has found being hearing impaired to be a barrier at times and thinks a program like this could make a difference.

"A lot of the world is audio-focused and that can make it hard to access for the hearing impaired," she said. "Those without hearing impairments often struggle to relate and often do a poor job of ensuring the hearing impaired can understand them."

"That can be a big barrier to socialization and sometimes learning. More awareness of how to handle these hearing impairments can be really good for kids."

High cost of hearing aids

There are still challenges for people who are deaf or hard of hearing in Saskatchewan, though.

Gillies said he hears from adults who struggle to pay for hearing aids now that they're no longer covered by the province.

"It doesn't seem to make sense how something as simple as a hearing aid can still cost thousands of dollars when I have a cellphone in my pocket that I can see my home from space."

The Saskatchewan government cut funding to its hearing aid plan in 2017. Adults are no longer covered, but children are currently still being temporarily covered.

The SHA said in a statement that the health authority and the Ministry of Health are "reviewing options" to determine how to best provide such services.

Low-income people are still supported and cochlear implants — such as the one Mitchell has — are also still covered.

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