

An Inside Look At Auditory Training

by Thomas A. McKean

I will always remember the first time I ever talked to Temple Grandin. This was before I wrote the Mira Trilogy, before I joined the Board of Directors, before I "got involved." I got her number from an old Advocate someone gave me, and she was returning my call. This was around 11:00pm, and the conversation was a total disaster. The fault for this was certainly mine, and Temple (who has since become a friend) has told me she remembers nothing of the conversation. Needless to say, I smiled when she said that, and did nothing to jog her memory.

But in the chaos that was the conversation, she gave me some advice. It is advice that is as old as the hills. But I think it still applies today, especially to those of us who write and speak regularly. She said, "All you can do is call them like you see them." And that is what I am going to do in this article. I recently went to Cincinnati, to "Comprehensive Concepts in Speech and Hearing," to have auditory training. I would like to recount my experience with you now.

This all came about late in 1991 when I received mail from Tina Veale, in Cincinnati. She had just set up the auditory training, and had read my article in the state of Ohio ASA newsletter about the auditory dysfunction. She wrote asking me for more information on my adaptive devices.

I have a very strict policy about calling the people who write to me. I believe very strongly that if someone takes the time to write to me, I should take the time to respond in some form. During that conversation, I was invited to hear her speak to the Northwest Ohio chapter in Toledo. I rounded up two friends and pathetically begged them to come with me (my own car was not up to such a trip at that time).

The three of us had front row seats. And as I sat there listening to Tina explain the process and the theory behind it, a little (very little) of my skepticism melted. After her presentation, she asked me what I thought of the process. I told her flat out that the only way she was going to get me to believe in it was to put the headphones on me and prove it. She immediately told me she was willing to do just that.

Considering the cost of auditory training, and considering the fact that my ears are quite sensitive, I would have been a fool to turn down that offer. But I turned it down anyway. My perception of auditory training was, "Here, wear my magic headphones for 10 hours, and I will fix your ears." See, I grew up in a home with the world's most skeptical parents. And I guess a little rubbed off on me because I didn't buy it.

As I became more involved with the ASA, I continued to read more about auditory training. I looked for bad things, but I couldn't find any. Articles and letters claimed kids had been helped. Parents told me it made all the difference. Then, at the conference in Albuquerque, Annabel Stehli finally talked me into it. I made an appointment with Tina. I went in somewhat reluctantly, but with an open mind.

The office was quite a bit smaller than what I had imagined it would be. I guess this is because I had seen a video of someone getting auditory training, and it was a child sitting in this big room. He was wearing the headphones and he was sitting on this mat in the middle of a floor. There were tons of toys all around him, and he seemed quite happy to engage himself with one toy in particular.

But Tina's place was not like that. In fact, the training was in a very small room. There were two little "cubbies" in the room, they were across from each other. There was one machine for each cubby. One was the French model, one was American. The idea was to be able to do two people at once. I observed through the two weeks that most of the kids seemed to either sleep or played with some small toy to keep their interest.

First came the initial audiogram. I was told I would need a hearing aid at some point, because I had significant hearing loss. I said, "I know. 10% in the right ear." To which she replied, "No, it is much more than that." This led me to speculate that my hearing has gotten worse since the operation on my eardrum in the 70's. I did, at one point, mention the hearing aid to my mother, just in passing. She told me not to worry about it because "every audiogram shows that you are going deaf." But I have decided not to be surprised if it came down to a hearing aid someday very soon.

Later that afternoon, I had my first "session." I walked into the room, sat down in the little cubby. They said they were going to raise the volume and to tell them when it was getting a little loud, which I did. I grew a little excited at this point. One of my main questions about auditory training was what kind of music they played. It was reggae music. I had not heard much reggae up to that point, and I decided to sit back and enjoy a true cultural experience. Mixed in with the reggae was some 15 year-old Stevie Wonder, and even Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits album, which I am very familiar with, having studied his music for several years. They explained to me that there were five or six CD's in the player, and that one song was selected at random from each CD, which in total made up the half hour of music. Usually, it was closer to 25 minutes, which suited me just fine.

The music itself was filtered true to form, at 4000 and 8000 hertz. To me, it sounded like cymbals placed at random locations within the music. You would be chugging along with the tune, and all of a sudden, you would hear a distortion that sounded somewhat like a "clash" and then you were back to where you were. I found the "clashes" to be a bit painful in the ears, while the rest of the

time it was quite pleasant. More pleasant than usual, in fact. This process was repeated for ten days. Twice a day for 1/2 hour, 4 hours apart.

Somewhere into the middle of the first week, I began to notice some changes. The best example of this is the fact that the hotel door had an awful squeal to it when it was opened. At first, this bothered me greatly. But as time passed and as I continued the training, the squeal grew less and less annoying. This caused me to go into training and ponder the 9th chapter of Acts of the Apostles while I was listening. Paul completely changed his mind in light (so to speak) of the new evidence that was facing him. It looked like I might have to do the same. Paul was all too happy to change his mind. It was beginning to look like the same would happen for me.

However well this worked for me, there were still some things about it that I did not like. For instance, the music stayed the same for the duration of the two weeks. They explained that out of 500 some CD's tested, they had found only 30 or so that were qualified for auditory training. Six of those thirty were in the CD player. And while it is certainly not mandatory to change the CD's, I feel that different music would make the process not only more tolerable, but also more enjoyable.

There were also a few times that I felt a bit "talked down to" by one of the staff. I don't think she meant to do this, it may have just kind of "happened." Please allow me insert a gentle reminder here for everyone reading this. I say this every time I speak, and almost every time I talk to individual parents. And I repeat it here again because I feel it is that important. These children, despite what the statistics say, they DO have intelligence! They KNOW when they are being patronized, they KNOW when you are talking about them behind their back. Please, PLEASE treat them with the respect and the dignity that you would with anyone else. They deserve this. And I feel that you will also see some improvement. Those of you who work with the autistic population, please watch yourselves. Very few things hurt us as bad as others thinking we are aliens or babies. We are not. We are people. Flesh and blood with thoughts and feelings. Feelings which can be, and are, easily hurt. I see this happen so often in my travels. It is not intentional on the part of the people doing it, just as it was not intentional in Cincinnati. But it does happen. And it needs to stop.

The device used in the training was the audiokinotron. The Berard device. I was very fascinated by the technical aspects of how both the audiokinotron and the BGC worked. Later, when I had the pleasure of visiting Dr. Edelson, he let me play with both of them. My thanks to Dr. Edelson for allowing me to do this. It answered many questions for me.

When I left Cincinnati to return to Columbus, my hearing had definitely changed for the better. I noticed I could turn the stereo in my car up a little louder than before. (And I did, when "Rock & Roll Heaven" came onto the oldies station.) The

sirens that go by my apartment on the OSU campus did not bother me as much as they used to. For now, instead of hurting, all they did was wake me up in the middle of the night. And I am assuming they do that for everyone. Doors closing, dogs barking, babies crying, people talking to me on the phone, all these things were pain free for the first time in many, many years. I stopped carrying the earplugs around with me, and I began to wonder if all that work I put into rewiring my telephone was really worth it.

(Side note: When I told Temple (during that same first call mentioned above) about my phone modification, she told me I was not the first to think of it. But since I was the first to publish it, it seems I am getting all the credit. This modification greatly reduces the pain from hypersensitivity when talking on the phone. If anyone wants a copy of my schematic, send a SASE to me at the address below. I will send it out to you.)

Tina was a genius. And very dedicated. She sold her home and moved herself and her family into a smaller one, just so she could afford the Audiokinetrone, the BGC, and the training from Berard. It seemed to have worked in my case. Just like she said it would.

A couple of months later, my parents went to their cabin in Tennessee. They asked me to stay at the house and look after things while they were gone. Standard procedure. I was putting the dishes away in the cupboard. I put the plates down on the shelf. The pain was almost unbearable. What happened? I thought I was over this! I walked over to the dishwasher, got some more plates and put them on the shelf, thinking it really didn't happen. It happened again. I stood quietly, looking at that monster that was the rest of the dishes. They looked back at me as if laughing at me in a merciless, malicious fashion. They looked back as if they knew they had won. I realized then that if I were the dishes, I would have done the same thing. I wondered why I had not thought to bring the ear protection I had always brought before. I finished the dishes. Very slowly.

Later that night, the dogs started barking. That bothered me. I had to turn the TV down while I was watching "Nick At Nite." (Preserving Our Precious Television Heritage.) I longed for the modified phone until I got back to my apartment. It is like I blinked my eyes, and had never gone to Cincinnati.

Annabel Stehli informs me that sometimes there is not much noticeable difference in the 3rd to 6th month. If this is true, then I have two more months of this ahead of me. Not a very pleasant thing to look forward to. I am hoping it will settle down again, but only time will tell. I long for the freedom that Tina once gave me. They say you can't miss what you never had. It has been many years since my ears have been normal, until now. I had forgotten what a pleasant experience it was to be able to hear like everyone else. I do not know what caused it to go back to where it was, perhaps think it was just meant to be. Auditory training works, but like all things, it does not work for everyone.

One thing I feel obligated to do as a board member is thoroughly investigate EVERY type of treatment available for autism. I feel that I need to do this to be better informed so as to make myself a more valuable asset to the board and on the lecture circuit. (Not to mention to find more answers to my own questions.) I now feel I have looked at auditory training from every angle. Below is a list of questions to ask auditory training practitioners, based on this research, and from talking extensively to the people listed below.

1. Were they trained to do auditory training? Who trained them? Were they trained by Berard or a Berard certified trainer? If they were NOT trained by either of these, don't even bother asking the rest of the questions. Hang up the phone and try someone else. If they say they were trained by Berard and you are still suspicious, ask to see the certificate.

2. Do they do anything at all different from what Berard suggests? If so, what is the reason? Why do they feel their way is better? You will have to use your own judgement in this case, but the closer they are to Berard's original method, the better your results will be.

3. Ask for references. Ask for both professional references and also ask for the phone numbers of at least three people who have gone through the training with this person. Call all references. If they are unwilling to give references, look for someone who has nothing to hide.

4. What do they charge for Auditory Training? If they charge much over \$1,000.00, chances are you can get a much better deal somewhere else.

5. Are they willing to come to you? There are some people who are willing to come to your town if a certain amount of people request it. Be careful, because a lot of people charge extra for this.

6. How are the children occupied during training? They should not be allowed to read or to sleep. They should be alert and doing something that causes them to listen to the music.

7. What kind of music is used? Is the music changed at any time during the training? My research shows that the best music to use is reggae, Mozart, or something else with a beat that covers all frequencies.. Berard strongly suggests that the music be picked at random for each session. Some people have the same CD's on the entire time, others refuse to play the same thing twice during the 10 days. Either way, make sure that the music they use is on Berard's list.

8. Do they do audiograms? Some people feel they are unimportant. The reality is they are the MOST important part of the procedure. Make sure that three (3) audiograms are included in the deal. Also make sure they are done by a certified audiologist.

9. How open are they about the training? They should be willing to tell you everything they are doing. Ask to have the audiogram explained to you. Ask them where they are filtering the music, and where they are setting the volume. Finally, ask to hear a sample of what your child will be hearing, or to sit in on a session with your child. Also inquire about aftercare.

10. Add your own questions here. I am sure I forgot a few.

I do not know what else to say, except to publicly thank Tina for the training. (Thanks, Tina. And thanks for the counseling in the office.) She wanted to prove to me that auditory training was valid, and she succeeded. I am now convinced that auditory training does indeed have beneficial effects for many individuals. It is NOT an experience I wish to repeat, but the end results may justify the means if the procedure is done correctly. If anyone has any specific questions, please feel free to write or call me. I will be happy to answer them.