

Mozart as Good Medicine?

May 5, 2003
NBC's Today Show

How a special music and sound therapy has become a turning point for an autistic child. "Today's" Katie Couric talks to Valerie Dejean, occupational therapist/director of the Spectrum Center, about how the Tomatis Method helped one Autistic child.

Compliments of:

The Center for InnerChange
4610 S. Ulster Street, Suite 170
Denver, CO 80237
Phone: 303-320-4411
Fax: 303-322-5550
www.centerforinnerchange.com

One in 250 American babies is diagnosed with some form of autism. Autism is a complex developmental disability that affects a person's social interaction and communication. To date — there is no known cure. But, "Today" host Katie Couric takes a look at how a special music and sound therapy has become a turning point for an autistic child.

TO HER PARENTS Sharon and Dave, Ashley was perfect — the second daughter they'd always wanted.

Sharon, says, "She looked beautiful, she looked perfect, I was elated. I wanted another child so Kacey could have a playmate — they were 14 months apart. Kacey would be a great role model."

But Ashley had a different idea, at 16 months she preferred to be left alone.

"She would tune us out when you called her name, kind of be in her own world. I couldn't imagine that there's something wrong with my child," says Sharon.

But there was something wrong with Ashley. After a hearing and speech evaluation, it was determined that while her hearing was fine, her speaking ability — at 19 months — was the equivalent of a 6 month-old.

"My heart just sunk," says Sharon.

Dr. Chuck Conlon, a neuro-developmental pediatrician at children hospital in Bethesda, Maryland, examined Ashley. "We really looked at the hallmark of her social interaction abilities and her communicative abilities, it was autism spectrum disorder."

"Autism? Ashley's not autistic," said Sharon.

While devastated, Sharon was also determined to find help for her little girl.

Around Ashley's second birthday, she started speech and occupational therapy.

But despite a 20-hour a week program for almost a year she made little progress.

So Sharon decided to try a special listening program developed by French doctor Alfred Tomatis, who theorized that autistic children have under-developed inner ears that can be re-trained through intensive sound therapy.

"The Tomatis is really looking to help your ear to listen better and to perceive sound better, and in doing that to help start language emerge," says Leslie Neale, a recreational therapist at the Spectrum Center in Bethesda, Maryland.

At the center, Ashley was exposed to music of Mozart after it had been filtered to bring out the high frequencies.

Neale says, “Mozart carries higher frequencies in the music and the instrumentation carries along very consistently with the human voice.”

Ashley also listened to her mother’s voice after it’d been modulated.

“With the mother’s voice tape — we simulate for the children what it sounded like to them when they were in the womb,” says Neale.

It is in the womb that hearing develops. The fetus picks up only high frequency level of the mother’s voice and other sounds. The Tomatis therapy is designed to replicate those sounds heard in utero, in order to re-awaken the ear’s natural ability to listen, and ultimately stimulate the brain’s desire to communicate.

Neale says, “For some kids, it’s really opening another new door to them in an entirely new world.”

For Ashley, the result was nothing short of miraculous.

Sharon says, “The second day, I really remember, we got into the car, we were driving home and all of a sudden she said, ‘I want cookie!’ She’d never said anything spontaneous like that before. Dave and I looked at each other and go, ‘what did she just say?’”

After more than a year of Tomatis listening therapy combined with interactive games, Ashley is now part of the crowd.

“She learned to talk, she learned to pretend play, she learned to hug, and she learned to love us. Tomatis was just that switch,” says Sharon.

But autism experts caution against false hope. They stress that the Tomatis method is not a cure, it’s not science, and it’s not meant for every autistic child.

“I don’t think that I could make this a treatment recommendation from the standpoint of definitely do this, until there’s more evidence to suggest there’s good clinical science to say this works,” says Dr. Conlon.

But for Sharon and her husband Dave, this is all the proof they need.