

In our July edition, Lorna Gravenstede introduced us to the Burwood Centre and explained the process and value of obtaining independent assessments.



Lorna is a Highly Specialist Speech and Language Therapist who has worked with deaf children and their families for the last twenty years in a variety of settings. She is now Head of the Burwood Centre, an independent assessment centre for deaf children, and is also involved in the education of new ToDs on the University of Hertfordshire course which is run by the Mary Hare Courses Department.



As we all know, Covid 19 has disrupted many aspects of people's lives. It has not been possible to conduct assessments face-to-face, but 'necessity is the mother of invention', and with the benefit of today's technology, the Burwood Centre has been able to offer assessments to some children in a different way. Lorna explains

ONLINE ASSESSMENTS: HOW THEY WORK AND HOW YOU CAN PREPARE



Due to the Covid 19 restrictions, we have had to change the way we are offering assessments to families at the Burwood Centre. The Burwood Centre is a multidisciplinary assessment centre where we offer deaf children assessments with any combination of: a teacher of the deaf, a highly specialist speech and language therapist and an educational psychologist. It is best, if possible, to assess a child by meeting them and their parent(s) in person, but there are some families who need advice and an assessment report in a time frame sooner than we can provide via face-to-face assessment at the moment. We have therefore developed our service so that we can assess some children online, over MS Teams.

Are online assessments suitable and offered to all children?



In a word, sadly, no. When we receive referral information, we take time to read it all carefully and we contact the family to offer an online assessment only if we think this might work for that child. Some children are not able to engage with tasks and maintain their attention skills in an 'in front of the computer at home' type situation. Online assessments of younger children are more difficult and some children with additional needs, depending upon what these are, might find the situation too challenging to yield useful information. We do discuss this with all parents to whom we offer online assessment, and if after discussion we decide together that this is not going to be viable for the child then it may be that that family decide to wait until we are able to offer an in-person assessment. Ultimately, the decision over how best to proceed will depend upon the family's time frame, how urgent the information is and what we think is possible to achieve via an online meeting.

Some aspects of development are not as easy to assess as others online. A particular challenge is assessing children's listening skills. We can make observations and can find out how well a child can follow spoken information with and without lip patterns, but precise measurement of the impact of background noise on speech perception is not possible. Assessment of social communication skills is also much more tricky online than in person because the way that we interact via a video link is not the same as it is in person. We work with families to decide if an online assessment is suitable for their child and work out to what extent it can help answer their questions and address the issues that they have.



How do Online Assessments Work?

If a child is invited for an online Burwood Centre assessment, we will send the family information so they know the timings, how to access the assessment

and what equipment they will need to have ready (often just a paper and pencil). We also usually send a letter to the child explaining what is going to happen in language which we hope is accessible to them. Typically, when assessing online, there will be some group discussion between parents and all the professionals involved (this might be up to three of us). The child will then work with each professional via the video link. The other professionals turn off their microphones and cameras while this happens, but we all usually observe each other's assessments because we can gain so much information from this. The types of tasks we ask children to do varies depending upon their age, stage and the questions that have been posed by parents. We tend to use a mixture of informal assessment tasks, including general conversation, reading passages with questions, and asking the child to produce some writing; as well as more formal standardised assessment tasks.



My first language is BSL – how will I manage?

We have carried out many online assessments now with families where either one or both parents are BSL users. In this situation and where professionals are not fluent BSL users themselves, we employ a BSL interpreter to join us and this has worked really well.



Will the results still be valid and useful?

So far, we have only received positive feedback regarding assessments we have carried out online and the reports that we have produced from these. Obviously, it is early days, but we think because Local Authorities are also equally restricted in terms of how they can assess children at this time, our assessments and reports are equally as good and valid. We do know that several of our assessment reports from online assessments have already been submitted as evidence for tribunals and that these have been successful, and the tribunal panel have been happy to accept the assessments, conclusions and recommendations.



The reports that we produce following an online assessment are just as long and thorough as those we would produce following a live assessment. Being able to watch the whole assessment, increases the time that we are able to observe your child and really adds to what we know about him/her and the depth to which we understand and can explain the issues.

How can I prepare my child before the assessment?

The most important thing is to read all of the information that we send you carefully so that you have the knowledge you need to be able to prepare your child. Our top tips for preparing your child are:



- Let your child know what is going to happen. Explain to them why the assessment is taking place and share with them the information you know about what is going to happen.
- Reassure your child that they do not need to worry about the assessments. They only need to do their best. We just need to get to know them and what they can and cannot yet do in order to come up with ideas to help them. Make sure you reassure them that there is no passing or failing, if they understand this concept.

- Talk to your child about where in your house you will sit for the assessment session and what you need to get in preparation (paper and pens!).
- If your child has any ideas about things they would like to share with the professionals assessing them, that is completely fine - maybe they want to show us their favourite soft toy, favourite book or quickly introduce us to their dog (we have now met a few!)?
- If we have e-mailed you with a letter for your child, then go through this with them, because this will give them important information and should help to prepare and reassure them.



What do I need to do to be ready to get the best out of the assessment?

Hopefully, you will already have sent us all recent reports you have on your child to give us some clues about the level we need to work at with your child and the issues that we might need to discuss. It is a really sensible idea to have a good think and write down all questions you have before the assessment day, so that you can make sure you have asked us everything you want to while we are there. Of course, if something does occur to you afterwards, you can always e-mail us.



Make sure that you have read advice about the technicalities of the assessment - for example, do you have MS Teams downloaded? If you are concerned about anything to do with this, just let our administrator know and she will be happy to set up a meeting with you before the assessment day so that you can check that you are able to get into the meeting. Be reassured that we have done quite a lot of online assessments now, and everyone has managed very well with the technical aspects. You might find that your child knows even better than you do how to access things!

For the actual assessment, find a quiet place where you and your child can sit in front of your computer or tablet screen. Let other children know what is happening and encourage them not to make lots of noise near where your child being assessed is working. We do, of course, understand that most children are accessing school at home at the moment and that there may be interruptions - please do not worry about this.

Wherever you have set up our meeting, make sure you have some paper, pens and pencils to hand for your child to use when needed and also so you can scribble down any notes you need to make.

Conclusion



The way that many people work has changed hugely over the last year and this has certainly been very true for us at the Burwood Centre. Although online assessments are not suitable for all, we have found that they do work well for some children and young people who are deaf. For families who live a very great distance from us an online assessment means that they will save time and sometimes a considerable amount of travel expenses. Some children are more relaxed when meeting us from their own home. Fortunately, most children are now very used to working via an online platform because many have now done some of this for school and others have met with family and friends over online platforms. Ultimately, we might continue to use some aspects of online work beyond the end of the pandemic.



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