

Powering Potential Podcast

Episode 4: First Words and Other Celebrations

Matthew: You know, learning the first word is really such a milestone, because now we were like, "Well, if she can do this, why can't we learn the second word?" And then it was like, step by step from there.

Dr. Teresa Caraway: Yeah.

Matthew: It was just a great time to see her kind of unfold. And it was like we got to really know her better and better as time went on. And it felt like, even though we had already known her for months at that point, each day felt like we were getting to know more, and more.

Dr. Caraway: Welcome to *Powering Potential*, a podcast from Hearing First where we explore the unique joys and challenges of raising children who have hearing loss. I'm Dr. Teresa Caraway, your host, a mother, and a speech language pathologist specializing in Listening and Spoken Language. I'm here to share the incredible stories of families who are teaching their children, who are deaf or hard of hearing, to listen and speak.

Over the past few episodes, we've heard families tell their stories of the first year after a diagnosis of a hearing loss. We've heard about how they found appropriate early intervention services and took the first steps on the journey toward listening and speaking. In this episode, we'll hear what progress sounds like.

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Matthew and Sarah are parents to Fiona, a lively 3-year-old who was diagnosed with profound bilateral hearing loss when she was an infant. When she was old enough, Fiona had a low-risk surgery to receive two cochlear implants. A few weeks later, those implants were turned on, giving Fiona access to sound with her new ears.

Tell us about activation day.

Sarah:

Well, we were really excited. I think it was about a month after the surgery. And she had healed really well, and she was kind of back to her normal self for awhile. And it was two days, because they activate one ear, and then the other ear. It wasn't, I mean, you can go on YouTube and watch all these kind of activation videos and see very dramatic reactions. But I think for little babies, it's a bit different than that. But it was emotional to think that, that was the first time she ever heard our voice. I think, I mean it was emotional for me, for sure, and exciting, and a happy day.

Matthew:

Yeah, it was also very emotional for me. And it was the most exciting day, I think, that I've ever had. I mean, it's up there with when she was born. It was just as exciting as that. It was, it felt like waiting for the best thing ever. And her reaction was subtle, but I knew just from the way she reacted that something was going on.

Dr. Caraway:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Matthew:

And she had a little bit of a smile. And then she started hitting the table. And she was really happy with herself, hitting the table. And so I think to me, those two things helped me understand that it worked on some level, but it was not this great, like, "Oh, now we can talk to

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her, and she'll look at us." It was more, like, subtle, like she was trying to figure it all out.

And it was— not that it was a brand new sense, but it was so much more access to sound than before that it was like a whole new world opening for her, and it probably was very confusing. She seemed curious, and excited but not fully secure in what was going on.

Dr. Caraway:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sarah:

Yeah.

Dr. Caraway:

So you could tell there were things going on in that little brain, that she's trying to figure out with that new signal.

Sarah:

Right.

Dr. Caraway:

Subtle things, and now you're on your way. And so tell me about going home and what you started noticing. And when was the first time you noticed or you thought, "Yes, this is working"?

Sarah:

I mean, I think, because even on the activation day... I think as people who are not professionals in the field, we could tell something was going on. But the audiologist, and the people who were there, are like, "Oh, yes, she's definitely hearing something." We have different videos from that time period. I think there's one from pretty shortly after that, but it's her with her grandparents banging on this drum that we got her. Definitely you can tell that she's hearing that, or us banging a pot, and she's looking around like, "Oh, what's that?". I think we were... And that's not always the case, either. Because usually what they tell you is from activation day, you need to be

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prepared that they're going to be responding to sound as if they were a newborn. And you should gauge your expectations by how many months it's been since activation day. But I think we were fortunate that I think things progressed fairly quickly.

Matthew:

And like you said with the banging the pot, that was the first time at home that I was like, "Whoa, she definitely heard that." Because she looked over as soon as one of us hit the pot with a spoon or something. And it was such an exciting time. We were making all kinds of noises, like you would have thought there was a band in the house. Or just we're always talking to her. And it was just, we were flooding her with as much sound as we could. And it was so exciting to see all the different reactions. And it just felt like, each little thing that we were seeing was starting to accumulate. And we were like, "Wow, she's really starting to hear sound." It was a great time.

Dr. Caraway:

A baby's first words are an exciting milestone for all parents. Those first words are especially noteworthy for Listening and Spoken Language families, like Sarah and Matthew.

Do you remember her first words? Her first word?

Sarah:

Yes.

Dr. Caraway:

Can you describe it to us, and describe that situation?

Sarah:

I remember that her first word was, "Uh-oh," because it came around the time when she was learning to feed herself with the spoon, in the highchair. So there was a lot of things that

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were falling on the ground. You know, a lot of food on the ground. So that was her first word, "Uh-oh, uh-oh."

Dr. Caraway: And using it appropriately with all the drops. Right?

Sarah: Yeah.

Matthew: Yeah, and it was so much fun, because she would, sometimes an accident would happen, and she would go, "Uh-oh". And then sometimes, she would purposely throw something and say, "Uh-oh." And it was so great, because we started to realize that she could associate sound and spoken language with an event. And it was more than just babbling; it was like, "Whoa."

Sarah: Yeah.

Matthew: And learning the first word is really such a milestone, because now were like, well if she can do this. Why can't we learn the second word.

Sarah: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Matthew: And then it was step by step from there.

Sarah: Yeah, once she had that one then more came. Like, "hi," and "bye," and I think "momma," and things like that. So it was very, just kind of like with a normal hearing child how things would go.

Dr. Caraway: Yeah. So started really following some of those typical milestones that you would expect for a child then.

Sarah: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

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- Dr. Caraway: And it sounds like she's catching up really quickly, closing that gap between her hearing age and her chronological age. So tell me now about her starting to talk and express herself.
- Sarah: Well, I guess we've alluded to the fact, I mean she has a very strong personality, I would say. It's so fun, I guess, as a parent to, like, you get to know your child and their personality. And she has a big sense of humor, I'll say. And it's been a lot of fun to kind of watch her pick up words. And you can tell that it's hard, and it requires some work sometimes. But I have to say I've enjoyed it.
- Matthew: Yeah, and as she started to get more language, like you said her personality started coming out further, and she started matching how she feels with what she was saying. So it was really great to see her ask for things, sometimes request things.
- Sarah: Sometimes demand things.
- Matthew: Sometimes demand things. But in general, it was just a great time to see her kind of unfold. And it was like we got to really know her better and better as time went on. And it felt like, even though we had already known her for months at that point, each day felt like we were getting to know more, and more.
- Dr. Caraway: Yeah, it's really fun when their little personalities start evolving and emerging, and they get to express their own thoughts and ideas. Yeah.
- Sarah: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Dr. Caraway: Can you share with us a funny story or a way in which Fiona expresses her humor or her

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personality? Do you have a story you can share with us, for us to get to know Fiona just a little bit better?

Sarah:

So we have this, it's like a Google Photos album, that goes back to the days, actually I'm there in the hospital gown waiting to give birth, basically. That's the first photo that's on there. And there's these two videos, which I think are hilarious, because they're right next to each other. The first one is I think Matt, you're with her, and you're eating some ice cream. And she's only maybe 18 months old in this. And so she's saying, "Ice cream, ice cream." And you give her a spoonful. And then you're teasing her, so you go for another spoonful, and then you kind of turn it around, and then you eat it. So she was mad or whatever.

So then there's another video, that from—

Matthew:

A couple weeks later.

Sarah:

A couple weeks later where she is sitting in her highchair eating blueberries. And he comes over, and is like, "Oh Fiona, can I have a blueberry?" So she picks it up, and puts it towards his mouth, and then all of a sudden it turns around and comes back into her mouth. So it's just like she was playing the trick back on him.

She just has a very sweet but very kind of mischievous and playful sort of personality.

Matthew:

Yeah, like she's the kind of person who will walk right up to you and take the French fries off your plate and ask you what you're doing, like, "Oh, what do you got? What are you eating?" Just her command of the room is just

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very funny, and she always wants to be the life of the party.

Sarah: Yeah. Or like the other day, I was eating some kind of dessert. And so she'll come over and take a look at what you've got on your plate, and be like, "Oh, I want some of that." So she'll, like, sidle up to me, and she goes, "Mommy, I love you too." That's what she says, even though I didn't say, "I love you." But she'll just say, "I love you too."

Matthew: And then she weasels her way over, and tries—

Sarah: "I want to sit with you." And wants to sit in my lap, no matter what I'm eating, kind of be part of it. So she has her wily ways of getting, you know.

Dr. Caraway: She tries to be subtle and sly with getting in on the treats.

Sarah: Yeah.

Matthew: Oh, yeah.

Sarah: Yeah, absolutely.

Dr. Caraway: Yeah, yeah. I love the teasing game that you described, though, where you're playing with ice cream, and you turn it around, you eat it. And then two weeks later, she remembers the teasing game, and she turns the tables on you with the blueberries. That's a huge cognitive, humor, language skill.

Matthew: Yeah.

Dr. Caraway: That simple teasing game, built into daily living, is a perfect example of how children naturally

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learn language through meaningful, loving interactions with their caregivers. All babies closely listen to their parents talk and then practice imitating their words, actions, and intonation. In fact, babies want to communicate even before they're able to pronounce full words.

And parents can help them by interacting, and playing teasing games, like Matthew and Sarah did. And by serving and returning throughout the day. A serve and return interaction is like playing tennis with communication. You can think of a serve as any time your baby tries to communicate with you. It could be through a smile, a movement, vocalizing, or babbling. Then you return the communication back to them, responding to their communication. All babies need serve and return interactions to grow their brains for listening and speaking, but babies who have hearing loss, especially need that practice.

When the time comes, nothing sounds sweeter than those first few words of spoken language. And for bilingual families like Mercedes and her husband's, they get to celebrate those first moments of listening and speaking twice. We met them in the first episode, when they were dealing with the shock of their son, Kevin's diagnosis. Their younger daughter Keily was also born with hearing loss.

Tell me about Keily's activation day, when her implant was activated and turned on.

Mercedes:

Kevin, my husband, and I were there. So it was so nice, because when she got activated, it was so nice. Kevin, he was the first to talk to her. And you know, telling little things and, "Oh, Keily. Hi, how are you? I'm your brother." You

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know. And she was kind of smiling like she knew.

- Dr. Caraway: Wow, that had to be really special for you!
- Mercedes: Special. We have that on video, actually. It's so nice.
- Dr. Caraway: Aw.
- Mercedes: It's so nice.
- Dr. Caraway: That's wonderful. And so what was going through your mind when you heard Kevin, your first born, who has cochlear implants—
- Mercedes: Talking to her.
- Dr. Caraway: Talking to him, and having Keily react.
- Mercedes: Nice, nice. Like [inaudible] telling you. I also had to mention, that for me, every parent, we always wait for the first word, for the first walk, for the first. But for me, it really was a big, big, big thing. Like, "Oh, wow, every day is a gift." Especially when they start talking. Every day, until now, I see Keily singing, she loves [to] sing. And she has a Karaoke, and you hear her in the microphone singing. It's a gift. My heart really beats so fast. It's so nice, it's so nice.
- Dr. Caraway: Yeah. When she does karaoke, what does she like to sing?
- Mercedes: Oh, she likes, "This girl is on fire... "
- Dr. Caraway: Oh, that's perfect! That's a great theme song.
- Mercedes: Yes, she [loves] that song. She [loves] that song, and she [likes] different songs. The first one was *Frozen*, and now it's this song. She

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always sings that song. She love actually singing, she loves that. And I'm telling you, she's a very smart girl. She has a perseverance in her. Nothing, nothing [stops] her.

Dr. Caraway: Is Kevin learning Spanish? Is he—

Mercedes: He knows Spanish.

Dr. Caraway: O.K.

Mercedes: Because at home, even the babysitter that we have, she speaks only Spanish. My parents also come sometimes, and they visit. They don't speak English at all. So they practice Spanish with them. They do it. And I always tell them, "All the family, we are from Mexico, and all the family speak only Spanish. So you really have to speak Spanish." And they like it. So I really want them to be bilingual. I think it's very important to be bilingual.

Dr. Caraway: And I think that's the terrific news today is that children, even those that are profoundly deaf, they can speak more than one spoken language.

Mercedes: Yes. And actually I have to mention also, that he's going to high school now. He always thought he was a superhero because [of] his implants. Like, "I'm bionic, so I have powers." And that really helped him so much going through his childhood and [thinking] that he is a superhero.

Dr. Caraway: Yeah, well, and today, in today's world, ear technology is cool anyway.

Mercedes: Yes.

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- Dr. Caraway: And so then if you're a superhero on top of it, that makes you super cool. Right?
- Mercedes: Yes, yes, so he always [says] he used to look [at] his hair and all that. And he [said], "I don't really want to look handsome. I like to look cool." So you see, in that time he [said], oh you know, he [loves] his implants. And if people look at him or whatever, he always explains, "Oh, this, they help me to hear." And he [keeps] going.
- Dr. Caraway: Well, wow, you've really provided amazing language learning opportunities for your children. Because with the implants and with pursuing Listening and Spoken Language outcome, you have them speaking Spanish, and you also have them singing.
- Activation day isn't the only time families on the LSL journey celebrate. When children start reaching listening and speaking milestones, it can feel like celebration after celebration. For children who don't need cochlear implants, like Ketty's daughter Nura, there are other events that bring joy and mark progress as well.
- Can you roll back the clock and think about, what were some of Nora's first words and two-word phrases?
- Ketty: She did know a couple of Spanish words then. So she would say something like, "Mom meche.... Mom leche, Mom milk." But as you can tell from "Mom leche," "Mom *meche*" is not really there. One of the first phrases, questions she would say, "What happy?" for "What happened?" And it was one of the first times she would actually use a whole facial expression. "What happy?" It was so cute. I should have recorded it. The "What happy?"

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was her very favorite expression. Dear God, she couldn't stop asking that.

The moment that I completely broke apart was the first time she was able to hold my face and look at me in the eye and say clearly, "I love you, Mommy." That day, I knew that we got through. That she's there. And I was like, "Wow."

Dr. Caraway:

When she said, "I love you, Momma". Do you remember where you were, or how that came about, that she looked you in the face and said that to you? What was going on then?

Ketty:

I was feeding her, and she just grabbed my face and looked at me and just told me.

Dr. Caraway:

So it was very spontaneous.

Ketty:

It was very spontaneous. It's not like I was hugging her or telling her cute things. She just looked at me, with a happy face, and really looked at me, like looking at someone's eyes and connecting and saying something. For me to see that she understood exactly what she was telling me, that she had that true, strong connection of emotion and verbal expression... It was magnificent.

Dr. Caraway:

You waited many months to hear that.

Ketty:

Years. Years, and I know people say, "Oh, but that's so beautiful." But coming not only from my daughter, who was missing something in the connection of the emotion and the words, with who truly was having a hard time learning to speak properly and making sense of her words. It was, it was really outstanding. Not only did it fill me up with these outrageous emotions like, "My baby loves me for real," but

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that moment of realization that we sort of like opened holding that wall.

This was not an aloof child anymore. This was a child who is now open, is open to the world, is open to what's happening. And it was never stopping after that. She couldn't stop talking. I remember, I would tell my mother, "Oh my gosh, what did they do to her? She cannot stop talking; she talks more than me." My mom would say, "That's impossible. Nobody talks more than you." And then she came to visit that year, and Nura was just chatty. And she's like, "I never thought [I'd see] the day, someone talks more than you. She does." Like, "Yep, she does."

Dr. Caraway:

That's great. That had to be a very proud moment.

Ketty:

Very proud moment.

Dr. Caraway:

Yeah.

Ketty:

Yeah, let her talk.

Dr. Caraway:

Yes.

Today ,we have excellent ways of measuring how well our children are reaching developmental milestones. Those metrics—the size of their vocabulary, how well they pronounce words, and how they put words together in a sentence to express their thoughts— are really important. But more than that, we hope hearing from these families is a good reminder to take time to recognize and celebrate the sweet moments and the connections you're able to build as a family.

In episode five, our parents will share words of wisdom, and the tips and tricks they've learned along the way. And we'll learn a bit more about the importance of advocacy.

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