

How Early Intervention Tipped the Scales in the Right Direction for James

James was born with a cleft lip and cleft palate. The openings in his upper lip and roof of his mouth made feeding extremely difficult. At six months old, he had surgery at Boston Children's Hospital to repair his cleft lip. The surgery was successful, but James still had challenges with eating. His parents, James and Kelley, were concerned he was missing growth milestones because he was not getting the nutrition he needed.

James's pediatrician referred James and Kelley to Easterseals New Hampshire's Early Supports and Services (ESS). They began weekly one-on-one sessions with ESS therapist Cristina Bernich that focused on bottle feeding. "James was very uncomfortable and had severe reflux. There was no easy way for him to suck on a bottle," Cristina says. "He wanted to eat but could not easily control it because of the structure of his mouth."

Cristina helped James's parents learn how to hold him properly and pace his feeding so he was able to keep his formula down. Between sessions, the couple reached out to her for advice and sent her videos of James's

successes. "It felt like she was 'our person,'" James says. "Even though we knew she had other patients, it felt like we were her top priority." Cristina continued to work with the family after James had a second surgery to repair his cleft palate.

Cristina, a licensed pediatric speech-language pathologist since 1997 and part of the Easterseals ESS team since 2020, has worked with many families who have had children

born with cleft lip and palate, as well as other craniofacial differences. "James's family stood out to me immediately, their warmth and patience with James's struggles to eat and communicate are a beautiful testament to how much of a difference gentle, informed, and patient parenting can make," she says.

Without Easterseals, James's family likely would have had

to drive to Boston every week for therapy. James is convinced his son would not have gotten the same type of personalized care. He believes Cristina's knowledge, accessibility, and availability helped James catch up quickly.

"The family celebrates every small step James makes and they rallied their community for

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*—James, parent of ESS client James,
about ESS therapist Cristina*

support,” Cristina says. “His progress has been stellar, thanks to his parents following every suggestion and recommendation and with his successful cleft palate repair earlier this year.”

Today, James is a healthy toddler and a good eater who appreciates everything from sushi to quesadillas. He continues to see Cristina once a month to fine tune his skills and monitor his speech.

“Now we can’t stop him from eating,” Kelley says with a laugh.



James dining out with his family.

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