

Paving the Way, from Infancy to Kindergarten



Parents share how Clarke's early intervention services prepared their children for mainstream kindergarten—and beyond.



Natalie, five-year-old Clarke alum and kindergartener. “The time Clarke staff spends coaching parents is invaluable,” says her mom, Lauren, “especially on topics like behavior management, education and advocacy, all skills parents of a child with hearing loss need to develop through a very particular lens. It also helps our children build incredible self-esteem, socialization skills and self-advocacy skills to prepare them for the mainstream environment.”

During the summer before kindergarten, many families of young children find themselves inundated with urgent advertisements, blog posts and media coverage about how to ensure their children are ready for kindergarten. The pressure to purchase flash cards, hone basic math skills and practice penmanship can feel a bit like cramming for an exam—and generally misses the point. Kindergarten is a major transition for young children and their families, and the skills required to take this exciting step won't be established with last-minute worksheets and number games.

At Clarke, preparation for kindergarten begins when a family enrolls in our early intervention (EI) services—and ideally before a baby is even six months old. (Clarke’s early intervention services include Toddler Groups, Support Groups and Audiology Services—all designed for families of children from birth to age three.) For children who are deaf or hard of hearing, this early attention to listening, spoken language and pre-literacy skills is crucial. Recent research backs this up.

In a [study of 385 children with permanent hearing loss published by the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine in 2020](#), researchers found that when infants with hearing loss receive early intervention prior to six months of age, they achieve better success in language development and are better prepared for kindergarten.

With support from Clarke’s early intervention specialists, teachers of the deaf, audiologists and speech-language pathologists, many children who come to Clarke are ready to attend mainstream schools by kindergarten—and sometimes even sooner.

Lauren, mother of five-year-old Clarke alum Natalie, recalls their experience at Clarke. “Our daughter, Natalie, received Clarke’s in-home early intervention services as an infant, participated in Clarke’s Toddler Group, and attended Clarke’s preschool, and was able to mainstream by age four! She is currently thriving, and her teachers commented right away on how well prepared she was for school!”

*“Clarke’s entire EI
[early intervention]
program for deaf
children is phenomenal
and provides them
with the skills they and
their families need to
support their
development during an
incredibly crucial
time.”*

— Lauren, mother of Clarke alum Natalie, age five

What Does “Kindergarten Readiness” Mean?

Expectations vary among non-Clarke programs, but in general, kindergarten readiness at a mainstream school includes many pre-academic skills, such as:

Speech, language and literacy skills (e.g., speaking in complete sentences, identifying rhyming words).

Math skills (e.g., counting to 10, classifying objects according to quantity).

Fine and gross motor skills (e.g., bouncing a ball, gripping a pencil).

Social-emotional development and abilities (e.g., following direction, playing independently for up to 10 minutes).

Self-advocacy and repair strategies (e.g., asking for clarification, alerting an adult if technology is not working).

“Thanks to Clarke, Natalie has had age-appropriate receptive and expressive language levels since age two and a half and has been able to maintain her rate of language growth,” Lauren explains. “The twice a week schedule [in Clarke’s Toddler Group] also provided plenty of time for her to be in... a typical daycare, and Clarke supported her and her caregivers there to generalize her skills across settings. By the time our children get to elementary school, where push-in supports can be socially stigmatizing, Clarke children need fewer supports because of the success they begin to build in Clarke’s early intervention services.”

Clarke’s Emphasis on Family Support

A vital component of this EI support at Clarke is family coaching. Families form partnerships with Clarke’s support team, learning how to enrich their baby’s life with meaningful sound and language through personalized family sessions, collaborative services and home, center-based or virtual visits. Families also have regular opportunities to connect with each other, in a structured setting, with a Clarke team member present to support them and offer professional tools and solutions when necessary.



Clarke alum Tommy, now 13, whose mother, Jane, valued connecting with other toddler families at Clarke. “As parents, we immediately bonded with other parents who were going through the exact same thing that we were... It’s hard to put into words how meaningful this connection is even now, and it certainly was so early in our journey.”

“As parents, we immediately bonded with other parents who were going through the exact same thing that we were,” says Jane, mother of 13-year-old Clarke alum Tommy. “To this day, 10 years later, we are still very connected to many of those families and make a point to reunite as often as we can. It’s hard to put into words how meaningful this connection is even now, and it certainly was so early in our journey.”

Kate, mother of eight-year-old Clarke alum Matthew, echoes this. “One of the best aspects of the

program is the opportunity for parents to network with each other. During each [EI] session, parents can observe their children while also chatting with other parents about the specific challenges of raising children with hearing loss.”

“As both a new and inexperienced mother, I felt completely overwhelmed by our son’s hearing loss diagnosis and unequipped with how to help him,” says Sarah, mother of 11-year-old Clarke alum Joey. “The Toddler Group provided much needed emotional support to me and my family as we developed relationships with other families and could observe our child interacting with his peers within his same disability. The Toddler Group created a physical* community where families could share their struggles and best practices with each other while watching their children learn how to participate and function in a preschool classroom environment.”

**In addition to providing in-person support, Clarke offers virtual EI sessions through our tVISIT (teleservices Virtual Intervention Services for Infants and Toddlers) Program to families of children from birth to age three. Learn more at clarkeschools.org/tvisit.*

Self-Advocacy: It's Never Too Early to Start

For students who are deaf or hard of hearing, learning how to advocate for themselves is vital to their success—academically and socially—as they prepare for mainstream settings. For young children in Clarke's EI programming, this training begins with their families.



Joey, 11-year-old Clarke alum.

“Self-advocacy and confidence are so hugely important for these kids,” says Jane. “We were worried about transitioning from the safety of Clarke, where everyone knew about hearing aids and cochlear implants, and knew about teaching deaf kids, to mainstream

schools. But the preparation Tommy had from such an early age made the transition (for him) a non-event. He was happy to show his teachers and his peers how his cochlear implants work.”

Sarah shares a similar experience. “Joey is confident around his hearing peers and has learned how to self-advocate. The self-advocacy training is crucial for young children to start to develop at an early age. Typical hearing children/adults do not realize the challenges that deaf and hard of hearing children have even when aided by technology.”

“Joey would not be as successful without Clarke’s [early intervention services]. The toddler years are so foundational and critical to development for speech. Without the constant instruction, attention and support from the Toddler Group we would not have had the same outcome with our son.”

— Sarah, mother of Clarke alum Joey, age 11

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Success for Every Child



Eight-year-old Clarke alum Matthew.

“Having a child with hearing loss can be a very frightening and isolating experience,” says Kate. “But I knew as soon as Matthew and I participated in our first Toddler Group that this was the place to be in order to provide Matthew and our family with the support that we needed in order to thrive.”

While the goal of the Clarke team is to prepare children to succeed in mainstream classrooms alongside their peers with typical hearing, they also recognize there is no single path that is right for every child. As such, Clarke professionals personalize their support with each family in mind, providing the tools they need to maximize their child’s learning and set them up for a fulfilling future.