

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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UT SOUTHWESTERN DOCTORS GIVE A VOICE TO CHILD

DALLAS – August 31, 1999 – Modern medical technology is enabling one local kindergartner to learn to speak without the use of vocal cords.

Four-year-old Dakota Killough wasn't expected to live past birth. A rare medical condition called laryngeal atresia meant his vocal cords and larynx weren't fully formed in the womb. Dakota was born with no airway.

"In the delivery room I could hear he wasn't crying, and I kept asking my husband what was wrong," said Dakota's mother, Kelly Killough. "He kept saying it was all right, but I knew it wasn't."

Doctors performed a tracheotomy and got tiny Dakota breathing, but his medical problems were just beginning.

Without vocal cords Dakota cannot speak, and without a larynx a small hole in his neck is the only way he can breathe.

But his doctors weren't about to give up hope.

With a device usually used for adult throat-cancer patients, Dakota is slowly learning to say his first words. The Electro Larynx, a small hand-held electrical device, works by creating vibrations against Dakota's cheek.

The Electro Larynx is too large for Dakota's small mouth, but doctors say he has a better chance of learning to speak by practicing with the machine now.

"Dakota's situation is different because he never learned to talk in the first place," said Dr. Michael Biavati, an assistant professor of otolaryngology – head and neck surgery. "We're trying to teach him to produce words and talk."

Dakota, who attends speech therapy at Children's Medical Center of Dallas once a week, has found other creative ways to communicate. He knows sign language, can make popping sounds by pushing air into his cheek, and frequently uses gestures and vivid facial expressions.

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“Dakota will never be able to talk like you and me, but to see him now I know we’ve been blessed with a child who should have a lot more problems than what he has,” Kelly Killough said.

And his Electro Larynx should eventually allow him to communicate his thoughts to friends, family – and the doctors who saved his life and gave him a voice.

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