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When eating doesn't come easily



Rajun beams with pride sitting amongst his Eating Skills team with the Centre for Child Development in Surrey. Seated (l-r) are occupational therapist Manjit Gill, developmental pediatrician Dr. Alison Laswick and speech language pathologist Andrea Rowan.

Three-year-old Rajun Mangat asks his mother for a cookie and a roomful of health professionals erupts in cheers.

Rajun isn't like most children. He doesn't eat most of his food through his mouth. Rajun relies on a hole in his belly and a gastrostomy tube. He is only slowly learning to eat so when he asks for food, even a cookie, those who know him can't help but rejoice.

Rajun has a rare genetic disorder that causes medical and developmental disorders called William's Syndrome. As a baby he had acid reflux and developed very distinct aversions.

"We realized he had some real sensory issues around not wanting to have things in his mouth," said Dr. Alison Laswick, a developmental pediatrician who is part of Rajun's eating skills team at the Centre for Child Development in Surrey.

His mother Manjit Chahal realized early on that something was amiss in young Rajun's life. He wasn't putting on weight at the normal rate, and Manjit didn't know what was wrong. He was sent to different health professionals, and eventually found his way to the eating skills team, which assesses and works with children who have problems eating.

"He wouldn't put anything in his mouth at all. He wouldn't swallow anything," says Manjit who also has an 8-year-old daughter and 15-year-old son.

A week before his first birthday, Rajun had a naso-gastric tube put in to feed him through his nose. Eventually that tube would be upgraded to the gastrostomy tube he now uses.

With the help of the eating skills team, Rajun has made a lot of progress towards the ultimate goal - getting all of his nutrition through his mouth.

"We had to break things down into really small steps (for Rajun). A lot of these steps happen with all children as they progress through their eating but we don't always identify them because they run through them quite quickly," says Andrea Rowan, a speech language pathologist who is part of Rajun's eating skills team along with Dr. Laswick and occupational therapist Manjit Gill. For Rajun some of these steps meant learning how to tolerate being in a room with food, smelling food, having food on his tray, and even touching food.

"He started being able to put it in his own mouth and know that he could spit it out and be OK," says Andrea.

Rajun's mother learned to be the epitome of patience and no matter how many times Rajun would spit up his foods, Manjit would try again and again. With the help of the eating skills team she learned that it wasn't that Rajun simply didn't like the food, but that Rajun needed to learn to have food in his mouth, and then swallow it. It helped her to learn that other children and parents had gone through the same challenges.

Already they've been able to decrease the tube feeds from five times a day to three. In the past few months, Rajun has made the transition from exclusive tube feeding to getting about a quarter of his food through his mouth, including cereals, biscuits and cheese.

Apart from their participation in eating skills, Rajun and his mother Manjit Chahal have benefited from other programs at the Centre for Child Development in Surrey, which is funded by the United Way of the Lower Mainland. One program is the young climbers program, which helped Rajun graduate to the next level of movement like running, jumping and climbing. Manjit also attended a Hanen program, aimed at teaching Rajun to use language and communicate using every day activities with his family.

Although these other programs have helped Rajun a lot, the top priority has always been getting him to eat. Rajun's mother Manjit couldn't be more thrilled with his progress. "At the end of the day it's been all worth it. To see him actually eat something now... I honestly thought it was impossible."