

Podcast Transcript: Adam Metcalfe

- Hello, and welcome to this week's NextSense Institute podcast. My name's Trudy Smith, and I am your host for today. We're continuing our series for hearing awareness week and talking to families about the importance of family centred early intervention and where informed choice fits within that. And really excited to have Adam with us today to talk about the journey that he, his daughter Anja, and their family has been on. So welcome Adam, thanks for being with us. We'll get started by if you could just tell us a little bit about you and your family please.

- Sure thing, hey Trudy. So our family is currently made up of my myself, Lucy, my partner, Anja, and just recently a little five month old called Locklan as well.

- Welcome Locklan.

- Yes.

- Your life is very busy then.

- Absolutely.

- Okay, and we're here predominantly to talk about the journey that you've been on with Anya. Did you your family have any personal history of people with hearing loss before Anja was born?

- Absolutely not. So my family has, we've all had hearing throughout our entire family. We looked at our family history and there's never been any indicators of hearing loss prior to and Anja being born. So, yeah, it's very new to us.

- Hmm, I can imagine. So what advice and support did you receive when Anja was diagnosed with hearing loss?

- Yeah, it was interesting. When she was born, we went through the, I guess the now standard switch test to firstly identify that she did have a challenge there, and we got that notification, and from about a month after that, we ended up getting a more official diagnosis. And from there, we got given a lot of paperwork, a lot of printouts, a lot of photocopies and a lot of written notes with phone numbers and emails of people who we could talk to. We also got in contact with somebody from Australian Hearing as well to help us on that journey. In terms of advice, it was, I think initially when we got the diagnosis, the first bit of advice was basically to go get another test and then go get another test. We didn't actually get a decision, or we didn't actually think about a decision for Anja until probably about when she was about nine months old. So from diagnosis to sort of a plan was probably, yeah, probably about six or seven months.

- Sure.

- Yeah.

- Okay. And you made the decision to use Auslan?

- Yes.

- Correct, yeah.

- Can you tell us a little bit about what that journey has been like and what informed that decision and how that's been for you?

- Yeah. So when Anja was diagnosed, the diagnosis, once we did the further tests was that she would be profoundly deaf bilaterally. And so there was two decisions actually we ended up making, the first one was the cochlear implant. And the understanding was that that was going to be a 50/50 chance of success for Anja. But even prior to that decision, I'd already decided myself that I wanted to use Auslan to communicate with her.

- Mm-hmm.

- And so the decision was actually quite easy to decide to do that. Yeah, I think that decision of sort of going into this sort of bilingual world was really easy for me. And in my head, my justification was that I wanted to give Anja both options access to, because she qualified access to a hearing world, but also access to sign language as well. And yeah, I'm really happy that I that I made that decision because as it turns out, her primary method of communication is Auslan.

- Mm-hmm.

- And so, that's very interesting. We have days where Auslan only and we have days where we're Auslan and talking. It's even better when we're in a busy shopping centre or something like that.

- It must be so helpful.

- Yeah, 'cause we can sign to each other and talk without having to shout at each other, which is very nice.

- Absolutely.

- Yeah.

- Yeah, you can tell her to drop that chocolate from across the shopping centre. It's very useful

- As yeah, absolutely.

- That's great. And so when did you learn, you and your family learn sign language?

- Yeah, learning, so I think learning for us was one of the hardest things to get access to when we started. At the time, this was also around the time when the NDIS was coming in and the Better Start at the time funding was going out. Yeah. And so getting access to the funding was a little bit tough but it was just through perseverance and extra documentation. In terms of learning it, I actually started with an app on my phone.

- Mm-hmm.

- Which was an Auslan app and also on the computer. So I looked up the Auslan dictionary online.

- Yeah.

- And just started with some basic words.

- Mm-hmm.

- Other things that I used was also, actually I jumped on the website for the RIDBC, now NextSense and found a number of links to some YouTube videos and things like that, showing kids signing. And that was just like really beautiful, not only beautiful to watch, but also educational as well.

- Yep.

- And that actually helped with things like rainbow and colours and birds and dogs and cats and all of those kinds of things. And so my learning was, in some ways, I always felt like I was only a week ahead of my daughter.

- Yep.

- But yeah, it was through not only repetition myself, so self-taught initially, but also then talking to, then also signing to Anja and helping her make the link. The other thing I did is I found out about some courses through another website and I did to an introductory and a sort of intermediate course as well, which was really powerful in helping to get the positioning of the hands.

- Yep.

- Correctly.

- Yeah, even like that grammar, that the way that you think different.

- Yes.

- I completely understand.

- Yeah.

- Why you would have Auslan only days because having to use English in or Auslan and English word order can be really tricky. So.

- Absolutely, yeah.

- Yeah.

- And so we end up, yeah, subjective and objective kind of modes of thought, which for me being a good deal older than Anja obviously is a little tougher. But I do feel like the fact that Anja has grown up with both basically from birth or from about six to nine months old, she's actually really benefited from both modes of communication. Yeah

- Sure. And does everyone in your family sign? And broader extended family as well?

- Yeah. So when my mom and dad found out, so Anya's grandma and grandpa, they immediately took Auslan classes, they were living in Queensland and they took Auslan classes as well. And through technology as well. So through video calls on the phone, we're actually able to sign to each other as well. And so Anja's never really felt left out of the conversation.

- That's so important. That's fantastic.

- Yeah. And yeah, my mom and dad love to sign to her as well, and they love to share with her new signs that they've learned as well. And yeah, it's really great.

- Oh, and because Auslan is just like English we do continue to broaden the vocabulary and add to it as technology and new concepts and those sorts of things. So it's great that she's got that acceptance in her world.

- Absolutely.

- That's brilliant.

- Yeah.

- Do you think that you are provided with unbiased and helpful information to support the choice that you made as a family?

- Yeah, yeah. Weirdly, it almost felt too unbiased. So yeah, it was something very, I think it's a decision that's really personal to every family that sort of encounters this. I was fortunate enough, I think because I'd already made the decision when I got the confirmation. But yeah, the information that I got was definitely very unbiased. I definitely made sure that I didn't actually jump onto any Facebook groups or sort of pro or anti sites initially, probably about for three to six months, because it was a very, 'cause I knew that with everything in the world, there's always one site on the other side and having the facts first about what's happening with your child and how I felt about it as well was really important to me. But then it was good to good to see those

groups and see the support groups as well. And see the other side of things. I feel like the decision not only to use Auslan but it also to provide implants for Anya, which again, she was fortunate enough to qualify for. Yeah, I felt it was a very unbiased process.

- Hmm. You've really given her both communities to engage with.

- It was the opportunity. So I wanted to be able to allow her to make that decision when she's older to say, actually I want to fully be immersed in Auslan and the deaf community or I want to have the opportunity to be able to hear for an oncoming bus or someone shouting out to her or whatever she wanted to do. So she'll have that opportunity and we don't enforce necessarily one way or the other.

- Mm-hmm.

- At home. We will sign and speak at the same time, which is I think really important for her now. But if she makes a decision and says, hey dad, I just want to use Auslan from now on, I'll be totally fine with that. And yeah, it really was, it was a good opportunity to give her both modes of communication.

- Absolutely. No, she's lucky to have that opportunity to really move in the communities as she wants it's that true bilingual.

- Yes.

- Bicultural background that's really unique. Have you found that there's been a community at NextSense with her education? Is she building a peer community at all?

- Yeah, absolutely. I think it's one thing for parents to wonder if their kids, they're are doing well at school and making friends, but it is almost even more so for when you do have a deaf child I think, because if you haven't grown up with it yourself, you don't understand how that translates. You know, when I think about when I was young, what were the things that I was doing and playing with friends and things like that, does that still translate? It was an unknown it was really just an unknown for me, and yeah, all reports are that Anya's doing really well. She's got friends that are both implanted and deaf, which is awesome but she also has fully hearing friends as well.

- Hmm, nice.

- So, she's, yeah, so NextSense has provided that atmosphere and community for her to thrive in, which has been awesome.

- Hmm, that's, yeah.

- If we didn't have that, it would've been I think it would've been very tough for us as well. Yeah.

- Yeah. Oh, no, that's good to hear. This is your chance to give advice to other families. If you imagine, if you take yourself back to first diagnosis and how all the those feelings and all of the perspectives and the options that you have, what advice would you give to those families?

- Yeah, I think the advice is, and it sounds a little cliché, but the advice is just to, definitely just enjoy your child and enjoy your baby and the decision about whether to use Auslan or whether to go for implants or whatever it might be, they will happen eventually. It feels like you have to rush the decision but you really don't have to. And I would say that actually for any kid or any baby that's just been born, actually using Auslan with them is actually a great way to start interacting with your kids anyways. So for a little baby Locklan, we've already started signing with him now to get him on that journey, and it's going to be awesome that he's going to be bilingual as well and be able to talk to Anya.

- Yeah.

- And so, yeah, I mean, my advice would be just start learning, if you make the decision to use Auslan, just start learning some basic signs. It doesn't hurt. And it's really interesting language to start learning as well. Yeah, so just enjoy your child and start doing a little bit of Auslan search.

- Absolutely, good advice. Thank you so much for your time today, Adam. I think it's been really interesting to hear about your journey and how as a family you've created this amazing community and culture around Anja, she's very lucky. Did you have anything else that you wanted to share with us today at all for families listening?

- No, but just thank you for the opportunity. I really appreciate it. I think families just make sure you embrace your children and enjoy everything about them. And this isn't something bad, it's actually a really great opportunity, and you'll enjoy every part of it.

- Absolutely. Find the joy in the little person and everything else will come.

- Absolutely.

- Thank you so much for your time Adam, this has been a really lovely chat, I appreciate it.

- Thank you.