

Ronin's Story

Hello, my name is Jennifer Conneely and I've been asked to speak with you tonight on my experience being a Community Options family. My husband and I are parents to two wonderful kids, Aisling who is six and Ronin who is four. They are exactly two years apart and when Ronin was born, Aisling was the epitome of a perfect big sister, helping mommy and getting to know her baby brother. She would talk to him and entertain me with the amazing observations that only a two year old can make. I looked forward to seeing them at 2 and 4, where I imagined that they would keep their parents constantly in stitches with the two year old observations and the wisdom of a four year old.

With my daughter, I've always felt we've had a deep soulful connection. A look passed between us can speak volumes. With Ronin, he's always felt like such a mystery. There is so much happening in his mind that it is hard to determine what he's thinking. From an incredibly early age, he was an explorer. He would crawl over to a cupboard and hoist himself up and investigate. He has drawers full of "gadgets" "tools" and "weapons" that consist of such varied items as an old hard drive, a package of toothpicks and special items pilfered from the rest of the family.

Ronin hit many milestones very early. He could hold up his head from about a month, he could sit up at three and was crawling at four and a half months. He walked at ten months and forget about a crib because as soon as he was mobile, he was crawling out of it. He was so busy moving and exploring and listening to his big sister, that it took awhile for us to realize that he wasn't talking. Ronin was communicating, but through the signs that he made up for himself. Smacking his lips meant he was hungry, pulling his fingers apart meant that he wanted to play with playdo and the dreaded finger point meant that he wanted to watch the Wiggles.

Looking back now, I can see in his baby videos that he reached a level of communication at about a year and then just stayed static. He didn't improve, other than to develop more signs. He called his big sister 'Ya' (which she still hates) and when I would ask him what his name was he would say 'No' I wasn't sure if it was because of all the times I would call out "RONIN, NO!!!" as he was pulling out bins of sewing supplies or emptying toy boxes. I think it really hit me that there was a problem when we were at the park and I told him to go and make a friend with the little boy who was playing next to him and he said no. I asked why and he shook his head and pointed to his mouth. No talking. I realized that Ronin was aware that he was different from other kids.

On his third birthday, we had his speech assessed. His word comprehension and understanding scored very high but his pronunciation and sentence structure were dismally below average. The Speech pathologist put it very succinctly when she said that he obviously had a lot to say but we just couldn't understand what he is saying. I could only imagine the frustration he must be going through. Ronin needed help. Community Options was suggested to us as a means of implementing the funding that we would receive to provide speech and language support. From the first point of contact, we felt cared for and supported.

Holly Reeve came to our house for a first interview. She took information on Ronin, his likes and dislikes and the entire family. She provided us with a clear understanding of how Community Options operates. I was impressed to hear how the organization promotes inclusion for all students and supports the entire family. I learned that Ronin would have a program developed for him that would focus on a number of objectives which would be overseen by a teacher and speech pathologist. He would have a full time aide in his preschool classroom and weekly visits to work on specific speech and language goals. Immediately, my fears for Ronin began to evaporate. The level of care he would receive began to take away some of the pressure I was feeling.

Donna Sledz and Tamara Chanski came to visit us at the beginning of the school year. Donna was the teacher and Tamara the speech pathologist. Now, over the summer, maybe because some of the pressure had floated away or maybe Ronin's development had started to catch up, but he began speaking. I remember the somewhat confused looks as Tamara first met Ronin and she was surprised to find him so talkative and even wondered if he was the same boy she had read about in the first assessment. Already, his speech and language skills were beginning to improve, but now that he realized he could talk, his frustration levels increased dramatically and impacted his behaviour. We still had a long way to go.

Ronin soon began pre-school. He was enrolled in the school where his big sister had attended and I was on the executive board. He was very familiar with the space, the teacher, the toys and even most of the kids, but he still had separation anxiety and troubles with transitions. His melt-downs at home were epic and I hoped they wouldn't follow him to school. Regular visits by Donna and Tamara helped to provide consistent care and work on his speech goals. Donna once visited the school while I was hiding behind a shed, hoping to sneak away while Ronin and his class played in the park.

Once the transition to school was over, Ronin's aide Chandima Semasinghe began in the classroom. Chandima provided a warm and protective backup for Ronin. When he didn't want to play with the other kids, she would gently encourage him to ask someone to play. When he began to get frustrated, she would help him work it out before it got to the point of a melt-down. We felt so lucky to have Chandima on our "Team Ronin" as she gave us peace of mind to leave him at school each day.

Our weekly speech and language visits began as well. Brandi Hewitt came to our house and worked with Ronin every Friday morning. She brought many games and helped Ronin focus on specific sounds through play. We quickly developed a routine on Fridays. I would wake up early and get my husband to work and daughter off to school, then I would madly try to clean up the house for the visit. Community Options is a rare organization that comes to you versus you going to them. It is so wonderful not to have to drive to appointments all the time, but it did mean I needed to keep the house somewhat in order! When Brandi would arrive, I would sit down with my coffee and enjoy listening to them work while I read a book! Throughout the year, this routine worked really well for me, but as Ronin got more verbal, he would fight having Brandi

visit. Once, he had such a temper that she couldn't stay. Donna called a meeting and we tried to figure out what was wrong. As a parent, I've learned that you've got to change your own behaviour to model what you want your child to do. I realized that in my mad dash to tidy up before Brandi arrived, I wasn't listening to Ronin's needs. He wanted to play with Mommy before Brandi's visit. So, we started to play. We also let him choose a couple of toys to 'show and share' to Brandi at the start of each session.

But it triggered a new fear in me, that Ronin's moods and tempers would not be controlled and only grow worse as he got older. Lynn Peden then made her first visit to our home one that I'll never forget. Lynn is a social worker that helps parents and kids work together. My kids decided to play in the front yard while I was talking with Lynn. The kids aren't allowed to play in the front unless someone is with them. They wouldn't come in, and Lynn used it as a teaching experience. She went outside and told the kids that they had to come in. Aisling, who is six now and momentarily brave said no, Ronin stood firmly beside his sister, looking defiant. Lynn told them again that they needed to come inside, they started running down the street. She was calm and firm and it didn't take long for their eyes to lose the confidence and start looking at me for support. Their chins began to wobble and inside they came. I couldn't stop smiling – especially when Lynn left and they told me that they loved me and were so glad that I was their mom and not that other lady. A corner had been turned and I learned new skills to combat the constant challenges of parenthood.

Ronin's final assessment came near his fourth birthday. I think we all knew that he had improved so much during the year that he wouldn't qualify for funding again. We were right, my little munchkin went from the 14th percentile in speech and language skills to the 95th. He is a very expressive guy. He uses his words in such interesting ways that I've decided that having kids who are 6 and 4 is pretty entertaining too.

As I was thinking about what I wanted to say tonight, I asked Ronin if he remembered how he felt when he couldn't talk. He said yes. I asked if he was frustrated, he said 'yup' I asked what he wanted to say and NO WORD OF A LIE, I'M NOT TELLING YOU THIS BECAUSE IT'S A GREAT ENDING TO A SPEECH, but he told me that he wanted to say 'I love my momma' – and my heart melted!

So, in conclusion, I'd like to extend a big bravo and thank you to Community Options and all the wonderful work that they do. I hope tonight is a great success and they provide support to many families for years to come!!

Thank you!

Jennifer Conneely