

Chairperson Roberts and members of the committee, for the record, my name is Sara Groves (G-R-O-V-E-S) and I live in Helena.

When my son, Peter, was about 15 months old, I began having concerns about his development because he wasn't talking – nor was he babbling. My older son was an early talker and could carry on in long paragraphs by the time he was Peter's age, which made Peter's silence all the more disturbing. But when I asked my pediatrician about it, he said that with all of the talking going on in our house, Peter probably just didn't have a chance to get a word in edgewise. Peter would talk eventually, my pediatrician assured me.

But I couldn't help being concerned because months passed and nothing changed. Then when Peter was about 20 months old, I attended a conference that focused on early childhood development. As I sat in the audience, the nationally-renowned speaker ticked through a list of milestones that the average 18 month-old should be able to do – and Peter had not reached a single milestone. I remember feeling sick to my stomach as I sat there realizing that something was seriously wrong with my child.

When I returned from the conference, I immediately called my pediatrician and demanded that Peter be officially evaluated. He referred us to Family Outreach, which sent a caseworker to our house to observe Peter and ask questions about his developmental milestones. Once their evaluation was complete, it became very clear that Peter had a significant developmental delay.

Peter was then sent to be evaluated by a speech therapist, a physical therapist, and an occupational therapist. He was diagnosed with verbal apraxia, a neurological disorder that impairs one's physical ability to speak (though Peter understood language perfectly), and with a sensory integration disorder, another neurological disorder that essentially means his brain wasn't processing input from his five senses correctly.

It was recommended that Peter receive speech therapy at least once a week for the verbal apraxia, occupational therapy once a week for the sensory integration disorder, and check-ins with a physical therapist every few months to make sure his gross motor skills stayed on track.

The next step was how to pay for all of this care. My husband is a social worker with the state and I work part-time at the State Library – we don't make much money, as you might imagine – but we did have health insurance. In spite of Peter's diagnosis and his prognosis, which was very good if he received the therapy he needed, our insurance company denied all coverage; they refused to pay for one single appointment of Peter's treatment.

Can you imagine? There was something wrong with our child and without treatment, Peter would not get better. With treatment, Peter's outlook was very positive; all of the therapists who evaluated Peter expected him to make excellent progress over time. But our insurance company, which receives approximately \$1400 a month to cover our family, denied coverage of the services we needed to help our baby. We thought about refinancing our house so that Peter had a fighting chance, but thankfully Family Outreach agreed to take Peter on as a client.

And so we began. Family Outreach assigned Karla Hood, a truly remarkable woman, to be our caseworker and, after moving up on waiting lists, we began our regimen of weekly appointments with a speech therapist and an occupational therapist. Karla also visited our home about twice a month, checking in to see how we all were doing, giving suggestions, and constantly evaluating Peter.

For months, it seemed that Peter made no progress – that we were getting nowhere – and that he'd forever be mute. If you've never had a child with a developmental delay or disability, I think it is hard to imagine the frustration and disappointment that goes along with that. I just remember being so overwhelmingly sad about my baby's life; I would walk to work, just weeping for his inability to do the things other "normal" kids could do – like ask for what they want, tell someone they love them – even chew and swallow food,

Thankfully, Karla and Peter's therapists were always there with an understanding ear. They assured me that Peter had, in fact, made progress. They reaffirmed that someday Peter would be able to talk, that once he started, it would be as if someone flipped a switch in his brain and he'd be off and running. They always answered my many questions and their belief that Peter would someday speak kept me going when things felt hopeless.

And then, one day, Peter talked. He opened his mouth and words came tumbling out. After that, it was just as Peter's therapist had said it would be: like someone had flipped a switch in his brain. At the beginning of the month, Peter had four intelligible words. By the end of that month, he had hundreds.

We continued with our therapy through Family Outreach until Peter was three. By that time, Peter's occupational therapy had helped his sensory integration disorder enough that he was functioning pretty normally and as his parents, we had also received enough education through his therapist to continue to help him. Regarding his speech, in less than a year, Peter had progressed from having four words to talking in paragraphs. Before he could talk, I remember thinking that I would never take a single word he said for granted. But it didn't take long until there were times that I actually asked him to be quiet as his incessant chatter filled the house, the car, the grocery store – wherever we were.

Because Peter was still difficult to understand, it was recommended that we continue to take him to speech therapy twice a week through the school district, which we have done for the last year, though next Tuesday, I am signing the papers to end treatment as Peter now has advanced skills, in all areas of development, for his age.

Peter turned four last month and it is truly hard to believe that two years ago, I was convinced my baby would never talk and that the most I could hope for is a child who was always behind in school and in life. Today, he wants to be a veterinarian – a word he can actually say. But no matter what he grows up to be, I know that he wouldn't have ever gotten there without the early intervention services provided by Family Outreach. Thank you.