



## TEAM

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## IMPACT STORIES

# Project SMILE: cost-utility and impact of high-intensity speech therapy on Speech, Motivation, and quality of Life in children with cleft palate

*Ghent University, Belgium/ Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium*

By revolutionizing speech therapy for children with cleft palate, project SMILE is paving the way toward more inclusive, equitable, and effective healthcare systems. At the heart of this initiative lies a high-intensity speech therapy program, rigorously evaluated through a clinical randomized controlled trial. This novel approach addresses the longstanding challenges of traditional low-intensity speech therapy—namely, limited effectiveness, prolonged treatment duration, and high dropout rates due to therapy fatigue. The goal is clear: improve speech outcomes, reduce long-term healthcare costs, and enhance the quality of life and social integration for children born with palatal clefts. To ensure meaningful, lasting change, the SMILE team focuses on bridging scientific innovation with clinical practice: we are a living lab. This effort is powered by a multidisciplinary collaboration between speech therapists, healthcare economists, surgeons, communication specialists, and patient advocates across Belgium. Central to this collaboration is the integration of cost-effectiveness analyses, clinical outcomes, and stakeholder perspectives providing a robust foundation for future implementation at both national and international levels. The project has already delivered transformative results. A randomized controlled trial has demonstrated the superiority of high-intensity therapy in achieving significant speech improvements in children. Beyond scientific results, SMILE has launched several key initiatives to support real-world adoption: "Team SMILE", a dynamic interdisciplinary network of 45 therapists, was established through two stakeholder meetings in Ghent and Leuven. The team fosters continuous knowledge exchange, peer support, and collaborative development of best practices. Hands-on workshops and intervention sessions equipped therapists with practical tools and fostered confidence in applying high-intensity protocols. We created educational cartoon videos that now help children and families understand the therapy in an engaging and accessible way, supporting therapy adherence and inclusion in educational settings. Project SMILE is also reshaping professional training and policy landscapes. Clinical guidelines, co-developed with the professional association for speech therapists, are being rolled out to first-line clinicians. These resources are freely available, ensuring scalability and accessibility even in low-resource settings. Through a powerful combination of scientific rigor, clinical relevance, and community engagement, SMILE is creating a new standard of care. Its long-term impact is clear: better speech outcomes for children, reduced burden on families and healthcare systems, and a stronger foundation for health equity and resilience in pediatric care.

*"By combining scientific evidence with clinical expertise, we are reshaping speech therapy for children with cleft palate. Through collaboration, training, and accessible resources, project SMILE empowers therapists, supports families, and drives sustainable change in healthcare systems—making high-quality, high-intensity care a reality for all."*

**Do you want to know more about our story? [Click here \(LINK TO THE PROJECT/TEAM WEBPAGE\)](#)!**



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