

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION SCIENCES & DISORDERS

Research tackles communication disorders in kids

KATIE HUSTAD

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It has been said that communication is the essence of human life.

In fact, our ability to communicate an unlimited number of thoughts and ideas separates humans from all other creatures.

Imagine what it would be like if you couldn't communicate effectively with the people in your life. What if every time you tried to talk, your words were slurred together and people couldn't understand you?

Many children who have cerebral palsy (CP) live this experience, never developing the ability to express everything they want to say to anyone they want to say it to. Can you imagine how this would impact life, educational experiences and social interactions?

CP is a common childhood disability that affects development of motor control for things like walking, hand control, posture and talking.

Many children with CP also have other developmental challenges like intellectual or cognitive disabilities and seizure disorders. Children with CP benefit tremendously from a range of treatments including speech and language therapy to improve communication abilities.

In my lab at the Waisman Center, my students and I have been studying how communication develops in children with CP.

We are trying to understand patterns of change in speech, language, and communication over time, and to figure out which early skills predict later communication abilities.

To do this, we have been following a group of about 100 children with CP and their families for almost 10 years and have gathered more than 4,000 hours of audio and video of children's communication, which we are using to measure how they grow and change with each passing year.

To our knowledge, this is the only study of its kind in the world.



ANDY MANIS – For the Waisman Center

Emily McFadd, a doctoral student who studies with Professor Katie Hustad, works with Tommy Pritzlaff to evaluate his speech and language development. Tommy and his family have come to the Waisman Center 12 times since 2009 to participate in Hustad's research on communication development in children with cerebral palsy.

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What we learn from these children will help us advocate for and develop speech and language therapies that may alter the course of development, improve quality of life and improve long-term communication outcomes for people with CP.

It has been an amazing experience to watch our children with CP develop into teenagers; we are so

grateful to all of the families who have shared and continue to share their lives and their children with us.

In addition to the promise of helping generations of children and adults with CP, I love that I get to work with some of the most talented students in the country.

My department, Communication Sciences & Disorders, has been ranked first or second in speech language pathology – from more than 225 training programs nationally – for decades.

This means the best and brightest students want to come

here, and many of them are Wisconsinites.

The majority of these students ultimately become speech language pathologists who work directly with people who have communication disorders in hospitals, schools, nursing homes and clinics.

The opportunity to teach students how to help people with disabilities to communicate more successfully and to see those students discover what an important difference they can make in the world is truly one of the best things about being a professor.

ABOUT THE SCHOLAR



Katie Hustad is a professor of communication sciences and disorders. Her research centers on people with significant

speech intelligibility problems. She studies variables that affect speech intelligibility, ways to improve communication for those with intelligibility problems and the development of communication in young children with cerebral palsy.