Annie Garner's Story

Annie was born without ears, so as her parents we knew immediately that she was Deaf. We began learning sign language before she even left the NICU. Unfortunately, she didn't receive the auditory brainstem response (ABR) test before discharge, delaying her enrollment in the Birth-to-3 Early Intervention program by nearly six months. During that time, we were alone—no one around us knew ASL, and we had only online classes to practice and hope we were learning correctly.

The first six months of parenthood were brutal, despite all our preparation. Our daughter couldn't hear our voices and wouldn't cry when she was hungry. She didn't smile when we were in front of her. As time passed, she continued struggling with eating and wasn't crawling or rolling over. At eight months, she was diagnosed with Optic Nerve Hypoplasia and other vision impairments. That's when we enrolled with the Wisconsin DeafBlind Technical Assistance Program (WDBTAP), which has been a blessing ever since.

Through WDBTAP we were connected with a Deaf Mentor who met with us in person to teach ASL. She is a Deaf woman who uses ASL as her primary language, which was key to understanding the full visual language. She corrected our mistakes and, with patience and grace, helped us learn how to communicate with our daughter. She continues to work with us today as our ASL skills grow.

During this time, Annie received Bone Anchored Hearing Aids (BAHAs), which bypassed her outer ears and gave her limited hearing. But they often caused discomfort—ringing when she leaned back in a car seat or lay down to eat. She continued missing developmental milestones, and her support team had to find new ways to provide speech and vision therapy just to connect with her.

WDBTAP stepped in again through their Lending Library. Her physical therapist recommended sensory tools like "the little room," filled with visual and tactile items to help her connect with her environment. The team regularly explored library resources to find tools that supported her growth and interaction despite multiple disabilities.

Annie is now over three years old, and WDBTAP has supported her every step of the way. The best part has been meeting other families with DeafBlind children. WDBTAP regularly hosts trainings and conferences for families, educators, and specialists. At family events, kids can play and connect with peers who share similar challenges, while parents share experiences, learn from experts, and discover better ways to support their children. This is usually when parents grow and learn the most, and where WDBTAP shines the brightest.

Without these gatherings, many of us feel alone. Social settings are harder when sensory deprivation, intellectual disabilities, and/or physical disabilities are involved, and many of kids have more than one. These events are where families feel seen, understood, and can be themselves without fear of judgement.

We are asking for everyone's help to bring financial stability to this program. It is essential for these kids.

Thank you

Casey, Leah, and Annie Garner