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Special-needs children receive adaptive bikes, strollers, communication devices

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Austin Miller, 7, tries out a new communication devices with his parents, Amanda and Michael Miller. Variety – the Children’s Charity and Heritage Valley Health System have provided 10 local families with adaptive bikes, adaptive strollers, and communication devices. -- Sally Maxson/The Times

BRIGHTON TWP. -- When most children wish to ride a dirt bike, they usually ask a parent. When 7-year-old Austin Miller wants to ride with his dad, he imitates tugging on an imaginary throttle.

Austin, of Rochester, has a developmental and verbal delay. But the communication device he received from Variety -- the Children’s Charity will make a world of difference in his day-to-day life.

Moments after receiving the device, an encased iPad with a special app called TouchChat HD, Austin was eager to tell his parents that he wanted to go outside and eat candy. It’s a setup he’s already familiar with because it’s exactly what he’s used at school for the past few months.

“He does do OK in letting us know what he needs,” said Michael Miller, Austin’s father, usually through pointing or using his own sign language to convey messages.

But he's hoping that using the iPad as his voice will be a learning mechanism to eventually speak more on his own. Miller said he's seen verbal improvement in Austin over the last two months after he began using an iPad to communicate at school.

"The more he hears it, over and over and over again, the more he'll try to say it himself," he said.

The Millers were among 10 families from the Beaver County area who received adaptive bikes, strollers or communication devices from Variety during an event at Heritage Valley Beaver hospital Thursday afternoon. They've distributed more than 1,800 bikes, strollers and communication devices in Pennsylvania and West Virginia since 2012.

Charles LaVallee, Variety's CEO, said a device that gives children a voice is invaluable.

He demonstrated what the device can do in communicating feelings and emotions, from saying 'I love you' to expressing what kind of pain they may be feeling when they're sick or at the doctor.

"What do you do if you don't have a voice?" he said.

In addition to the six communication devices that were distributed, two adaptive strollers and two adaptive bicycles were also given out.

Andrew Fleeson, 20, uses a wheelchair and attends New Horizon School in Brighton Township. His mother, Danna Fleeson, said he was so excited to receive his adaptive bike that he couldn't sleep the night before.



Andrew Fleeson, 20, draws applause from hospital staff while trying out his new bike with his parents, Mike and Danna Fleeson, Thursday afternoon at Heritage Valley Beaver. Variety – the Children's Charity and Heritage Valley Health System have provided 10 local families with adaptive bikes, adaptive strollers, and communication devices. --- Sally Maxson / The Times

His brothers have dirt bikes they often ride.

"All he could do was watch," she said.



Andrew Fleeson, 20, try out his new bike with his parents, Mike and Danna Fleeson, Thursday afternoon at Heritage Valley Beaver. Variety – the Children’s Charity and Heritage Valley Health System have provided 10 local families with adaptive bikes, strollers, and communication devices. --- Sally Maxson / The Times

The organization is pushing efforts to identify every special-needs child in the area who is eligible to receive a device, stroller or bike.

“I am grateful to Variety for their work and making these incredible opportunities possible for kids with disabilities,” said Norm Mitry, president and CEO of Heritage Valley Health System. “I urge our greater community to help us spread the word to identify every eligible child.”

For more information, visit www.varietypittsburgh.org.