Deaf-Blind Perspectives

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Cochlear Implants for Young Children Who Are Deaf-Blind

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Should we consider a cochlear implant for our young child who is deaf-blind?

Is he eligible?

At what age might he receive an implant?

What should our expectations be?

How many children with deaf-blindness are being implanted?

Is it effective for children who are deaf-blind?

These are questions that state deaf-blind projects are being asked by parents as more children with multiple disabilities, including deaf-blindness, are being considered for cochlear implantation. The opportunity for cochlear implantation now extends beyond children who are only deaf or hard of hearing. Children who are deaf-blind from birth or early in life before developing language are receiving implants, but very little research has been done for this population, and this raises important issues. How will it be determined which children are likely to benefit? What specialized therapies and educational strategies will be necessary following implantation? It is essential that research be performed and practices developed that address these questions so that parents can make informed choices for their children.

What Is Cochlear Implantation?

Cochlear implants are electronic devices that are surgically placed under the skin behind the ear and consist of four basic parts: a *microphone* to pick up sounds from the environment; a *speech processor* that selects and arranges those sounds; a *transmitter* and *receiver/stimulator* that receives signals from the speech processor and converts them into electrical impulses; and *electrodes* that collect the impulses and send them to the brain. A cochlear implant does not restore normal hearing, but it may provide a sense of sound to people with severe-to-profound hearing loss by compensating for damaged or nonhearing parts of the inner ear (NIDCD, 2002).

Cochlear implants were first approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 1985. In 1990, approval was granted for implantation in children age 2 and older with profound sensorineural deafness (Spencer, 2002a, p. 39). By 2000, approval had been extended for children age 2 and older with severe-to-profound deafness and for children of 12 to 23 months of age with profound deafness (ASHA, 2004). Some implant

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