

Dept of Health introduces oral Cantonese assessment tool for school children

The Department of Health today (March 3) introduced the first assessment tool in the world for testing the oral Cantonese abilities of primary school children.

The tool - Hong Kong Cantonese Oral Language Assessment Scale (HKCOLAS) -- will help to identify children with language impairments at an early stage so that timely and appropriate assistance can be offered to them.

Speaking at a press conference, Deputy Director of Health, Dr TH Leung, said a language assessment tool had been available for pre-school children but not for Cantonese-speaking school children.

"To cater for the needs of school children, we initiated in 2002 the development of a reliable tool for assessing a school child's overall language ability and for identifying specific impairments.

"The tool will provide accurate assessment of children with language difficulties and identify their specific needs. The earlier the children can receive treatment and support services, the better it will be for their future development."

Also attending the press conference, the Department of Health's Consultant, Child Assessment Service, Dr Catherine Lam, said, "Some primary school children in Hong Kong have experienced one or more language impairments, such as articulation problems, inadequate vocabulary, grammatical errors and communication difficulties.

"The language environment in Hong Kong is more complicated than that in many other parts of the world. Local children usually start speaking Cantonese at home and learn modern standard Chinese used in written language after going

to school. However, Cantonese as an oral language differs in many ways from the modern standard Chinese used in written language.

"In addition, children have to study English and Putonghua at school under the biliteracy and trilingualism policy. This could pose challenges for some children in learning languages," she said.

In September 2002, the department's Child Assessment Service commissioned the Language Information Sciences Research Centre of City University to jointly launch this project lasting for 3.5 years. More than 1,100 children from various kindergartens and primary schools in different districts were sampled for testing in the course of developing the assessment tool.

Dr Lam said, "Language abilities and learning abilities are closely tied to each other. Language impairment will adversely affect children's learning, social and cognitive development.

"Identifying children early with language impairment will allow them to receive timely and appropriate treatment and hence minimise the adverse influence. This will help reduce the burden to the community and teachers in the long run."

The project has drawn on the experienced speech therapists of the department's Child Assessment Service and linguists of the Information Sciences Research Centre of the City University of Hong Kong, headed by Professor Benjamin T'sou.

Professor T'sou said, "The professionals have pooled together their academic knowledge in children's speech development, language assessment, social and educational linguistic and their clinical experience in the development

of this assessment tool."

He said, "HKCOLAS covers six main areas - Cantonese grammar, expressive nominal vocabulary, lexical semantic relations, word definition, textual comprehension and narrative skills.

"HKCOLAS can assess not only the language abilities of children from pre-primary to primary six levels, it can also identify diverse language impairments."

Dr Leung said HKCOLAS would be used by the Child Assessment Service and supplied to qualified speech therapists, including those in the Hospital Authority, Education and Manpower Bureau, non-government organisations and private practice, etc.

He said, "We will organise two forums for speech therapists and related professionals on March 25 and 26 to help them understand and use HKCOLAS. Both the tool and the forums are free of charge.

"Parents may consult their doctors or qualified speech therapists for assistance to children suspected of having language difficulties."

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