

Powering Potential Podcast

Season 2, Episode 3: School Days

Peter:

I was the first one in Edmond public schools, like, to be in the normal classroom. For my family, it's super important that I got an education like everybody else did, like every other kid did. And being a trailblazer, [being] in that classroom [with kids who have normal hearing], it just exposed me to being the only one [with hearing loss]. It exposed me to having to explain to people [about hearing loss]; it exposed me to having people stare at me on the first day of school, the first day at a job, and everything like that and just being able to work my way through that.

Dr. Teresa Caraway:

Peter isn't the only teen with hearing loss blazing trails. In fact, today the majority of children with hearing loss attend classes and play sports in mainstream schools right alongside their hearing friends. The Listening and Spoken Language approach allows them to integrate into the hearing world right from the start and that head start can make all the difference for success later in life.

Welcome to Season Two of *Powering Potential*, a podcast from Hearing First where we explore the unique joys and challenges of growing up with hearing loss. I'm Dr. Teresa Caraway, your host, a mother, and a speech-language pathologist specializing in Listening and Spoken Language. In Season Two, we'll get to know six incredible teens and young adults who are learning to navigate the hearing world as individuals with hearing loss. Most parents of children with hearing loss want what Peter's parents wanted for him, namely the best mainstream education available. While a

specialized school is the right decision for some families, most children with hearing loss can thrive in a mainstream setting with simple accommodations and a little help from their friends. In this episode, we'll learn more about what it takes to go mainstream, what accommodations are needed in the classroom early on, and how our young friends explain their hearing technology to classmates and teachers. I asked Connor to go back in time and tell us about those first few days at school as the only kid with hearing technology.

- Connor: I have a memory of the first time wearing hearing aids and it was, you know, being back in, like, the cubby area and discovering what feedback was, where I put my hands up and I could make them squeal. And I was like, "Oh my gosh, this is squealing." And I remember kind of doing that. I don't know if that was the first day, but that's really kind of one of my first memories in class.
- Dr. Caraway: Do you remember what the other classmates ... Did they have any reaction to you walking in with hearing aids? Do you ever remember a time when they asked you about your hearing aids?
- Connor: Oh man. In kindergarten there was just a lot of interest. I think other people wanted to have hearing aids 'cause it was cool, you know, 'cause—
- Dr. Caraway: Ear candy, right?
- Connor: Yeah it was really cool. They looked cool. They, you know, they were the future. And so that was what was really cool is, you know, just having—
- Dr. Caraway: So, when you're 4 or 5 years old and you're in kindergarten and kids ask you about your hearing

aids ... Do you remember what you said when you were little? How you explained them?

Connor: I remember my mom used to always tell me to say, you know, "I can't hear very well. They help me hear better," and that's what I used to tell people whenever I was in kindergarten. So that's what I did.

Dr. Caraway: So did you ever have a time when you ... [when] your mom made you wear your hearing aids, [a time] that you had to wear your hearing aids [even when you didn't want to?] Or did you always want to wear them?

Connor: I can only think of about two times in my life whenever I was at school that I did not wear my hearing aids. I've always been supported by people who were encouraging. There were two times in middle school that I didn't want to wear my hearing aids. And I think that that kind of largely stemmed from some bullying behavior or people making fun of it.

Dr. Caraway: Do you think that in middle school now, looking back, that we all have something that kids pick on to make fun of us about?

Connor: So I tell my own patients ... I often, often have parents say, "Oh, can I talk to you about something?" And it's always about the bullying. And I always tell my patients, especially [at] that age, there's going to be something. There's always something that they're going to pick on, whether it's big eyes, big nose, big teeth, bad breath. It's going to be something, you know. I think, I honestly think having a hearing loss is a blessing, and you're very lucky to have a hearing loss. The best thing you can know is that the hearing aids at the end of

the day are for you, that they're there to help you and you know, you can be your best self when you wear the hearing aids. Whether you're in a bad family life or you're in a bad school life or whatever it is, you know, wearing those hearing aids are what's going to help you be the best person that you can be. Why would you want to be a lesser version of yourself without them? So—

Dr. Caraway:

Connor's story reminds us that there's a lot we can't control on the LSL journey, including how other kids at school react to your child's hearing devices, whether that means hearing aids or cochlear implants. In one scenario, hearing technology can lend almost a celebrity status for a little kid. Though later on, that celebrity status can become a reason for bullying. But what's most important is the advice Connor gives to his young patients and their families: Your child's attitude and ability to self-advocate helps tremendously in challenging situations like the one he faced.

Connor's perspective that his hearing loss is a blessing became a powerful tool on his journey, one that any child can cultivate with the help of his parents and support team. We'll dig in to how a child can become a self-champion in episode four. Zach's approach is pretty straightforward when it comes to explaining his hearing technology to kids at school. Let's hear how he breaks it down for them.

Zach:

For the first couple years of school, I wouldn't say that the kids looked at me as different, but it was definitely a question that I got asked a lot over and over. You know, "What are those things in your ears?" But at school ... itself, I was just like any other normal preschooler.

- Dr. Caraway: And what would you tell ‘em?
- Zach: I told them they were hearing aids. A lot of times, you know, younger kids, even today, they'll be like, “Why do you have Play-Doh in your ears?” Stuff like that. I think it's hilarious.
- Dr. Caraway: But they ask if you have Play-Doh [in your ears] because of the ear molds?
- Zach: Yeah, it's colorful.
- Dr. Caraway: That's funny. So what do you tell them when they ask you, “Do you have Play-Doh ... ?”
- Zach: You know, now I tell them, “Yeah. Yeah, I have Play-Doh in my ear.” But back then I was really kind of hard about getting my point across that they, were hearing aids, not Play-Doh, but now I just don't [care].
- Dr. Caraway: So tell me about, you know, so you start ... You went to preschool, pre-K, kindergarten and you're all ... you're going to school with hearing friends, with hearing peers.
- Zach: Yeah.
- Dr. Caraway: Okay. Did you ever have a time in school where you used your hearing aids as show and tell or you explained to your class what they were? Or showed them the parts?
- Zach: I would say I never, like, it would have to be, like, a one-on-one thing. Of course people would ask, you know, “What is that?” I'd tell them and that's the end of it. They'd ... you know, and there's even been times where people that I've gone to school with for the past 12 years asked me, you know,

“What are those?” And I'm, like, [telling them what they are, and they're], like, “Oh, I didn't realize that you were deaf.” So, it's not like ... People don't really look at that, but if they do, I just straight up tell them [what they are and] they're like, “Okay.”

Dr. Caraway:

For Zach and so many other kids, hearing loss is almost a non-issue in their daily lives at school. It's incredible that many of Zach's classmates see him not as the kid with hearing technology but see him for who he really is: just another kid. While it's getting easier to go under the radar at a mainstream school, many kids with hearing loss do need some accommodations in class and on the field, especially in the early years. The most common accommodations are sitting at the front of the classroom or asking teachers and coaches to use remote microphone technology. It's also called an FM system or mini mic. Essentially, the teacher wears a small microphone and their voice is sent directly into the child's hearing technology. It makes it easier for them to hear in noisy environments. Jayden and Harper's families take a proactive approach to getting them the support they need at school.

Did anybody go in and explain to the teachers or to your friends about your hearing aids?

Jayden:

My mom helped me, and we went in there, and so, we used a process, you know that, called mini mic. And so, my mom [took] it to every teacher before school started, and she explained to them how to use it and, you know, how to use it all. And then when school started, I [would] give it to them, and they [would use] it so I [could] hear 100 percent what they are saying. And then after that class I'll take it to the next one.

- Dr. Caraway: Okay. So, you're passing the mini mic for the teacher to wear it, and what [does] the mini mic do? How does that help you?
- Jayden: They say something, and [the mini mic] give[s] me the sound straight in my ear, so I can basically hear exactly what they are saying.
- Dr. Caraway: Do you get nervous about the beginning of the school year ever?
- Harper: Yeah, I always get nervous 'cause I have new teachers and, like, it's a new grade, and it's probably going to be harder, but usually throughout the year I get closer to my teachers and the people in my class.
- Dr. Caraway: Yeah. Yeah. So, I have a question for you. So, like, when you start a school year or start with your teachers, do you ever talk with them about your hearing loss?
- Harper: Yeah, we have a day, like, it's still in the summer, but a couple days before school starts, where it's, like, called Back to School Day or something. My mom and I, we always go and talk to my new teachers and tell them stuff and that's when we tell them that they might need to be a little bit louder in class.
- Dr. Caraway: Before school starts, asking for a meeting with teachers to go over specific ways they can help your child with hearing loss is a great strategy to set them up for success. Taking that extra hour shows both your child and their teachers that you're invested in their school life, and [it] lays the foundation for your child to develop self-advocacy skills. Zach tells us about how important those

early teacher experiences were for him on the journey.

Zach: I mean, especially my elementary teachers, they were really adamant that I knew what was going on and that I was hearing. I think that once you get to about middle school [or] high school, you start to become more independent. The teachers are more focused on teaching the class—[they're] not focused on particularly kids—which isn't bad at all. That's how it should be. So, but yeah, it's the elementary teachers without them ... like definitely—

Dr. Caraway: What did they do specifically that you remember?

Zach: Well, I knew that they always ... they always made sure that I knew that ... you know, I knew what was going on in the class, what they were saying. They'd ask me if I'd hear[d] what they said and what was going on. Yeah. So, we usually have a, usually ... we do have a meeting before every [school] year with all my teachers that I'm going to have [that year]. Of course, at my school, [it's a] small school, so [I] pretty much have the same teachers every year. So [there's] not really much need for that. [But] I would go and basically what would be said is that, you know, "I'm deaf. Make sure that he sits in the front of the room. Make sure that he hears what you're saying, and if he looks lost, go help him." And yeah, that was basically it.

Dr. Caraway: At that point did you talk about the equipment? About the FM system?

Zach: I did yeah. I do remember my meetings in elementary and middle school where you talk[ed] about the usage of that, what it was used for, you

know, [and made] sure that the teachers wore their necklace thing that had the microphone on it.

Dr. Caraway:

Of course teachers are incredibly important for a child's success in school. Another source of support to draw from is maybe an obvious one: a group of friends. Encourage your child to find friends who can watch out for them and lend an ear if needed—especially at times when they can't wear their hearing technology. Harper, Jayden, and Zach explain why that's important.

So what else? You mentioned that your friends ... When you don't have your devices on, do you like that they help you? What else do they do to help you and support you?

Harper:

Sometimes I don't get what they mean, like, I don't get what they're saying. So they write in their Notes [app] on their phone.

Dr. Caraway:

Okay.

Harper:

And then sometimes if we're in the dark and I don't have my ears on, they, like, turn their flashlight on to, like, show their mouth and they're like—

Dr. Caraway:

Oh really? Huh?

Harper:

Yeah.

Dr. Caraway:

So when would you ... Like in the dark when you don't have your devices on ... Would that be like a sleepover or—

Harper:

Yeah, that'd be like when we're going to sleep or in the morning when we had just like, when we just woke up.

- Dr. Caraway: Yeah. So, do [your friends] ever help you hear things better or be your, like, what I call your wing man, to help you make sure you heard something?
- Jayden: Sometimes, like when [my] coach [says] something and I didn't hear it, my friends usually tell me [what was said] so I understand. And then you know, like, [in] basketball when my coach says something [and] I don't hear [it], they tell it to me so I can understand it. And then I go out there and do what I need to do. They help me in a lot of ways. They help me on schoolwork sometimes, help me understand better [the] assignment or homework or stuff [like that]. And then they also help me in sports. When I don't hear [the instructions], they usually tell me [what the teacher said].
- Dr. Caraway: So, talk to me about in terms of hanging out with friends.
- Zach: So you know, a lot of my friends here, they have the same schedule as me. Not, not like the working out, but they do more hours than me, like eight, nine hours lifeguarding, stuff like that. So whenever we come home, we just get on the Xbox and we hang out there.
- Dr. Caraway: So did you ever have sleep ... as [a] younger [kid,] growing up, did you have sleepovers at your house?
- Zach: I did, yeah. I had a lot at my house and my friend's house.
- Dr. Caraway: Yeah. So, and when you had sleepovers, what did you do with your hearing aids?
- Zach: I mean, to be honest, whenever I wanted to go to bed, I would tell him like, "Don't talk to me. I'm

taking them out. I won't be able to hear you. So if you're trying to have a conversation, just don't even try."

Dr. Caraway:

Doing well in mainstream school, making friends with typical hearing, and going on sleepovers can all be par for the course for children who are on the LSL journey. I hope these stories show that it's possible for a child with hearing loss to live a life fully integrated into the hearing world. And that includes playing sports and participating in all the extracurricular activities that make childhood such a special time. Let's hear from Jayden, who takes full advantage of all the activities offered in his mainstream school. He has some clever ways of adapting his hearing technology too so that it doesn't get in the way of his extensive schedule.

Okay. How about when you go swimming in your pool in your backyard? What do you do?

Jayden:

I usually take it off, but there is a swimming, kind of like ... You can put it, your hearing ... [your] cochlear implant inside of [it], but I don't use it because I feel like it might mess it up. I mean I might mess it up because—

Dr. Caraway:

You don't want to take the chance of ruining a processor, right?

Jayden:

Because you have to take everything apart and then you [have] to put it [back together], you know?

Dr. Caraway:

Yeah.

Jayden:

I play the violin at school, and [I am] part of the orchestra. And I've been playing since fifth grade, I think. Yeah, fifth grade because when I got here,

they didn't have an orchestra until, like, fifth grade, so I joined the orchestra.

Dr. Caraway:

That's pretty good. What's the hardest thing about playing the violin?

Jayden:

The rubato is hard, but I learned how to read the note on the note paper for violins, so it's easier to understand. And [now] I know where my fingers go on the violin that connect to the note.

Dr. Caraway:

Peter had quite a full schedule as a high schooler as well. Not only did he play competitive soccer, but he refereed games for younger teams too.

Peter:

Then once I started playing competitive soccer, as I got older, things started to happen. I remember ... I reffed in high school, I reffed soccer in high school, and one of my coworkers, he reffed me when I was a little kid. And he remembered me because there [was] a game that we played when I was, like, 10 or 11. And I was playing and some dude, like, almost kind of elbowed me in the face a little bit. Which, I mean, it wasn't really a foul, but anyway, that wasn't the point. The point is that my microphones fell off, or my cochlear implants ... I call them microphones.

Dr. Caraway:

Yeah, yeah.

Peter:

["Microphones is] just how I grew up saying [cochlear implants] ... But the cochlear implants fell off and down on the grass and the ref completely freaked out. He didn't know what to do because he had never seen anything like that before. And, he always tells me this, that I, like, just picked them up and put them back on my head like it's no big deal. And he was just astounded by that and he's remembered that ever since. He can tell you

exactly where it was on the field, what field, and what complex it happened on.

So, if that happens usually ... Thinking back, I was the goalie for a lot of my high school things, so my coaches never had to talk to me. I was always the one screaming at them. So yeah, I mean I did play in the field sometimes and I was very vocal. And I could hear my teammates pretty well 'cause we're together [on the field]. I can understand the voices 'cause I'm listening for their voices. But for the coaches, a lot of the times if I couldn't hear them. My teammates would just scream at me and point to them, [so] I made a habit of looking at them a lot during throw-ins and goal kicks and substitutions. So if they're trying to tell me something, I can look at them.

Dr. Caraway:

Yeah.

I'd like to close this episode with Kane, who gives a wonderful summary of what's needed to thrive in a mainstream school.

Kane:

I have a lot of good close friends that I'm very blessed with. If I don't hear something in class, they'll help me with that. If I'm just having a rough day, they'll pat me on the back and be like, "Hey it's all right." And then ... 'Cause I used to get so mad if I didn't hear something right. They'd be like, "It's okay. It's not going to change, so just ask us if you need help or anything."

Dr. Caraway:

What do you think has helped you the most to be where you are today?

Kane:

Yeah, my peers. And I have amazing coaches from Premier and my Washington coaches. Coach K is absolutely amazing. He's always with me. My junior

high coach that I had last year, Coach [inaudible], he was always there for me.

Dr. Caraway: So if there were a parent or a student out, you know, [a] kid out there your age that was maybe getting bullied, what advice would you give them?

Kane: We've got to forgive others. Go, just forgive them and just move on because maybe one day, like, their mind will click, and they'll remember that. There's a work ethic in everything. Like hearing, like, if I really want to hear really good, I'm going to have to pay attention more to things more people say and stuff like that. And then, like, if I need more work ethic for baseball, [I need to] like, go hit more or go play catch more. In basketball, I go to the gym and get more shots up. So I think that's work ethic to me.

Dr. Caraway: Finding that solid support team, a good group of friends, and the inner strength to persevere are all key components to thriving in a mainstream school setting. The LSL journey isn't without its bumps in the road, but with these elements in place, it can be so much smoother. Check out episode four of *Powering Potential*, where we explore a theme we've touched on several times so far: helping your child become a self-champion.

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