

AKONI

3 YEARS OLD
MĀ'ILI, O'AHU

"All of the people we encountered on our journey and their compassion for our family gave me strength to be a strong advocate for our children, which aided in their success."

- Asahel, mom




My name is Asahel, and I am the mother of a 3-year-old boy named **Akoni**. When he was around 5 months old, I began to notice signs that he wasn't developing at the same level of his peers. Since my other two children had special needs, this likely made me more aware that Akoni wasn't meeting his milestones on time. Being this wasn't my first experience, I already knew what was to come. At least that's what I thought at the time.

My other children were close in age, so I was able to navigate the second child's process quicker. If I'm being honest, I had no clue with my firstborn. I had only heard the word "autism" a few times and didn't even understand that fully. Multiple people began saying, "Have you ever considered he may be autistic?" I then began to research the topic and started to believe the possibility but still had some doubts. Later, I was told by another mom to call Early Intervention. This was a program I had never heard of before.





My oldest son started with Early Intervention in California at 2 years old and was diagnosed as autistic with speech delay by the psychologist. Through the EI program, we were enrolled in a center-based special needs school. There, I attended with him three days a week for four hours. So, when I started to notice signs of delay with my daughter, I immediately began the same process. She was later diagnosed with Global Developmental Delay. We were also enrolled at the same school as my son by the EI program. There, both my children excelled and were later transferred to the school district. As you can see, I just assumed it would be the same process with Akoni.



I seemingly forgot the main rule of thumb of being a parent of a special needs child: “Each child is different and don’t compare.” See, I just thought I would walk through this process easy as I had done prior. I assumed Akoni would be diagnosed with autism with speech delay as my other son. I knew there were different levels of autism, but nothing could have prepared me for the challenges I would face with Akoni’s symptoms and behaviors. He had a unique set of needs that would require me to do a lot of research and get way more services than I had done with my other children. However, I was now in a different state and



had different insurance. The process and programs were different.

Navigating the process for services for Akoni here in Hawai’i was difficult at first. I was initially denied by Early Intervention. I experienced long wait periods due to limited staffing and had gaps in services. Nevertheless, it all came together slowly but surely. By staying determined to help my youngest succeed, he eventually received EI Services, which included: speech, SPED, nutrition, psychology, and later PBS. He also received OT and ABA services through Kaiser. Unfortunately, there was no center-based program in Wai’anae. So, utilizing the experience I had received in California with my other children, Dexter and Noelani, I was able to replicate a system of a center-based program with Keiki Steps and Ka Pa’alana Preschool. Fortunately, with their kindness and sympathy for our situation, I was able to have our RBT (Registered Behavior Technician) attend daily with us at both programs. In using all of my experience and knowledge and remaining determined, I truly believe this is what helped our children succeed. All of the people we encountered on our journey and their compassion for our family gave me strength to be a strong advocate for our children, which aided in their success.