by Eric Mann

Julia was born in February 2006 with a profound hearing loss in both ears. After multiple rounds of testing, my wife, Jeanne, and I had to decide whether to raise our daughter to communicate using spoken language or to communicate through sign language. Our decision was to raise our daughter as a child who can listen and talk, and we began the process of determining what it would require for her to hear and speak.

The Mann Family - Jeanne, Julia, Raleigh and Eric. As Jeanne and I prepare to help Julia, now 3 years old, undergo a second cochlear implant surgery to become a bilateral implant user, we are revisiting the tips and tactics that we have learned along the way to be successful when dealing with a child with hearing loss.

Early Detection and Constant Intervention

When we first realized our daughter had a hearing loss, we quickly passed through the “grief period” and began pushing for answers to what we could do to help her. We went through a myriad of tests over several months that ended up telling us exactly what we knew just days after our daughter was born... she could not hear. Becoming engaged as quickly as possible and staying focused on what's important were critical to preparing our daughter for success using spoken language.

Hearing Aids

Our first step toward a spoken language outcome was a test period using hearing aids. Julia was 8 months old when she began her hearing aid tests and she did not like wearing them. She constantly took them out and threw them at us, or we would catch her chewing on them like her pacifier. Jeanne and I found the following tips helped us make it through this period when dealing with a young infant and hearing aids:

- Change your child’s perception of hearing aids. Funky colored ear molds, wild looking ear wraps and cute shirt clips help to show the aid as a useful, fashion accessory rather than a boring skin tone device that Julia had to wear.
- Help your child adapt to wearing hearing aids. With young children who pull at their hearing aids, try to find a loose knit cap. The cap will help them stay in place, allow them to function properly and divert your child’s attention away from the hearing aids.
- Celebrate small successes. Strive for full-time hearing aid use, but recognize that your child may not want to wear the hearing aids all the time.
- Talk to your child incessantly. He/she will want to hear you and will begin to wear the hearing aids more often.
- Be prepared for anything. Attach the hearing aids to a shirt clip and clip them to the back of their clothes. If the aids come out, you want to be sure they are not lost. Have extra batteries, cables, etc., whenever you leave the house. You never know what may happen to the hearing aids.
- Ask for help. Julia’s older brother, Raleigh, was a tremendous help in getting his sister to wear her hearing aids. He would talk to her all the time and made sure she did not remove them when riding in the car. Julia responded better to her brother’s urging than to ours.
- Divert attention away from the hearing aids. When in the car,
have something for your child to do. When Julia was bored, she always had fun removing and chewing on her hearing aids so it was critical to provide a fun alternative. Julia Mann and her brother Raleigh.

Cochlear Implants

After we completed our hearing aid test period, our audiologist determined that Julia was not receiving enough benefit from the hearing aids alone. At this time, Jeanne and I decided to proceed with cochlear implant surgery. When Julia’s cochlear implant was first activated, she was frightened by the unfamiliar sounds. We eased into her wearing her device by breaking up her listening time into small chunks. As she became more comfortable, the time lengthened. Here are some tips that helped Julia’s transition to using the cochlear implant device:

- Choose appropriate clothing. Julia began by using a body worn device. We found that “onesies” with a small pocket sewn on the side made wearing this device style so much more manageable.
- Again, be prepared for anything. Like the hearing aids, be sure to use a shirt clip with the sound processor and make sure you have replacement parts on hand at all times.
- Change your child’s perception of the sound processor. Our sound processor came with assorted color caps. Change the caps as you accessorize and make the device fun to wear.
- Help your child wear the sound processor. When Julia was a bit older, we switched to the behind the ear processor. Wig tape helped keep the device in place and functioning properly.
- Work closely with your child’s audiologist and cochlear implant center. The audiologist has experience working with a range of young children, and you have the most experience with your child – together you and your audiologist can find some great solutions to any issues that may pop-up.

The Next Stages

As Julia gets older and begins school, we will continue to look for new and better ways to help our daughter succeed. We have been fortunate to have a very committed school district, a family who is engaged in her listening, and wonderful doctors, audiologists and teachers who have been tremendous resources every step of the way. If possible, try to get involved with other parents who have children with hearing loss to share tips and stories. There are several online resources that Jeanne and I found useful that can help you transition through these stages with your child.

Source: Volta Voices, March/April 2009