

When there's no guidebook:

How Easterseals New Hampshire helped Otto and his family

The 2020 holiday season was one that mom Kirsten and her family will never forget. Her then 18-month-old son, Otto, was rushed to the emergency room on Thanksgiving. He was diagnosed with meningitis, an infection that causes inflammation of the tissue around the brain and spinal cord. He would spend the next two weeks in the hospital.

A week after Otto's discharge, Kirsten, over eight months pregnant with her second child, took Otto to the doctor for a follow-up appointment. There, the doctor determined that Otto's bout with meningitis had left him profoundly deaf. He had gone from a vocabulary of about 30 words before his illness to being nonverbal. On Christmas Eve, he underwent emergency surgery in preparation for getting cochlear implants.

After a consultation on New Year's Eve, Otto had implant surgery on January 7. Six days later, Otto's brother was born. For anyone, a newborn and a toddler would be a handful. Kirsten and her husband, Anthony, also had Otto's recovery to navigate. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic was surging. As Kirsten says, "It was a shock. We didn't know where to go."

Otto's pediatrician referred the family to the Moore Center in Manchester, New Hampshire. From there, they were referred to Easterseals New Hampshire's Early Supports & Services (ESS) program.

Otto began speech therapy, along with occupational therapy for the vertigo he

was still experiencing from the meningitis infection. Most of Otto's speech appointments centered on play therapy to help him learn

American Sign Language (ASL). While Otto worked with his therapist at ESS, his family also went to class. They took 16 weeks of ASL classes at Northeast Deaf and Hard of Hearing Inc.

Otto had a dedicated set of toys assigned to him at in-person appointments.

Kirsten says the most important toys in his collection represented sounds that were key to tracking his progress.

And the progress has been significant since Otto started with ESS. At 30 months, Otto "speaks more now than he signs," Kirsten says. "Within the last 10 months or so, he's started getting back on track developmentally," she says. "He's now scoring age-appropriately in terms of verbal expression."

Soon, Otto may even be ready to join his peers at a local preschool. It's a goal he's working on with his therapists.

"It has really gone well," says Kirsten of Otto's therapy at ESS. "We're thankful these services were available. There was no guidebook on what to do. Just having that support in helping you get where you need to be has been a relief for us."

