

ABRIL'S CASE

I'll never forget that day when I was on my way to our family vacation and we decided to stop for the night and get some rest at a hotel in Zacatecas, Mexico. Three of my four daughters came with us, my two 13 year old twins and my other little girl who was 11. In the morning after breakfast they wanted to go to the pool, so they put on their bathing suits and came with me. I was staring at one of my twins, Abril. There was something really strange about her body. I saw that her shoulders were uneven, one of her shoulders was higher than the other, and one of her hips was not in the right place. Her right hip was elevated. I didn't like the way it looked, so I asked my husband to take a look at it and tell me if he saw the same thing. He said, "No", and I said "Look at her again." He said, "I don't see anything strange".



The next day, he talked to me and told me that he was really worried. My question got him thinking that maybe Abril did have a problem. He said he'd notice that when Abril was standing up she was always bending one of her legs. She was leaning to one side. I started thinking about Abril when she was a baby. The day that she started to crawl and the day she tried to walk and even the day she started running, she ducked like her head was too heavy for her and she was trying to stand still. I don't know why I hadn't paid attention to that before, maybe because Abril was always a really healthy child. Besides, her pediatrician hadn't mentioned anything about it.

That week of vacation I couldn't stop thinking why my child's body was taking that shape. Until then, I thought that she looked like her father. He is really tall and thin, but that didn't explain all the other things that I started noticing about Abril's body. For example, why was her waist so uneven? Now I know that this condition is called lordosis, but at that time I didn't know what was going on. There were a lot of details that I started to remember that I hadn't paid attention to before; maybe because I wasn't aware of their importance.

When we came back from our trip, the first thing I did was to make an appointment with the doctor. We had to see our primary care physician first. I remember that I talked to the doctor alone first because I didn't want Abril to listen. I was afraid to upset her, or make her feel bad about her body if it wasn't something serious, because maybe I wasn't right. The doctor listened to me and then he called Abril in. He examined her and gave us a referral to see an orthopedic surgeon. Our primary care physician said Abril probably had scoliosis. I left the medical center really worried. I didn't know what scoliosis meant. I wasn't even familiar with the word and I didn't have a good feeling about it. So I talked to my husband and he said that we should wait for the second opinion.

The day of the appointment with the orthopedic surgeon arrived and we waited for him for more than an hour. Abril was impatient, anxious and upset. She didn't understand why she had to see a doctor if she was feeling fine. Well the doctor never showed up, so we left. My husband decided to make another appointment, but this time with an orthopedic surgeon that he knew. The next day the doctor confirmed the first diagnosis, idiopathic scoliosis and left leg shortening.

The first thing we needed to do was find out what scoliosis was and what kind of treatments were available for Abril. The doctor started to explain. I was shocked, but doing my best to pay attention to what he was saying. He said that in the future there was a chance that they might have to do surgery, but the first thing Abril needed was a Milwaukee brace. When we left Abril was devastated. She couldn't stop crying and we were worried.

The doctor sent us to a physiotherapist who would make the brace and gave us the address of where to find the orthotist who would make the brace. It was a Friday night so there was no way to get an appointment with the physiotherapist. In addition, the orthotist had moved so we did not have the correct address. The next day, Saturday, we looked for the orthotist and we found him in a neglected warehouse with weird devices and a lot of shoes. We talked to him and told him about Abril's condition. I told him that it was urgent for us to have that brace. He gave us a catalog with a lot of brace samples. We told him to come to our house the next day and take Abril's measurements for the brace. He said that he needed to stretch Abril's arms and legs so the measurements would come up right. I didn't understand that well, but I told him to come Sunday anyway. When we arrived home we showed Abril the brace catalog. She was upset and said that she would never wear the Milwaukee brace. She wanted the Boston brace. She was really sad and I couldn't force her to do something that she didn't want to do, so in the middle of the day I called the orthotist and cancelled the appointment.

On Monday we went to the physiotherapist. She was a kind, retired doctor. She still runs her own medical center and she tried to explain some other things about scoliosis. She told us that there was a maximum level of spine curvature. If the curve got beyond that level there was a chance they had to do surgery. Abril was really close to that maximum level. The X-rays showed 38* and at that time I wasn't aware of the advantages and disadvantages of surgery. The only thing I knew was that I wanted to stop my child's body deformation. The doctor also told us that the treatment would last for 3 or 4 years. We thought it was a really long time, I just couldn't stop thinking that she was in her second year of high school and that she would have to use that brace her entire college time.

We were devastated, confused, and desperate. For us there was no way out. So, we started looking in the phone book and on the internet, and talking with people that we knew, searching for names and doctors. If there was a chance that my daughter had to have surgery, we wanted the best doctor for her. The physiotherapist asked me if I had bought Abril's brace already, I said no and that we were still looking for somebody to make it. She asked us if we have talked to Engineer Caudillo and I told her that our first doctor gave us somebody else's phone number and address.

She specifically recommended us to go see him. She told us that he was the best in that area and that he knew a lot of people. He also had given a conference for orthotists last year which had discussed about scoliosis. That was a light of hope in our path.

We met with Engineer Caudillo and he introduced us to Dr. Miguel Gomez. That was how we learned more about scoliosis, but most of all, it was our chance to put our daughter in good hands.

Today I am writing in this way and I don't believe it. I feel confident and calm. Abril has been wearing her brace for three years now. A year ago she has been wearing it just during the nights. Her recovery has been amazing. We have been able to reduce the two curves she had. The thoracic curve was reduced 50% and the lumbar curve was reduced a little bit less. But Dr Gomez always tells me that what matters is the balance, more than the curves. Sometimes I don't understand everything about this, because every doctor has his own way to treat, but I trust Dr. Gomez's experience. I remember that at the beginning the only thing that worried me was stopping the curve in Abril's spine.

With all the attention and help we've received, Abril has a better posture now, she is in a better mood. I feel so lucky because on this path I have found wonderful people; very professional in their job and wiling to help us in any way they could with their knowledge and experience. Not everyone has the same luck. I remember that a year before Abril was diagnosed I took her to the doctor because she wasn't feeling good. She wasn't able to stand up by herself, she was complaining about back and neck pains. It was very unusual for her. So, I took her to the doctor and on our way I remembered that she had this kind of pain before, twice to be more specific, so I told the doctor. But, unfortunately he didn't have the knowledge to diagnose the symptoms sooner. He just gave Abril some painkillers for Torticollis. Now I know that those were scoliosis symptoms. Maybe the doctor didn't take X-rays because he didn't think they were necessary. If he had, maybe we could have found out about Abril's condition a year earlier. I was disappointed with the medical service.

Abril has had five braces. The first one was the Milwaukee type, which she had for three months, but it wasn't that helpful for reducing curves. However it was helpful for her in an emotional kind of way. The rest of the braces were made with the CAD CAM technique of Dr. Gomez. They were more effective and less disturbing and for the same reason they gave her a chance to move better. With Dr. Gomez's type of bracing, Abril was able to have a normal life. The only different thing was that she had to use some special clothes, but she was fine with that. She is a very even-tempered girl. She does her exercise routine every single day. She swims three times a week and she always follows the orthotist's instructions about wearing the brace. The only day she didn't wear the brace was on her 15th birthday but she wore it at night when we got home. Sometimes in the morning she wakes up with some bruises in her body because of the pressure that the brace makes on her body and I ask her if it hurts and she says that when she falls asleep she doesn't feel anything.

My job does not allow me to be with her, but I try really hard not to neglect her at any time. I make sure that she is doing her exercises, but she doesn't need my supervision for that. She knows that it is her responsibility and she is always doing them. There is no need for me to tell her. The first months were really hard because I had to leave a lot of my regular activities so I could take Abril to her treatment. Sometimes we had to visit the doctor three times during the same day, because the brace was bothering her in one hip. But it was necessary for us to do it so the brace would fit perfectly and she could be as comfortable as possible using it every day.

We've tried to create a good environment for her, as soon as we knew about her condition. We talked to our other girls and explained to them that her sister was going to need a lot of love and patience. I also told her cousins, her uncles and aunts that she was going to wear the brace for a period of time and explained to them everything about scoliosis. We also made her a big blanket with encouraging messages from all the people that love her, her family and friends. We also made her a special desk so she could fit perfectly with the Milwaukee brace, but when she got the CAD CAM brace from Dr. Gomez, she didn't need it anymore.

She also found support in her teachers and classmates. One of her teachers asked her to make a presentation to the class about scoliosis because she was absent a couple of days. He said he would excuse the absences if she did. She was more than happy to make it. She searched on the internet and found a lot of information. She wanted everyone to know everything about scoliosis, because some of her classmates could have it without knowing they do. She also likes to go to the Orthotists & Prosthetists conferences in Mexico. She has been to two in Guadalajara and one in Aguascalientes. We also went and visit Dr. Gomez in Houston, TX. She always comes back with her hopes up, maybe because she knows that they are very professional. I think that all these helped with her treatment in a better way, She has always been a very good student. Her grades were down just when she started treatment but after that she was first place in her class.

On this year's vacation Abril finally had the chance to swim in the ocean and put her feet in the sand without having the brace on. The brace just made her sweat too much. She still needs to wear special shoes for her left foot. Right now she is not using the brace so she gets the chance to dress like a normal girl and that makes her feel better. I am very confident that in the future our daughter will not have more problems. But if something happens we know that we can count on a lot of professionals that are willing to help us. It's necessary to let everyone know that there is not a lot of information out there about all of the options available for treating this condition, but Dr. Gomez's website can provide you with a lot of valuable information.