

## From the book *Families of Adults With Autism: Stories and Advice for the Next Generation*

By Kristin Zhivago

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**M**ichael is 47 going on five. He used to be going on three, but now he's five, because he speaks in full sentences. This is a fairly new development, starting with ear retraining about fifteen years ago.

It wasn't until we retrained his hearing that we realized he'd spent most of his life unable to hear consonants. If we said, "Hi, Michael, how are you today?" he heard: "Hi, Ile, how are ou uay?" This is what he would repeat back to us—just as he heard it. And we would invariably say, "What?"

For most of his life, Michael was stuck in a one-way communication hell, where he heard us, then repeated what we said to him exactly as he heard it, only to find us perplexed. This was frustrating for him, to say the least. So when we did understand him, he would be gleeful, and he would repeat that phrase over and over, so glad that we'd connected.

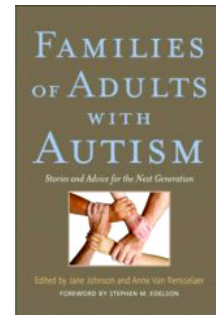
After we retrained his hearing, he could finally hear high-frequency sounds, such as s, t, and f. He started to teach himself to talk using consonants. Now instead of saying, "Wanna go wal?" he can say, "I want to go for a walk, please." "Where are we going?" "What's her name?" He is still having trouble with the "s" sound, because it involves an invisible trick: You must know that the tongue has to be pulled back from behind the teeth. Try showing someone where your tongue is when you say the letter "s" and you will see what I mean. Your teeth are in the way. Also, years of seizure medications have given Michael a tongue that is a bit swollen. But he continues to work on it, and has mastered a lispy "s" that often gets the point across.

After his ear retraining, I remember we had a "Helen Keller moment." We were taking one of our long drives, and this time we found ourselves in an agricultural area in the eastern area of San Diego county. We were driving past miles of irrigation ditches. Michael loves puddles, and loves to slam his foot down in any puddle he passes, spraying water all around. So he often points out creeks and other water. As we went past these irrigation ditches, he kept saying, "Wa-er" as he always did, and I kept correcting him. "Honey, it's Wa-TER," I said, over and over. He kept watching my face, and listening, and trying, and finally he got it, and was thrilled. It goes without saying that the "wa-ter" was the most popular word for the rest of the trip.

We always knew that Michael had sensitivity to low-frequency sounds. Even as an infant, passing motorcycles and airplanes caused him to put both hands on his ears. Now we understand that all appliances, even when they're turned off, "growl" at him. (Turn off your TV, put your ear up against it, and you will hear that "hum." That "hum" is very, very loud for people like Michael.)

In fact, he calls telephone poles "monsters" because the transformers on the poles emit a low-frequency hum that, for him, can be very frightening. I remember one day in particular, we were taking a long walk, and hadn't gotten back to our car yet until after sunset. The growling from the telephone poles along the road made him desperate to get into a car—any car—so we could drive away from the danger.

Once we understand the sensitivity of their "wiring," we can start to decode the way they're acting.



I first became aware of the hearing issues when seeing an interview of “Georgie” and her mother. Georgie went through the ear retraining as described in the book, *Hearing Equals Behavior* by Guy Berard, MD. Her mother had written a book about Georgie’s transformation from a petrified child to a well-functioning adult, thanks to the ear retraining, called *Sound of a Miracle: A Child’s Triumph Over Autism*.

It was difficult to find people who could conduct the ear retraining properly (its formal name is Auditory Integration Therapy), but we did. First she tested Michael for sensitivities by putting earphones on his head (not something he wanted to do!), then playing sounds that would cause him to react in some way (sometimes very violently). But she was sensitive to his facial expressions and reactions, and we already knew that low-frequency, “rumbling” sounds were a problem, so she didn't have to subject him to that particular test.

Michael then listened to filtered music through headphones, twice a day for ten days, for a half an hour each session. And yes, he had to be convinced that it was the right thing for him to do. But he calmed down after a while, because the music was intentionally filtered to exclude the sounds he found hurtful. He got so he could finally hear the high-frequency sounds that he had never heard before, and thus began his journey into the world of hearing, and then saying, consonants.

It wasn't until he had mastered some of the consonants that we realized what a difference the ear retraining had made, and that he'd never been able to repeat what we said because he simply couldn't hear everything.

We have experimented with many other things for Michael, including “Cell Food,” which we purchase through LuminaHealth.com, which helps his mental alertness, the B supplements that Dr. Bernie Rimland recommends, DMG, and something called Reconcostat which adjusts his pH balance; these have provided some benefit. But none of them compares to the change in his life due to the ear retraining, with one exception: Wendy Smith.

Wendy Smith was the supervisor of Michael’s house for many years, part of the Home of Guiding Hands in Lakeside, California. Wendy has her own autistic son, and so is particularly aware of how autistic people think. But she also has a unique talent for creating programs that help the autistic person grow and develop. She has done a fantastic job of training the staff at Michael’s house, so they understand how to approach him, how to help him deal with frustration, and how to help him learn, and to do the right thing. Michael has blossomed in that environment, where the staff apply consistent guidance, day in and day out. The other staff members at the Home of Guiding Hands, including new supervisors at his house, have also been fantastic - a true blessing. Michael continues to improve, and is basically a happy person.