

time than Haig, but it was implanted when he was just five months old, compared with Haig at five years old.

“At one stage, the speech therapist Cameron worked with said there was no point in bringing him any more, because his level was better than a lot of hearing kids he worked with. That’s because he benefited from all the speech therapy we had done at home, as a result of learning with his big brother,” says Yvonne.

The technology that is available to help families like the Omans has progressed steadily in recent years, complementing the explosion in personal technology such as smartphones and tablets that has also taken place.

“Haig has been implanted for ten years and, even in that time, things have moved on a lot,” says Yvonne. “The pace at which cochlear implant technology is moving, it won’t be long before kids can tune their implants themselves. At the moment, they have to drive up to Beaumont [Hospital] and spend an hour and a half tuning 22 electrodes into the right frequencies for them. That’s how fast the technology is going.”

When Haig was 13, he got his first smartphone. Since then, text-based communication has been a mainstay of how the Omans organise their family life.

“He uses applications like Snapchat all the time, as well as Facebook messaging and normal e-mail. He e-mails his teachers, and his friends as easily as you or I would use the phone. It’s a great way for kids like him to learn how to express themselves using the written word,” says Oman.

“He needed to learn how to write in full sentences because often deaf people think in quite black and white terms. They’re not given to using superfluous words or lots of description when they write, because they don’t think that way.”

The deaf community is extremely interested in technology, and creative in the way they use it, according to Caroline Carswell, who runs the Irish Deaf Kids website and support group.

“Digital hearing devices are the core everyday technology for most kids with hearing issues, but everyday smartphones and mobile devices are major levellers. They give kids access to the rest of the world because they present information in visual and text format and can show videos with captions,” she says.

“Texting can also give a quick summary of a social situation where a young adult misses a key fact and can’t immediately be clued into a conversation.”

For instance, if someone in their peer group is visibly upset, and the deaf young adult didn’t pick up from the others what the issue is, a friend can discreetly text them about the issue - for example, ‘her mum’s not well’ or ‘he dumped her’ - as a way to keep a teen in the loop.

“Kids are also generally very quick to pick up on text-based communications apps like Whatsapp, Snapchat, Viber and so on. They can stay plugged into social networks with other kids eas-



Future possibilities for the hearing-impaired

Traditional hearing devices are worn on the head, but in the near future, it’s likely that such devices will increasingly make use of the personal technology most people carry with them in their phones.

Already, wireless-controlled earbuds are widely available, and it seems likely that in time consumer technology will make a serious dent in the conventional hearing-aid market.

“The incumbent vendors who sell this technology are already feeling the pressure to adapt to a very changed market for interconnected devices,” says Caroline Carswell of Irish Deaf Kids. “Cochlear implants are moving toward fully implantable devices.”

Fully implanted devices will need to be powered in a way that doesn’t require cables - wireless charging technology which uses magnet-based chargers, kinetic charging and from wifi sources is in development.

“Presumably, the app for the remote control of these devices will be smartphone and tablet-based. The device makers and audiologists are still figuring out how to tune fully implanted devices, but wearers are likely to have a lot more control over tuning than they do at present,” says Carswell.

Technology will also make it easier for people not located close to specialist healthcare to get access to best-practice training through online consultations.

Finally, if Google can make good on its promise to mapping users’ voices to achieve reliable voice-activated searching, then this technology could unlock the holy grail of tech-driven empowerment - providing speech to text translation in real time.

“This has been called ‘life with subtitles’, and it would make a huge difference. Even so, for wearers of the latest hearing devices, subtitles will only be needed in certain contexts, maybe study or training environments and group settings. More uses will emerge as the technology evolves,” says Carswell.

ily, and they can stay up to date with news,” says Carswell.

The latest cochlear implant processors can stream sound from sources connected to wifi such as laptops, tablets and phones straight into someone’s ear, without any intermediary devices.

“Curiously, a separate remote control is still used, but I have no doubt it will soon be possible for kids with hearing devices to remotely control them from their smartphones using Bluetooth and wifi,” Carswell says.

All these technologies are tools that can allow a child with im-

paired hearing to grow up as normally as possible.

“You want your kid to have every advantage, and we live in a hearing and talking world,” says Yvonne Oman.

“They know they’re deaf, obviously, but it’s not a disability to them - they just get on with life. Haig was in sixth class when he came home and asked me what disabled meant because some kid had called him that in school. It had never occurred to him up until that point that he was disabled.”

See irishdeafkids.ie

Good life

Susan Morrell



Forced rhubarb: fooled into thinking that spring has come early

Push plants into an early harvest

Forcing springtime bulbs by tricking them into bloom ahead of schedule is a favourite cheat of home gardeners.

Perhaps, when you bought your spring bulbs last year, you kept a few aside for forcing in a pot indoors as a little treat to cheer you up mid-winter. Or maybe you bought one of the prettily-presented pots of forced hyacinths that dot the flower shop windows around Christmas. But did you know that you can also force some vegetable crops into an early harvest?

As gardeners, we’re meant to be more patient. The rhythms and cycles of growing plants naturally induce a sense of calm in those who learn to follow those rhythms without rushing or getting (too) frustrated.

Eating seasonally is part of that. Withstand the temptation to buy tomatoes from Brazil in January, and the locally-grown varieties will taste all the sweeter at the height of summer. But sometimes, just sometimes, cheating is okay.

If you’re already growing rhubarb, sea kale or chicory in your garden, try forcing a couple of plants into early harvest and see how you get on.

For the rhubarb, make sure your area has experienced a few hard frosts, then simply clear the area around the base of the plant of debris and leaves and cover with a large bin or flowerpot.

Insulate with fleece, an old blanket or straw to “fool” the rhubarb into thinking that spring has come early, and you could be enjoying rhubarb in a couple of months. Take note of which plants you forced this year, and leave them to grow naturally next year.

Sea kale, a plant native to coastal regions and beloved by the Victorians, can be forced in

the same way as rhubarb. Some fetching terracotta urns are even designed for this purpose.

Enjoy this member of the cabbage family, which is cooked like asparagus, after forcing it under a pot and “blanching” its otherwise bitter, blue-green leaves into a paler plant with more palatable flavour.

Bittersweet chicory can also be tinkered into providing much needed homegrown taste during the winter doldrums. Dig up the chicory roots from your garden, pot and cover them with an up-turned pot, and keep in a warm, dark place. In four to six weeks

Did you know that you can force some vegetable crops into an early harvest?

you should have sweet, pale shoots - known as chicons - to add to winter salads.

Potatoes can be forced, in a sense, simply by planting them early - like right now - for an extremely early harvest. Plant tubers in dark bags half-filled with compost and holes punched into the bottom. Store them in a greenhouse, where there’s no risk of frost, and keep topping up the compost as they grow. Keep moist. Expect homegrown spuds before summer.

Mother Nature should never be rushed, of course, but experimenting with a few of our garden crops to see which we can coax into a sneak preview of spring is a fun and tasty way to pass the winter weekends.

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