



Autism & Aspergers - finding a door to their world

Listening Training: A Different Approach to Autism, Asperger Syndrome and other Autism Related Problems

As we know all too well, there is quite a difference between hearing and listening. Listening involves the desire to communicate and focus our attention. At a time when we are totally absorbed in our thoughts we may still hear the voices of our friends or the music on the radio, but effectively, we are not aware of them: we have tuned out. This small 'autistic' experience is generalized in autistic children. For them it is not the 'tuning out' that is exceptional, but rather the 'tuning in' that they fail to manage.

Autism: The Purest Form of Non-Listening

No individual is the same of course, but as far as we now know, autistic people are 'wired' a bit differently than the rest of us. They have an out of balance nervous system that finds it difficult to adapt to even the simplest things, just because they have such an exceptional way of processing sensations. For instance, many autistic people are hypersensitive to sounds. A telephone ringing, a doorbell, a dog barking or a vacuum cleaner, anything can cause great distress. According to Tomatis it is a misconception that this sensitivity is limited to the auditory system. Both skin and bones are equally conductive of sounds. And other senses might also be responding. For example light may be perceived as sound and vice versa.

"I do not treat these children. I awaken them." Alfred Tomatis

In the Listening Training the process of desensitizing these children against this overdose of stimuli takes place gradually. Parents report that little by little their children are able to cope better. They cover their ears less, eye-contact as well as fine motor skills are observed to improve. And there are changes for the better in sleeping patterns and appetite.

For those without language, vocalization increases. Later their voices become more modulated, and slowly transform into 'babble'. Repetitive body movement and self-destructive behaviour decrease. They are observed to handle social situations better. Instead of isolating themselves, they will begin to seek contact by touching, looking and holding hands. During the second stage language becomes more appropriate. This stage is reached more quickly for those who already have some language but did not "communicate" with it. These children and adults may begin to refer to themselves and others, using "I" and "you" and first names. They become more and more responsive.

The rate of improvement varies but generally the programme consists of at least 150 to 200 hours of auditory stimulation over a six to twelve month period. Improvement has also been observed in children and adults with Asperger Syndrome and other variations of a so-called Pervasive Developmental Disorders (see below).

The benefits for autistic clients include:

- better eye contact
- better communication
- better posture
- increase of attention span
- better handling of new stimuli, so less tantrums
- better sleep

- better appetite
- improvement of gross and fine motor skills

Benefits for those diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome/PDD: besides the above mentioned you will often notice an enormous improvement in social skills, such as:

- increased and genuine interest in other people
- more empathy
- a positive, joyful attitude in general
- a greater willingness to share
- a more flexible way of dealing with the unexpected

More often than not, this group of clients need less 'listening hours' than others 'on the spectrum' - generally not more than 60 to 70 hrs.

The Parent's Programme

It is beneficial for the parent-child relationship that at least one parent 'listens in'. That is why the Joya Centre offers parents listening sessions without any additional charge. With young children we may also wish to record the mother's voice and present it, filtered in such a way as her voice was first heard whilst the child was still in the womb. Creating a so-called audio-rebirth will usually result in a better understanding and bonding between the two.

Paulina Basha Aarts, director of the Joya Centre, has experience with autistic children, and has seen first-hand how the Listening Training can make the difference from a state of withdrawal and hardly any verbal contact to a change of heart and an eagerness to take part in the world.