

Voices from the Field: Andre Miguel



Identifying and Accessing Assistive Technology

Alaina was diagnosed with severe-profound bilateral sensorineural hearing loss when she was only 6 weeks old. We had to learn everything about sensorineural hearing loss in a relatively short amount of time, all while caring for a new baby and dealing with the shock of the diagnosis. The early intervention team, which consisted of her audiologists, case manager, parent advocates, teacher of the deaf and speech/language pathologist started educating us about the different communication styles available to families of children with hearing loss. This ranged from fully visual communication (also known as American sign language) to combinations of visual and aural communication (like cued speech and lip reading) and finally fully oral-aural communication, which is using assistive technology and auditory-verbal therapy to teach Alaina to listen and speak.

The early intervention team made it very clear that our communication style with Alaina was our choice and we never felt pressured in one way or another. My wife and I chose oral-aural communication for Alaina because it aligned with the kind of communication we always imagined we would have for our daughter. It was what we were used to and we knew that we wanted Alaina to be a full and present member of our family and community.

The early intervention team then began educating us about the available assistive technology in the field of hearing loss. This ranged from high-powered hearing aids to cochlear implants. When Alaina was 3 months old she was fitted with hearing aids to maximize her hearing in those crucial early months. The audiologist along with her early interventionists utilized the hearing aids to measure how much of her auditory environment she was able to access. We learned special games to play with Alaina and how to make our play “sound first” to encourage Alaina to use her sense of hearing as much as possible.

However, after 7 months of trying out hearing aids, we realized that Alaina would not be able to access speech due to the severe level of her hearing loss. Together with my wife, extended family, and the expertise of Alaina’s therapeutic team, we made the decision to fit Alaina with cochlear implants. Again, Alaina’s audiologists and early interventionists were there to support us at every step of the way. They worked with us to schedule her surgery at the optimal time, provided the choices in implant manufacturers for Alaina, and prepared us for the surgery and recovery period. It was difficult to make such an important decision for Alaina in a relatively short amount of time, but we knew that the best outcomes for her listening and speaking would occur with early implantation.

Alaina was implanted when she was 10 months old. The surgery took about 6 hours, the longest hours of my life. Her surgery and recovery went very well, and her implants were successfully activated two weeks after the surgery. We left the activation appointment with two huge bags full of equipment, batteries, and user guides. We felt excited about this next phase in our lives, but we were also feeling a little overwhelmed. Once again, our team was there to guide us through the process.

Alaina now is now learning to talk, listening to songs and stories... My wife and I have also become confident and comfortable in caring for Alaina's equipment and also teaching other caregivers in Alaina's life such as babysitters, family members, and her teachers at school on the proper care for the equipment.

This experience has made it clear to me the importance of practitioner's roles in helping families access assistive technology for their child's special needs. Alaina's team not only supported us in making informed decisions about assistive technology, but also were there to support us emotionally. They saw us as equal partners even though they had extensive experience and knowledge about the technology of hearing aids and cochlear implants. We are grateful to those practitioners' guidance and sensitivity throughout the process.