

How Leighton Is Finding Her Voice



Clarke preschooler Leighton with her parents Spencer and Nina.

Like most caregivers who discover their child was born with a hearing loss, Nina and Spencer worried at first how their infant daughter would communicate and if she would struggle academically and socially.

Thanks to her cochlear implants and a listening and spoken language (LSL) education at Clarke, four-year-old Leighton is an expressive child with a big personality and a budding passion for sports.

Diagnosis and Early Treatment

Leighton failed her newborn hearing screening. Additional testing eventually led to a diagnosis of severe-to-profound hearing loss due to auditory neuropathy spectrum disorder (ANSD).

In a small percentage of cases, ANSD resolves on its own, and the value of hearing aids and cochlear implants can vary for children with ANSD. On her doctor's advice, Leighton started off unassisted and then used hearing aids from the age of one to two. When it became clear that hearing aids were not providing Leighton with enough access to sound, her parents moved forward with her first cochlear implant at age two.

Leighton's sound perception improved dramatically after her first implant and roughly three months later she received her second cochlear implant. Though her sound access significantly improved, her parents knew she'd need intensive therapy. "When my husband was offered a job opportunity and we realized it was close to a Clarke school, we knew relocating would be the best option for her." Nina and Spencer knew that at Clarke, Leighton would get daily individualized speech therapy and that she'd be taught by trained teachers of the deaf.

Finding Clarke, Making Progress



Leighton at Clarke.

Now that Leighton has completed her first year of preschool at Clarke, her parents report tremendous growth in all aspects of her life. "Leighton is incredibly expressive now. The overall improvement in her communication has allowed her outgoing, independent personality to shine through even more. Her teachers say she walks into the classroom at Clarke and says, 'I'm here!' with her arms in the air."

Leighton's parents are astonished at the amount of growth Leighton has achieved at Clarke in just one school year. When she started at Clarke, Leighton was beginning to use basic two-word phrases such as "my turn." Now, Nina reports Leighton is using sentences that are six or seven words long and has even begun some basic reading.

Because of the pandemic, Leighton was on a hybrid schedule for preschool. While in some ways that wasn't ideal, Nina also found it offered additional opportunities for collaboration with the Clarke team.

"The hybrid schedule allowed us to actively participate

and be fully immersed in her virtual speech activities. Watching her firsthand reach new goals with her therapists and teachers each week was priceless. We quickly learned how the simplest activity, like putting on shoes or getting dressed, can become a speech opportunity."

Nina notes that those lessons from speech therapy have become so ingrained in Leighton's day that she now turns the tables and uses them on her parents. "For example, we'll ask her for something, and she'll respond by prompting us to say it again or she'll highlight the key word back to us: 'You want the *apple*?' " says Nina.

Enhancing the Learning Environment at Home



Leighton's family found fun ways to incorporate LSL learning into her love of sports. "...You use so much verbal direction when you're teaching a sport, and we started using those moments to reinforce what they were doing in the classroom," says her mom, Nina.

The most effective way to use LSL techniques is for the family to mirror those lessons at home. Nina and Spencer have done so by using the techniques they learned in early intervention and from Clarke staff to build Leighton's listening and spoken language skills during non-school-based activities.

Nina said one of her favorite activities to do with Leighton is to bake and she's been able to incorporate many LSL techniques into those fun moments. "We have done so many speech therapy sessions in the kitchen," says Nina. "I think most kids love to do stuff in the kitchen. When we make Easter eggs, bake cookies, even just making oatmeal, there are so many steps you can break out—measuring things, finding ingredients, mixing, et cetera—and then you can finish with a treat."

Leighton's parents extended the LSL learning outside of the home as well. Nina and Spencer are both athletes, actively involved in tennis and golf respectively, and Leighton has followed in their footsteps. Those outings have proven to be another great way to incorporate LSL strategies into fun. "She took to both sports quickly. Even with a child who has typical hearing, you use so much verbal direction when you're teaching a sport and we started using those moments to reinforce what they were doing in the classroom," says Nina.

For example, Nina gets weekly updates on the class's lesson plan and Leighton's specific goals. She uses them to guide home-based speech development. "If they're working on prepositions, we'll focus on things like, 'stand *behind* the line, swing *on top* of the ball,'" she said.

(Learn more about [recommended tools and strategies for enhancing LSL development at home.](#))

A Partnership at Home and School

Nina said she appreciates that the frequent updates from Leighton's team at Clarke, in addition to report cards, standardized testing scores and more. "They really keep you updated regarding how your child is progressing and what to anticipate next," she says.

"Words cannot describe the impact that Clarke has made on our family. Any parent of a deaf child knows how disheartening it can be to see a growing language gap between your child and their hearing peers. During her first month at Clarke, I remember speaking with the director and expressing my fears surrounding whether Leighton would ever be able to catch up. After just one year I am now able to see the possibilities are endless for Leighton now that she has the right tools."