



Baby, can you HEAR ME?

Within days of being born, it became clear that baby Felix couldn't hear. His mum Jo tells his remarkable story...

Felix was barely 24 hours old when the NSW Statewide Infant Screening – Hearing (SWISH) Program screener came into our hospital room for a routine test. She put earphones on his ears and electrodes on his head to test if there were brainwave changes when he heard sound. Felix's test showed no response, but, after the screener explained that it might be because of mucus in his ears after the birth, I wasn't too concerned.

A few days later another test was done, with no response. Again, it wasn't uncommon for a baby to have two negative tests but Felix would need a full hearing test.

A few weeks later we drove up to Sydney for the tests. All my husband, David, and I could

do was watch the specialist's computer screen and hope for some kind of response. Nothing. At the end of the testing the specialist told us Felix was profoundly deaf. I was confused. What did 'profoundly' mean? Where was it on the scale of things? He then said he would get a social worker to speak to us – which made me think it must be bad, really bad.

The social worker explained that hearing loss is often classified in different categories – mild, moderate, severe and profound. With profound deafness, even the loudest sounds produced by an audiometer may not be detected. She said Felix would need to be fitted with hearing aids but as he was profoundly deaf, it was



unlikely the aids would help. She mentioned cochlear implants. A cochlear implant is a highly technical medical device that gives a sense of sound to someone who is profoundly deaf or severely hard of hearing. It is made up of two parts. One part is surgically implanted in the inner ear, the other part sits outside, behind the ear. Before even being considered for cochlear implants, you must prove that hearing aids will have no benefit.

Getting help

The trip home was dreadful. I cried most of the way. Actually,

I cried most nights for months afterwards. I was terrified about Felix's development. I grieved the loss of a perfect child. I worried about the kind of future my baby would have. Would children make fun of him? Would he reach his full potential?

I worried about the impact it would have on our oldest child, Amelie. She was almost three at the time and I fretted that she wouldn't understand the attention surrounding her new sibling. As it turns out she has been wonderful. She's a natural helper and loves interacting with her little brother.

Felix was fitted with hearing aids and we started early intervention. Early intervention is all about learning as much as possible, as early as possible, while the brain is still developing. We chose The Shepherd Centre

we had to wait until he was five months old before they would operate. Even then he was one of the youngest babies in Australia to have both implants put in at the same time. The latest research shows that putting two implants in at the same time, rather than one at a time, has better results.

By far the hardest part of the process was the surgery. I tried to prepare myself but after laying my baby on an operating table and watching him go under the anaesthetic I was a mess. Four long hours later Felix came out of surgery and we were told it had been a success. At this point just the internal parts of the implants were in place. The outside parts, which sit just behind the ears, would be fitted and the devices switched on after the surgery wounds healed.

“Felix was sucking his dummy when the testing started. As soon as the first beep sounded he stopped sucking. My heart was in my mouth. He had heard something!”

because of its family-centred program that focuses on teaching deaf and hearing-impaired children how to listen and speak through Auditory-Verbal Therapy (AVT). AVT aims to develop age-appropriate speech and language skills in young children to enable them to integrate into their local schools. Surprisingly, the centre receives only 30 per cent of its funding from the Government. The other 70 per cent is raised via donations. To find out you are relying on people's generosity to help your child is humbling.

We go to the centre for an hour each week for a one-on-one lesson with a teacher. She works on specific areas of development and teaches me how to incorporate his therapy into our daily life.

A new beginning

Felix was three-and-a-half months old when he was given the all clear for cochlear implants but

A few weeks later we were ready for the implants to be turned on. Felix was sucking his dummy when the testing started. As soon as the first beep sounded he stopped sucking his dummy. My heart was in my mouth. He had heard something! He went back to sucking his dummy. Another beep. He stopped again! They soon switched on a microphone so he could hear my voice. When I spoke to him you could see he was trying to work out what was going on. David and I were elated.

Hear, hear!

Felix will never hear what we hear – the sounds produced by the implants don't have the richness of human voice and are quite electronic, sometimes described as robotic. But Felix's progress has been nothing short of amazing. He is now 18 months old and in the 99th percentile of understanding and speaking. He



(Top) Mum Jo, big sister Amelie, little Felix and dad David. (Below) Felix at 18 months who talks like a two-and-a-half year old!



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is talking like a two-and-a-half year old. To see Felix smile and laugh and talk in baby sentences has made all the heart-rending decisions and sleepless nights worth it. My happiest moments are when Amelie and Felix chatter along as they play together. It makes my day, every day.

Early intervention needs funding

Services for hearing impaired children need to be adequately funded, states First Voice, a coalition of hearing health services. According to cochlear implant inventor Professor Graeme Clark, infants with severe to total hearing loss who are given quality auditory-verbal therapy early on, and access to technology, can do just as well in mainstream schools as their hearing peers. For more information visit www.firstvoice.org.au