

DISORDERS

Robert Botello listens to sounds in the earphones as he balances on a rubber ball at the Listening Centre in Dallas. Since 1991, the center has helped people improve their lives by improving their listening.



Fort Worth Star-Telegram/ JOYCE MARSHALL

Listen UP!

Center helps people learn to concentrate

BY DAVID LYDAY
SPECIAL TO THE STAR-TELEGRAM

DALLAS — Some have learning problems. Some suffer from stress.

Some want to be better at their jobs, or better at their relationships. Some desperately need a way to feel like they matter.

Harl Asaff tries to describe the enormous range of clients she and her associates have helped at the Listening Centre in Dallas: Kids with learning problems. Children who have attention deficit disorder. Children who are dyslexic, hyperactive or autistic.



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Spencer Lanham gets a lesson in listening at the center

But their clients are not just children. The Listening Centre also has help for adults who just want to "polish the apple," Harl says, "get rid of high levels of stress or anxiety, for instance. I guess the older I get, the more I look at the quality of life. People struggling with anger, frustration,

'Why me?' kinds of feelings. They're so upset, and they don't have to live like that."

The Listening Centre, directed by Harl, her husband, Jim, and a small group of associates, offers hope to this range of people. They do so

More on LISTENING on Page 3

Listening

Continued from Page 1

by improving the way their clients listen. Not how they hear, but how they listen. Since 1991, they have helped more than 350 people—from dyslexic children to business professionals—improve their lives by improving their listening.

Norma Moore of Dallas tells a story that is somewhat typical:

"Our 9-year-old son had trouble tuning in to his environment, the people around him, teachers," she said. "He's a very bright child, and school was just too hard. Tuning in to those around him was too hard."

After going to the Listening Centre, she says, "The change was kind of stunning. He was able to pick up cues from those around him much better. His concentration for school is much better. It's a miracle."

The Listening Centre uses the Tomatis Method, developed in France in the late 1950s by Dr. Alfred Tomatis, an ear, nose and throat specialist. The program employs a device called the Electronic Ear, developed by Tomatis, which uses music and other sounds, filtered and doctored in various ways, to help restore the ability to listen properly.

Normally, our hearing is a balance between the sounds we receive through the air channel in the ear and those we receive by bone conduction—literally sound waves transmitted through the bones of the skull and skeleton.

If those two reception channels get out of balance, the communications we get from our listening become garbled. Environmental sound such as traffic noise or the hum of fluorescent lighting can overpower verbal information.

So who might benefit?

- A child with a normal to high intelligence who is going through school underachieving, feeling like a failure, floundering through remedial tutoring and perhaps on medication.

- A child who is hyperactive or has an attention deficit disorder, with other family members suffering through bouts of anger, blame, remorse and guilt.

Recent studies show that attention deficit disorder can also be an undiagnosed problem for adults. These are the warning signs:

"Look for stress patterns, how unhappy they are, how short-tempered they are, how much time they take to organize themselves, if someone is working twice as hard as they need to," says Dr. Ursula Palmer, the center's psychologist. "Could they take less time to get the same thing done?"

For a good picture of the affliction and the recovery, simply listen to Harl and Jim's story of their son:

When the child was 5, it was clear he had trouble getting infor-

mation the same way the other children in his group were getting it. Yet, he was clearly very bright.

"You listen to him talk, you know that he is bright," Jim says. "You look at him trying to do schoolwork, or trying to read out loud, and he found it a frustrating and degrading experience."

After unsuccessful years of special tutors, the Asaffs were finally faced with taking him out of school.

Then they heard about the Tomatis Method, in use at a Toronto center, and took the boy, then 13, for treatment. The boy's first listening test showed that the dominant sounds he heard were the air conditioning, the transformers in the fluorescent lights and his own heartbeat. That meant he was listening primarily with his bones rather than with his ears.

After he completed the program, "He started to be able to be responsible for his own homework," Harl says. "And he would read out loud, which had always been an awful thing for him. He began to laugh instead of cry when things were too hard."

These changes will allow him to leave high school with a good education and his self-esteem intact, the Asaffs say.

The Asaffs were so impressed by what they saw at the Toronto center, and by the results for their child, that they determined to bring the Tomatis Method to Dallas.

They dug into their own pockets to found the Listening Centre and assemble the Tomatis-trained therapists: Today they continue to operate their own independent oil company as well as participate in the management of the center.

Now the staff includes Palmer, a board-certified counselor and expert in American Sign Language; Emilia Flores, listening therapist, degreed in psychology, and Tomatis Technical Trainer for the Americas; and Melanie Busby, listening therapist with extensive background in linguistics and voice production with hearing-impaired children.

The treatment program involves two three-week segments, with a two-hour session a day for 15 days in each segment. A session can include listening to doctored music through headphones (the Electronic Ear), humming along with special therapeutic tapes, also using headphones and reading out loud.

Psychotherapy is also used in the program where appropriate, and other members of the family are often involved.

The cost of a six-week program can range from about \$500 (for a large group in cooperation with a school district, for instance) to about \$2,500 for an individual-

ized, custom program with extensive family involvement. Insurance may cover part of the cost.

Synthia Rogers, a teacher at Dallas' Greenhill School, took the Tomatis program.

"My energy level was way down, and I was extremely unfocused," she said. "My daughter suggested I look into the Listening Centre."

The results? "It helped me with my focus and concentration," she said. "My mental energy is higher. It felt like it cleared out some cobwebs."

There are other, more severe cases, in which the program at the Listening Centre has helped change tragedy into hope:

"There was a boy who was in the third grade, he was hyperactive, he couldn't get along at home, couldn't get along at school. His former school had recommended that he repeat the third grade," Harl says. "But [after the Listening Centre program] when the new school tested him, they finally decided that he should actually be in the fifth grade. Obviously we didn't make him smarter," but he was able to settle down and do the work that he was capable of doing."

Then there is the young lawyer in Bethesda, Md. "Great at book work, awful presenter," Harl says. "He heard about Tomatis, and he went [in Maryland]. His next presentation was flawless, and they said, 'Wow, what'd you do?' And he said, 'I did Tomatis.' The next week, there were four more young lawyers at the Tomatis session."

The Asaffs are quick to say that Tomatis is not the answer to everything.

"This program helped our son, and we decided then to try to offer it to others," Harl says. "And we have given help to a lot of people who have not been able to be helped in other ways."

They would like to help many others, a big dream that carries a big price tag. But the Asaffs say they believe it could start in a small way. And, as with so many other things, they try to compare the price tag for doing it with the price tag for not doing it.

Harl talks about a boy she went to high school with. A boy who probably had the listening problem, but no solution. Not even any idea that there was a solution.

"He finally graduated with us, but he was three or four years older," she says. "He was such a nice man, and he probably thought he was a failure. Because that's the way he was treated. I often wish I could find him, and I could tell him, 'Hey, there's something you can do.'"

For more information: Call the Listening Centre, 12800 Hillcrest Road, Dallas, at (214) 404-8152.