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When the Educator Is a Parent: A Perspective and Some Helpful Hints

By Jessica Wiley

I'm a special educator whose classroom was next door to the homeroom of my hard of hearing son. I had him as one of my students for special education literacy three times a week. I was fortunate to have the professional background, personal knowledge, and treasured relationships with colleagues—all of which helped me navigate the experience of giving birth to a child with hearing loss. What started out as a lone assignment quickly grew into a team effort! I share some of what I learned below.

I have always said that my teaching career prepared me to be a parent. Little did I know how true that would be. I began teaching in 2009. Two years later, in 2011, I became a mother for the first time when my daughter Katalyn was born, and then again in 2014 when my son Kristopher was born. Both of Kristopher's newborn hearing screenings showed that he had hearing loss, and a month later we were referred to Arkansas Children's Hospital, where an auditory brainstem response confirmed my biggest fear: hearing loss.

At 2 months, Kristopher was fitted with his first pair of hearing aids. Soon after came the next pair and a plethora of appointments, equipment, information, and batteries. As so many hearing parents know, the diagnosis of hearing loss begins a wild and sometimes difficult journey for the whole family.

As a teacher, I knew that a child's first experience with language is before they are born; hearing children recognize their mother's voice while still in the womb. After Kristopher's diagnosis, I wasn't sure what he could hear, but I was determined to expose him to language. During bottle feedings, I would talk to him about how he was a greedy eater. While doing laundry, he would watch me go by, and I would talk to him, carrying soiled loads of clothing and lots of love. During trips, I would speak to Kristopher from the driver's seat, showing him the passing billboards, and Katalyn would identify the colors

Photos courtesy of Jessica Wiley



Far left: Kristopher (age 2) sitting on the couch watching television with Mommy (2016). **Left:** Kristopher (age 4) reading one of his favorite books and riding in the car with Mommy (2018).

and types of cars that whizzed by. As he got older, we talked all the time, playing “The Floor is Lava” as he and his sister used a myriad of tactics to move around a room without stepping on the floor. We talked while eating pizza, and we talked while watching movies in pretend forts. Our imaginations would take over, and words would spill out in silliness and joy.

I had to be strategic. Kristopher was a wriggler, and lights and movement caught his attention, but when he heard my voice, he redirected and focused. I would put my face close to his and talk, deliberately moving my lips and exaggerating so he could see the movements. He responded, using intonations and vocalizations. Our favorite routine was at bedtime, when I would read Kristopher’s favorite book, *Eyes & Nose, Fingers & Toes*. He soon memorized the actions and speech associated with it. He would clap his hands, touch his toes, and wiggle his fingers. He would count his eyes and point to his nose while we counted together. When he got distracted, I would move my body and have him mimic my movements. That brought his attention back

to me.

I used speech. My husband, other family members, countless therapists, and I had many conversations about incorporating sign language. However, I focused on spoken language, confident that Kristopher would excel in his use of speech. Somehow, I found resources and guidance. The learning situation I wanted, Pediatrics Plus Developmental Preschool, had a waiting list, but by age 2, Kristopher was in full attendance. He received speech therapy, occupational therapy, and physical therapy. He also needed to work on meeting his developmental milestones and getting ready for public school. I was thankful for Medicaid and not having to worry about how we would pay for services.

Then it was time for me to return to work. At first Kristopher stayed with his god-grandparents. However, as he grew older, we felt he needed socialization and exposure to other children his age, and his god-grandparents were growing older, too. We had to find daycare. I reached out to the Arkansas School for the Deaf (ASD) Outreach Support

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Above: Kristopher (age 4) playing in his classroom at Pediatrics Plus Developmental Preschool (2018). **Right:** Kristopher with friends at his fifth birthday party at Hog Wild Family Fun Center (2019).

Services. Through ASD coordinator Karen Howard Lange, we found help in evaluating the daycare center I had selected. My daughter attended there at the time, and I was pleased with her care. Ms. Lange also provided recommendations for improving accessibility and for direct early intervention services. Therapists from Arkansas Therapy Outreach came weekly to provide speech and occupational therapy. Educational providers, therapists, support staff—these wonderful professionals were our saving grace.

In addition, I found Arkansas Hands & Voices, an organization that provides Arkansas families with resources, networking, and information to improve communication access and educational outcomes for their children. We met the first representative of Hands & Voices at Arkansas Children’s Hospital. Mandy McClellan Jay was a parent advocate and the beginning of hope. Arkansas Hands & Voices provided options for communication, resources for therapy, outreach programs, and, ultimately, moral support.

From the beginning—from those very first days at daycare—Kristopher modeled the behaviors of his peers who surrounded him. He modeled mouth formations and body language. He, of course, learned some inappropriate behaviors as well, but that allowed us to teach what was a rarely used word: “No.” Kristopher made great improvements. His babbling became words and eventually one- to two-word sentences. He was meeting milestones and growing socially. He played with

Katalyn, who enjoyed her role as big sister, encouraging him to use words whenever he wanted something. Socially, Kristopher grew more independent. He played with and conversed with other children. He enjoyed joining in with our cleanup songs and sang his best as he followed directions. Unsurprisingly perhaps, his favorite word was “no.”

As a family, we also saw how Kristopher’s disability was affecting us. The idea of not knowing what would happen next was the worst. Lingered deep down within my soul were the “What if” questions: *What if he regressed? What if his hearing couldn’t be restored? What if it got worse? What if he would never be independent?*

As a literacy inclusion teacher, I worked in a different building, but in Fall 2023 I changed classrooms, and the three of us—Kristopher (beginning fourth grade), Katalyn (beginning sixth grade), and I—were all in the same structure. In fact, I was just next door to Kristopher’s classroom. Any time his hearing device malfunctioned; I was there to problem solve. I was constantly involved in his educational programming—literacy services, math services, speech therapy, and occupational therapy—and three times a week I was working with him inside his classroom. It was a difficult adjustment; I moved constantly between the role of mother and teacher. We had a few bumps along the way, but I would say we had a successful year.





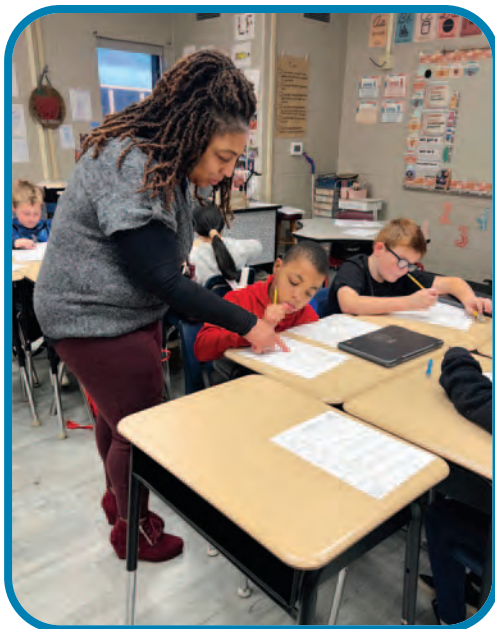
Today, Kristopher is 10 years old and entering fifth grade. He is in full inclusion classes, a notion encouraged by his third grade special education and general education teachers. He uses a Cochlear Mini Mic +2 during classroom instruction, activity classes, and transitions. His accommodations include preferential seating, instructions condensed into one to two steps (e.g., “Kristopher, come get your mic and

connect it to your

Chromebook” or “Kristopher, first read the passage and then highlight text evidence”), repeating and explaining back to check for understanding, and redirecting him when he rushes on assignments. While this is the best placement for Kristopher, there are hurdles. He interacts with his teachers and therapists only minimally. He has to be prompted and called on to participate in class activities and to interact with other students. Group work is difficult, especially the communication piece. He is still academically delayed.

However, outside of academic structure, Kristopher thrives.

Above: Kristopher (age 5) reading at home on a summer day (2019). **Right:** Kristopher and Wiley work on an assignment in class (2023).



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On to Literacy: A Mother’s To Do List

Whatever communication decisions that families make for their deaf or hard of hearing children, they may find the following literacy strategies helpful:

- **Label everything.** Label items in the bathroom, bedroom, and living room. Periodically stop, point to the item and the label, and sign if the child uses American Sign Language (ASL). Note the spelling, too, and use the finger alphabet for signing children.
- **Include the child in all discussions.** Interactions with the child should occur throughout the day, in the communication that the child prefers, and especially (and consciously) at mealtimes.
- **Use print in the community.** Call the child’s attention to functional print: restaurant signs, road signs, billboards, and marquee signs.
- **Engage in play with print.** Have your child look at a menu and order lunch from your kitchen “restaurant.” Create an in-house obstacle course or construction zone or reenact a scene from a television show.
- **Encourage the child to communicate using nonverbal cues.** Be deliberate with facial expressions. Part of communication includes verbal and nonverbal communication. If a child indicates by pointing, encourage the child to identify the word as well, using speech, sign, or another method. This supports multi-sensory engagement and conveys meaning.

He loves to play with his friends on the playground and in the cafeteria. He and his sister also participate in Community Connections, a nonprofit organization that provides sports and arts for children with disabilities. With Katalyn, Kristopher enjoys this inclusive and free organization, practicing martial arts, playing soccer, and taking part in the Neighborhood Pet Club. The respite literacy program and other respite services, such as going to Larry’s Pizza and Action Jacks Family Fun & Entertainment, provide much needed breaks to engage with other families who are facing similar journeys—and just to breathe. As a result of my children’s participation, I was asked to become a Parent Mentor, and I engage with parents to share

Right: Kristopher participates in Top Soccer, one of the free programs offered by Community Connections. **Center:** Kristopher was also interviewed for Good Night, one of the fundraisers for Community Connections (2023).

stories of difficulties and encouragement.

I feel that, with continued support from his educational team at Morrilton Intermediate School, some time to mature, and continued interactions with his peers, Kristopher will gain appropriate skills. Through the advancement of technology, continued practice, and opportunities to generalize skills, he will be able to grasp complex concepts and thrive. We still communicate successfully in spoken language, but in Arkansas, ASL is approved as a credit in the public schools, and if Kristopher wants to take it, I'll fully support his decision. The critical support from both Hands & Voices and professionals has continued. Further, we make frequent visits to Arkansas Children's Hospital for its Audiology and Ear, Nose, and Throat departments. We visit a local behavioral health care provider for medication management.

At the heart of every choice for the parent and educational team should be the best interests of the child. As parents, we need to establish good relationships with the professionals who help



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us and ensure they are respectful and cordial. Also, we need to ensure the professionals are knowledgeable. As children continue to grow and change, their classroom modifications and technological accommodations will continue to change, too.

Today, there are advancements in hearing technology and software for accessories supportive of children's goals and dreams. No longer will individuals like Kristopher be ostracized, segregated, or excluded. But support is critical. For me, support from parents, educators, facility managers, and medical professionals was needed to ensure my son received the education and care he was entitled to.

I am Kristopher's biggest cheerleader, and I need him to know that I support him no matter where he is or where his journey will take him. Being his mother first but also part of his educational team has allowed me to view my child through different lenses. With our faith and a strong family and educational support system, we have been able to think positively about Kristopher's quality of life. My husband Cameron, Katalyn, and I are with him every step of the way, and we will advocate for him until he is old enough to advocate for himself. Our hopes remain high.

Left: Katalyn (age 12), Jessica, and Kristopher (age 9) during Take Your Child to the Library Day at the Conway Public Library (2024).