



the  
magic of  
Mozart

By Elizabeth McBreen  
Photos by Frank Koester

Parents of autistic child thank the Tomatis Method  
for bringing their daughter back

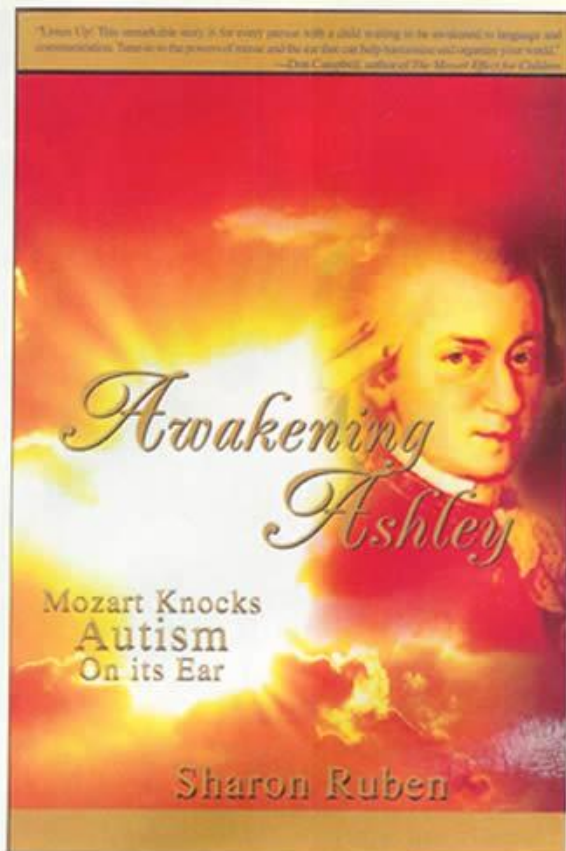
**A**shley Ruben was 18 months old when her parents had her hearing tested. Her mother, Sharon, had become concerned about Ashley's failure to respond to her name. When the tests showed that Ashley's hearing was fine, it left Ruben and her husband, Dave, with no physical explanation for why their daughter did not interact with them. There were other concerns as well. Ashley never had strong muscle control and had a speech delay. "You don't like to compare your children," says Ruben of Ashley and her older sister Kacey, "but Kacey flew through all of her milestones and Ashley always seemed about 3 to 6 months behind."

A speech evaluation was conducted following Ashley's hearing tests. According to her therapist, Ashley was not only behind in speech development, but she was not engaging, pointing or following directions. "She was not with us," says Ruben. "It was like she was in her own little world."

After a series of unsatisfying visits to doctors and specialists, Ruben consciously decided to become her daughter's advocate. She was determined to make sure Ashley received a proper diagnosis and treatment. One night, while doing research online, Ruben came across a startling possibility. She had entered the phrase "speech delay" into a search field and the results yielded article after article on autism. Ruben asked her developmental pediatrician about the possibility of Ashley being autistic. She was told that Ashley was indeed on the spectrum, but the diagnosis came with good news. "While he had labeled her, he thought there was a lot of hope because of her visual and creative abilities." After this visit, Ruben would leave no stone unturned in her quest to reclaim her daughter. She and her husband pursued both traditional and alternative therapies. Occupational therapy, speech therapy, a gluten free diet and skin brushing all became everyday elements of the Rubens' lives.

Once a treatment regime was in place, Ashley "began to wake up," according to her mother. As she began to show improvement and her vocabulary grew, a visit to the psychologist opened another door that would lead to astonishing changes in Ashley's life. Her psychologist discovered that Ashley had problems with auditory processing. Ashley could hear the words of others clearly, but they were not being processed properly. After the visit, Ruben visited the Web site that Ashley's psychologist had written down for her. As Ruben read about the Tomatis Method, she found that Ashley matched many of the characteristics describing a poor listener. Since her laughter seemed to fall into the specific category that the Tomatis Method claimed to help, she made an appointment at the Spectrum Center in Bethesda, Md.

The Tomatis Method was designed by Dr. Alfred Tomatis, a French ear, nose and throat specialist. It is a form of auditory training for those who have problems



processing what they hear. According to Tomatis, hearing is a passive action while listening is active. In order to listen, the brain has to process all of the sounds taken in by the ear. Tomatis believed that some people cannot hear at all frequencies and his experiments showed that "when our ears cannot hear certain frequencies, our voice does not contain them either." The goal of his method is to strengthen the ear muscles by exposing them to altering sound frequencies, thereby "retraining" his subjects' ears.

The sound stimulation that Tomatis used was based on how a fetus hears its mother's voice from the womb. In the 1950s, when Tomatis was developing this method, the claim that a fetus could hear its mother's voice was groundbreaking.

Since the 1950s, Tomatis' observations have been proven accurate. Before a child is born, it hears the high frequencies of its mother's voice by way of bone conduction through her spinal column. The high frequency sound of her voice "wires the fetus for language and prepares it to hear and attach meaning to language outside the womb, when it is born," explains Ruben. Since he could not reproduce the high frequencies that fetuses hear in utero, Tomatis turned to Mozart. Much of the classical composer's music has high frequencies. Tomatis filtered out the





Sharon Ruben with husband Dave (left) and daughter Ashley.

low frequencies in the music and found that what remained caused improvement in his subjects' speech, energy level and coordination.

Tomatis found that people who do not have the ability to filter what they hear, are in turn constantly bombarded with a series of distracting and disorienting sounds. Such is the case with many autistic children. It was, in fact, the case for Ashley. Her inability to process sounds correctly was having a profoundly negative effect on her speech. Once Ashley had been evaluated and accepted as a candidate by the Center, she began receiving treatments based on the Tomatis Method. The treatment is initially administered in three loops. The first is 15 days long, followed by a four to six week break. The second loop is eight days long, followed by another four to six week break. The final loop is another eight days. From the beginning of her first loop, Ashley began to hear varying frequencies that would begin to strengthen and retrain her ear. She heard the frequencies through a device called an "electronic ear." Ruben's voice was used in conjunction with Mozart. The addition of her voice more closely reproduced the environment of the womb. During each day of therapy, Ashley was tuned into the electronic ear for two intensive hours. The Rubens saw improvements in Ashley immediately. "When she came out of the elevator after the first session, she was smiling," says her mother. Ashley had rarely ever shown emotion of any kind before beginning the Tomatis Method. On the second day of her first loop, the Rubens were returning home and Ashley spoke her first spontaneous sen-

tence. "It was like Tomatis was waking her up," says Ruben. Although the Rubens do not underestimate what the therapy did for their daughter, they feel that Ashley's age was in their favor. "We feel very lucky that we started it early," Dave Ruben says. "There were kids at the center who were much older than Ashley. Because she was so young, her brain was still very malleable." By the end of the first loop, Ashley was speaking, had more energy, initiated pretend play and was more social. Her parents were finally able to relish in the ups and downs of her young life. "In four months, Ashley had gone from 'easy baby' (not caring much about anyone or anything) to talking, singing and expressing herself as an individual in true toddler fashion. Changes were happening so fast and furious with Ashley that I never knew which personality I'd get each day - a happy Ashley using her new words and communicating her wants and needs, or a cranky toddler whose independence was emerging," Ruben says.

Although Ashley is an excellent case of what Tomatis can accomplish, her progress is by no means an anomaly. "I would estimate that two out of every three children who receive this treatment, undergo a complete transformation," Dejean explains. "They begin speaking and interacting. It changes their lives."

The Rubens say that the Tomatis Method gave them a ray of hope and accomplished everything for their daughter that they hoped it would. Their advice to parents of autistic children is to become educated in the field of autism, network with others in the community and to begin treatment as early as possible. They feel that the Tomatis Method should at least be explored as a treatment option. They also say that teaching others is often a necessary element of raising an autistic child. "You really have to pull together and educate everyone, even your family," Dave Ruben says. "You have to teach the science behind what you are doing."

Ruben now has a full-time consulting business for parents of autistic children. She speaks with people all over the world about how to deal with diagnosis and how to cope while finding and administering treatment. Tomatis is at the core of Ruben's consulting work, but she suggests other therapies for those who are not able to access Tomatis.