

**WHEN LISTENING COMES ALIVE**

**By  
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**Published in  
Open Ear  
Fall 1994  
Chapter from his book of the same name**

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*From the editor*

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When Paul's book came out in 1993 many of us in the field of music, sound healing and education were very excited. *When Listening Comes Alive* is a clear, well written and easy to understand resource about the Tomatis Method and much more. Paul tells us first about his personal story, of how Dr. Tomatis changed his life through the Tomatis Method of audiostimulation and personal guidance, then he provides readers with self-help exercises. After twenty five years of research and professional practice with the Tomatis Method, psychologist Paul Madaule has designed exercises called Earobics. The latter part of the book is devoted to an instructional style that allows each of us to improve our listening skills and in turn improve the quality of our lives. The book, now in its second edition, is accompanied by a cassette tape entitled *Earobics Exercise Tape*. This book is highly recommended by our staff at the OPEN EAR Journal.

The following is a chapter from *When Listening Comes Alive*, printed with permission from the author and Moulin Publishing, Norval, Ontario.

## "BIRTH OF LISTENING"

"You know, this may sound strange, but music has been a part of me since before birth," said Boris Brott - Hamilton (Ontario) Philharmonic conductor - to his radio interviewer once. "As a young man, I was mystified by this unusual ability. I had to play certain pieces sight unseen. I'd be conducting a score for the first time and, suddenly, the cello line would jump out at me; I'd know the flow of the piece even before I turned the page of the score. One day, I mentioned this to my mother, who is a professional cellist. I thought

she'd be intrigued because it was always the cello line that was so distinct in my mind. She was, but when she heard what the pieces were, the mystery quickly solved itself. All the scores I knew sight unseen were ones she had played while she was pregnant with me."<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Verny, who reports this story, mentions that other musicians, such as Yehudi Menuhin and Arthur Rubinstein, also claim that their musical interests promise that you will have another Menuhin in the family, but if you want your child to develop a genuine appreciation for music, you now know when her musical education should start.

I have always found it fascinating that these musicians of the highest caliber — the best listeners on earth and those most "in touch" with their ear — know that their musical interests and talents date back to the womb.

## SILENT DIALOGUE

The ear of the unborn child is bombarded by an impressive quantity of sounds— heartbeat, respiration and visceral noises of the mother's body, as well as those of her own. Amidst this continuous and repetitive noise, another kind of sound starts to emerge and take shape from time to time. This sound is clearer, more melodious. It is the mother's voice. Each time the mother-to-be uses her voice, she sends sound vibrations to the body and the ears of her unborn child who is most eager to absorb and be nourished by them.

A car radio not only provides a diversion, it also masks the noises of the car itself. We can imagine the unborn child making its first attempt to "connect" with the more agreeable sound of the

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voice of her mother. But unlike a radio, the voice is not always "on" and the fetus cannot control it. She has to wait until it comes on to enjoy it. Thus the first motivation to reach out is born. This is followed by the first gratification — the pleasure of hearing this sound again. This initial silent "dialogue" gives birth to listening. When the voice doesn't come with any regularity, or when it is absent altogether for long periods of time, it may generate the first feelings of anxiety, or of abandonment.

Many mothers sense and respond to their unborn child's silent quest for dialogue. They sing the same songs over and over again. They tell stories or even engage in lively conversation with the child. But what about the quality of their voice? Does it make a difference in the way it may spark the child's desire to listen and to communicate?

We all know the difference a voice can make. A warm, friendly-sounding voice may open our mind to ideas or opinions we were not receptive to at first. It makes us listen. While we know how to say "no thanks" and close the door or hang up the phone on solicitors, we all have been caught more than once continuing to listen in spite of ourselves. Something in the voice triggered our desire to listen to it. We also may have been turned off and chased away from a showroom by nothing more than the salesman's voice and way of talking, even though we may admit that he had interesting things to say in retrospect.

The unborn child does not understand the meaning of the messages sent by the mother's voice. What he "understands" is the emotional charge of those messages. A voice that carries joy, calmness, warmth, love, hope and fulfillment is more likely to "invite" listening and the desire to communicate than a voice that carries anxiety, anger or sadness.

### *EXPECTANT FATHER*

Fathers often wonder if their own voice can have some nurturing influence on the unborn child. There is evidence that the unborn child hears her father's voice, and that this voice has a soothing affect on the newborn for the first hours of life.<sup>2</sup> However, the link between the father's voice and the child's ear is not nearly as direct as the mother's voice. Part of the voice sounds will be

absorbed by the physical barriers before it reaches the child's ears.

I believe the greatest contribution of the expectant father is to create a warm and loving atmosphere. Because the unborn child is very much a part of her mom, everything — not just talking — the father does directly for the mother, he does directly for the child. The mother's experience of the pregnancy can be drastically changed by the father's attitude toward her and the pregnancy itself. A wonderful pregnancy for the mother means a wonderful experience for the child. All this positive energy will be transmitted to the child by the mother's warmer, richer voice.

### *THE MOTHER TONGUE*

The mother's voice is more than an emotional nutrient and a source of vital energy for the unborn child. The rhythms of intonations specific to her voice and to the language she speaks, which is to become the child's mother tongue, impregnates her nervous system. Right from that time in life, the child "embodies" the "music of language." Psychologists and linguists, as well as parents, have always been startled by the amazing rate at which children acquire language. One of the reasons for the rapid rate of acquisition may be that it started well before birth. Henry Truby mentions that a six-month-old fetus already moves his body to the rhythm of his mother's speech.<sup>3</sup>

Children placed into a different language environment after birth provide vivid examples that language acquisition starts in the womb. Steven, a child adopted by an English-speaking family, came to The Listening Centre because of a history of learning disabilities. After a few days of working with Steven, it became obvious to me that his problem was primarily a motivational one — he did not want to learn. He had become a master of avoidance, making teachers and parents believe that he was not able to study. While talking to Steven's mother about his interests and hobbies, she mentioned his fascination with the French-language channels on TV. The mother could not understand this fascination because he had not studied French at school. At my request, the parents inquired further about Steven's birth mother, only to discover that she was French Canadian. I recommended Steven be placed in a French immersion program at school. Despite the added difficulty of the new language and of his

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so-called learning disability, Steven soon became more motivated and started doing well at school. Such stories illustrate the key role of prenatal life in the acquisition of the mother tongue. The pregnant mother who lives in a bilingual or multilingual milieu should try to use the language she is most comfortable with – her mother tongue – as much as she can. A Spanish-speaking mother who lives in the U.S. and has almost no opportunity to speak Spanish, should make a point of singing, reading out loud or telling stories in Spanish during her pregnancy. This will help the child later in life to learn both Spanish and English. As we will see in the next chapter, the assimilation of other languages is possible and easy for a child once she has good mastery of her first language – her mother tongue.

Talking to the unborn child becomes critical during the fifth month of pregnancy – a time when the inner ear and its connections with the brain are operational. However, it seems very possible that the child hears even before this time. I would advise mothers to start their “daily chat” with the unborn child as soon as they know that they are expecting.

### MOTHER’S MOTIONS

The ear is a receptor of movements and all movements of the mother are recorded by the unborn child. As with any other sensory stimulation, these movements have an energizing effect on the child’s rapidly developing brain; they also contribute to the future development of motor functions.

Thus, walking, rocking, swimming and low impact exercises are activities that should be practiced by the mother-to-be. To facilitate the harmonization of both levels of the child’s ear – the auditory and the body level – the mother should synchronize these movements with the sound of her own voice. For example, she could rock while telling stories or reciting poetry at the same time, or dancing to the sound of her own singing. Participating in natural birth exercises not only help the mother relax and prepare her for labor and delivery, they also provide both her and her child with sensory stimulation.

### LISTENING AT BIRTH

The ear is the sensory witness of the birth process. Sounds and movements of labor and delivery will be forever recorded. The mother’s breathing, the instructions of the doctors, the sounds of pain, or

excitement are all perceived by the child. The baby will also hear the very first sound she makes in this world — her first cry. At birth, the baby is suddenly exposed to an entirely different set of gravity rules. She no longer floats in the womb. Memory of these multiple sound and body experiences will often be hidden from our consciousness, but they will always remain present somewhere within ourselves. Our fears, dreams and fantasies will reflect them.

The traumatic nature of birth for both the mother and the child has been described many times. While giving birth is a very natural process, it has been turned into a medical concern. With its strong lighting, medical instruments and so many strangers, the delivery room may appear to the anxious mother as a torture room.

To the criticism that hospital birth is too harsh, too violent for the mother and the newborn, the medical community’s reply is that things are done this way to decrease the chances of problems. The decline in child mortality at birth these last few decades supports their point. However, a new generation of physicians, following the path set by Frederic Leboyer,<sup>4</sup> insists that there are other ways endangering her life. Leboyer’s approach respects the naturalness and the intimacy of birth for the benefit of both the mother and the child.

Through her voice, her touch, the warmth of her body, the mother can ensure a smooth transition between the world inside the womb and the new world. By being physically close to the child, during the first moments of her new life, she helps the newborn experience this difficult transition without a sense of abandonment or rejection.

### INTERRUPTED DIALOGUE

Newborn children may need to be placed in an incubator because of a health problem, or premature birth. The sad reality is that for these very reasons, they desperately need the warm, reassuring, soothing and nurturing presence of their mother.

Premature birth in particular imposes a sudden, often unexpected interruption of the mother-child dialogue. The child is cut off far too early from the sensory stimulation provided in the womb, so critical for her future motor and language development.

The incubator is sort of a sterile "bubble" that not only deprives the child of sensory stimulation, but also isolates her at the very moment she needs the physical and emotional nearness of her mother. This has become the concern of many specialists, and some incubators are now equipped with loudspeakers transmitting pre-recorded heartbeat sounds to simulate the environment of the womb.

One possible way to help the newborn child compensate for the missing sensory stimulation and the interrupted mother-child dialogue is to use recordings of the mother's voice in the incubator. This would help the child's desire to "open up," whereas lack of stimulation can make her "turn off" listening and communication altogether. The decision to open up or turn off can greatly influence the child's perception of herself, of others and of the world around her for the rest of her life. Some hospitals in Europe are now diffusing the mother's voice in incubators to create a conducive environment for the newborn.

### **LIFE BEFORE ADOPTION**

Another interruption of the dialogue between mother and newborn that may affect her desire to listen and communicate comes when the child is given up for adoption.

Fortunately, the practice of placing newborn children in one or more foster families before finding a permanent home for them is quickly disappearing. These successive separations reinforced feelings of being abandoned and rejected, which began with the initial breakaway from the mother. These successive moves certainly were not a "welcome to life," and many youngsters and adults are still suffering from their effects.

Steps are being taken to ease the adoption process. An increasing number of newborns are adopted by their new families at the time of birth. Encounters between the natural mother and the potential adoptive parents are organized during pregnancy and the mother has a say in the choice of new parents for her child. This kind of preparation before the child is born ensures a better continuity and decreases the trauma of separation.

Despite these preventive measures, the sense of loss and of abandonment may still persist. More than 20 percent of the children who come for help

at The Listening Centre are adopted. This figure is much higher than the general proportion of adopted children in the population, which does not exceed five percent.

Many of the adopted children and adolescents I have worked with shared certain characteristics, such as a sense of isolation; they also had problems with authority figures, lack of physical and emotional closeness and were ill at ease with the physical signs of affection. And almost all of the adopted people I saw had an ambivalent relation-



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ship with their adoptive mother. As children, they had usually sought her attention, but in a way that made the mother react negatively. In other words, they seemed to ask the mother to reject them over and over again. First directed toward the mother this attitude later affected their relationship with their siblings, particularly if they were younger. If they happened to be natural children, the situation was even worse. Then, at the age of puberty, these problems at home extended to the school and in social situations.

I want to insist on the fact that I only talk about adopted youngsters that I have worked with. I know many adopted people who do not have any of these problems. At the end of a lecture on adoption, one woman was happy to tell me that she did not present any of the problems I described, even though she was adopted, while another, also adopted, said I was "right on."

There is good reason to believe that the experience of pregnancy makes a world of difference to a child's future development. Many mothers who gave their baby up for adoption enjoyed the pregnancy, welcoming the baby into life. Every-

thing should be done to create an atmosphere around expectant mothers that is conducive to this welcome. Of all mothers-to-be, they are those who need the most and have it the least. When the father's support is absent, or when the family turns its back on the woman, it is up to us as a society, as friends and neighbors, to lend the mother a helping hand. ♦

1. Verny, T. (1981). The Secret Life of the Unborn Child. New York: Dell Publishing, pp. 22-23.
2. Verny, T. The Secret Life of the Unborn Child, pp. 30-31.
3. Verny, T. The Secret Life of the Unborn Child, pp. 21.
4. Leboyer, F. (1974). Birth without Violence. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

#### **About The Author**

Born in France, Paul Madaule studied psychology at the Sorbonne while training with Dr. Alfred Tomatis. In 1978, Madaule moved to Toronto, Canada, where he co-founded The Listening Centre. In addition to setting up the Listening Centres in North America, Madaule has a busy schedule giving lectures and listening workshops. He is the co-author and co-editor of *About the Tomatis Method*. Paul Madaule is currently director of the Listening Centre in Toronto. To order *When Listening Comes Alive*, published by Moulin, please refer to the back page.