

Eastern Iowa News Now

What's Happening Now

Making house calls: UI research study seeks to help children with mild to severe hearing loss

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CEDAR RAPIDS — Haley Walstrom's pretty pink hearing aids are the only clues that the 7-year-old has a hearing impairment.

The Prairie Heights first-grader speaks articulately about her many friends and her favorite school subject: reading.

"She really works hard and has never had any speech problems," said her mother, Michele Walstrom of Cedar Rapids.

The same isn't true for all children with hearing impairment.

Much research has been conducted on children with complete hearing loss, but a new University of Iowa study is investigating how best to help children in the mild to severe range, like Haley.

Michele, 39, and Dean Walstrom, 44, found out through a state-required birth screening that Haley was born with enlarged vestibular aqueduct syndrome, a birth defect in which the inner ear is malformed.

The cause is unknown.

She has mild to moderate hearing loss in her left ear and severe loss in her right ear.

Knowing from the beginning about her hearing impairment allowed the couple to find coping mechanisms to help their daughter.

They learned sign language, took Haley to an audiologist and once she enrolled in school, found other accommodations, including an FM system that Haley's teachers wear to transfer their voices directly to her hearing aids.

While Haley is well-adjusted, her parents wanted to do more.

They enrolled her in the UI hearing study last summer.

The study, based in the UI Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders, also includes Boys Town National Research Hospital in Nebraska and the University of North Carolina.

Marlea O'Brien, study coordinator for all three sites, said nearly 200 participants have been recruited.

Researchers hope to enroll another 200 in the next year.

Two mobile testing vans allow researchers to travel statewide in Iowa to assess children ages 6 months to 6 years old with permanent hearing loss in both ears, ranging from mild to severe.

The goal is to find the best ways to help children advance their speech, language, social and academic skills.

O'Brien said parents of participants so far have been grateful for the chance to enroll in the study and to find out what they can do for their children.

Having the two vans in Iowa provides an easy way for families to participate, she said.

Normally, people must travel to Iowa City or elsewhere to enroll in research studies.

Participation involves at least one visit per year for three years.

Researchers evaluate the child's hearing and communication abilities.

O'Brien said study results are shared with the family and school professionals, if desired.

The study is funded by the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, part of the National Institutes of Health.

Michele Walstrom said the research findings may not benefit her daughter, but she hopes it will for others.

“My husband and I really feel strongly there needs to be more information available about hearing-impaired children,” she said. “We just feel like this is an area that hasn’t had a lot of attention and needs it.”



Haley Walstrom and her mother, Michele, are shown at their home in Cedar Rapids last week. Haley is enrolled in a UI study on hearing. (photo/Liz Martin)

To participate

For more information on the hearing study, e-mail Marlea O’Brien at marlea-obrien@uiowa.edu or call 1-(800) 551-5601 or visit www.ochl-study.org

Eligible children must be from a home where at least one caregiver speaks English. There is no requirement that the child use hearing aids. Compensation to participants is available.



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