

Aaron a verbal communicator despite deafness

Access to vast network of services extremely beneficial, says mother

By Kathy Yanchus
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

For the McMullen family, there was no other option once they discovered their profoundly deaf son Aaron could learn to communicate verbally.

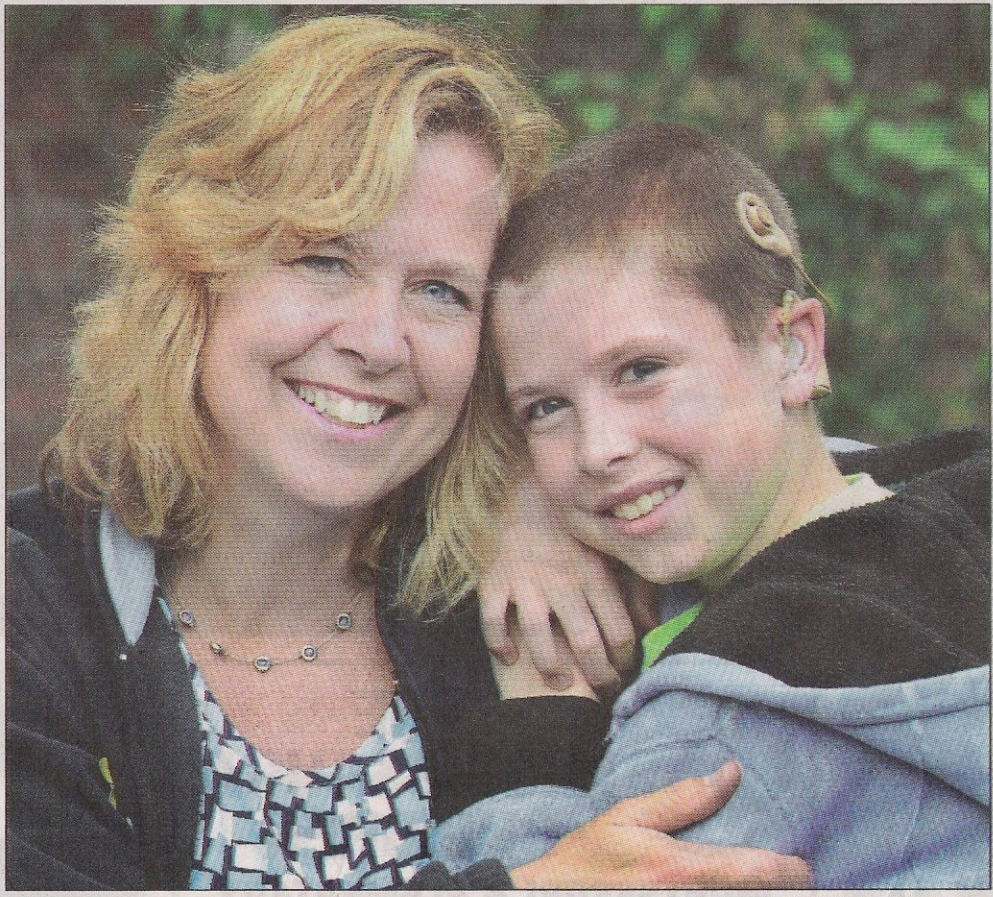
"We thought if we can listen and speak and communicate with everyone else, then we should give him the same opportunities," says Debbie McMullen. "We didn't hesitate."

To equip Aaron with the speech and language skills needed to be integrated into a regular classroom was their short-term objective, immersing him into the hearing world — enabling him to reach his full potential — was the ultimate goal.

The McMullens were fortunate to have access to the vast network of doctors, speech therapists, audiologists, hearing impaired advocates and committed teachers who could make it happen. The family's involvement was also critical to the entire process.

At the age of two, Aaron's parents began to notice their toddler wouldn't startle or respond when his name was called. Aaron wasn't born deaf, nor had he suffered a childhood illness that could cause deafness. Tests revealed his bilateral (both ears) progressive hearing loss and Mondini Syndrome (incomplete cochlea).

Soon after he turned three, Aaron had his first cochlear implant and his second just after turning six. Surgery for his new "ears" — as the McMullens refer to Aaron's implants — has been followed by weekly auditory/verbal therapy, intensive one-on-one speech lessons that build on the now 10-year-old's residual hearing and use his cochlear implants to teach him to listen and become aware of sound again.



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FAMILY TIES SPEAK VOLUMES: Debbie McMullen is very grateful for the services that have helped break down the communication barriers for her deaf son, Aaron.

"We focus on speech and language skills through listening," explains Yvonne Oliveira, speech-language pathologist, audiologist & LSLS Cert. AVT at HearSay Speech and Hearing Centre on Derry Road.

The therapy closes the gap between the child's language age and chronological age, says Oliveira. Parents are coached alongside their child with learned strategies applied consistently at home, she says.

Today, Aaron attends Grade 4 at Our Lady of Victory School.

"He is doing very well. He's in a normal environment which is what we've always

wanted," says McMullen.

Aaron has an itinerant teacher of the deaf four days a week, plus an educational assistant who works with him every afternoon on math and language. He also swaps his cochlear implant battery for an FM boot in the classroom, which works in conjunction with a microphone around the teacher's neck to meet his optimal hearing needs.

"The Halton Catholic board has been so accommodating," says McMullen, adding that regular meetings are held with school staff to determine Aaron's needs.

Before Aaron leaves school for the sum-

mer holidays, his mom will have next year's mathbooks and vocabulary to "pre-teach" him over the summer.

McMullen points to livingroom shelves overflowing with well-worn board games that the entire family, dad Paul, siblings Sara, 15 and Adam 12, have used as one strategy to encourage his listening and speech.

To watch a child with no speech and no vocabulary become a verbal communicator is tremendously satisfying, says Oliveira. "There is more awareness and knowledge of the fact that just because your child is born deaf there is no longer only one option."

Not all families have access to AV Therapy, however, and one of those reasons is there are so few AV therapists, says Oliveira, who's contracted by VOICE, the advocacy group that seeks a provincial standard of care and dedicated funding for all children with hearing loss who want to pursue this route.

She's currently mentoring two teachers of the deaf within the board in preparation for their certification.

Statistics show that the majority of families are choosing an oral/AV approach for their children identified with hearing loss in the Provincial Infant Hearing Program, says Norah-Lynn McIntyre, VOICE executive director.

"The government must ensure that equal supports and opportunities exist to foster the potential of these children, including access to audiological and communication supports," says McIntyre, emphasizing the message of May's Speech and Hearing Month.

Oral language equates to literacy skills and literacy skills equate to employment, says McIntyre.

"If children born deaf or hard of hearing can fully engage in society, they will become employable, contributing, involved taxpayers in the future," she adds.

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