

Aural Education for Children with Hearing Impairment

Since past two decades, Aural Education for Children with Hearing Impairment (AURED), through its 'Auditory approach', is striving hard to integrate hearing-impaired children and -making them independent. **Kavita Tate** explores the successful journey of this NGO.

Having a child with any sort of disability, whether physical or mental, is extremely difficult to cope with, especially for the parents. One of the most difficult parts of having a hearing-impaired child is the 'discovery' process. In several cases, many other afflictions are considered before the true cause of unexplained behaviour is revealed: deafness. Once the kid is diagnosed as deaf and clarified how it happened, starts the treatment options and training. Here comes the role of organisations like AURED, which through effective therapy programmes like 'Auditory verbal therapy', are helping deaf children recover partial hearing and teach them the vital life skills to make up for the absence of hearing.

The journey

AURED started as an early intervention centre in 1986. In the last 22 years, the organisation has grown from six students to the currently enrolled 470. Its aim is to habilitate children with hearing impairment and integrate them into mainstream schools. The specific method used by the centre is 'Auditory approach', which believes in the concept of 'listen and speak' for the hearing impaired. Contrary to the general belief, the organisation believes that 95 per cent of the children with hearing impairment have residual hearing, and with early detection & intervention, they can learn to listen and speak as well.

Since initiation, AURED has provided support to more than a thousand children with hearing impairment. The centre was started in a modified kitchen with six children. It was later shifted to the backroom of an apartment, and then to a 180-sq ft garage. Today, about 470 beneficiaries are enrolled at the King George Vth Memorial, Mumbai. More than



108 of these children have been enrolled between the ages of three months to three years, and so have had the benefit of early intervention. AURED has worked with hundreds of children, not only from Mumbai, but from several other cities in India and other countries as well.

Remembers Aziza Tyabji Hydari, founder director, AURED, "When AURED first started its journey, it was a 'mission with a struggle'. Auditory verbal therapy was not well-known and had not been put into practice in India. There were many who were skeptical. The only support we had was of the parents of six profoundly deaf children, who were willing to 'experiment' with this exciting new concept of 'listen and speak'. The extent of their faith was worth it. Today, as 20 year olds, they are able to communicate through spoken language, appreciate music, mix with hearing peers, are integrated members of society, and more amazingly are bi-lingual."

A positive approach

In AURED, children take part in one-on-one teaching sessions. Therapy is conducted in four major languages:

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English, Hindi, Marathi and Gujarati. Parents are considered as the primary caregivers, and are required to participate in teaching sessions to enable them to learn how to use the auditory approach in their homes. No sign language or lip reading is used.

AURED believes in the importance of early intervention. The reason, informs Hydari, "Recent research indicates that the critical period of 'learning' starts from the sixth month of pregnancy, up to two years, and therefore, early diagnosis & intervention is essential. Children with significant hearing loss, who receive hearing aids before the age of six months, and a cochlear implant between the ages of seven months to one year, can develop language skills similar to those children with normal hearing. Those who receive implants between 18-24 months of age, acquire only two-thirds of language skills in comparison."

AURED depends on donations and support from other trusts, foundations and individual donors. It also has its own trust - the AURED Charitable Trust, which was founded in 1991. AURED has established a satellite centre in Hyderabad and Kenya, and an affiliate centre in Delhi. Around 320 students have been referred from 65 cities within India and 14 neighbouring countries. More than 80 per cent of the students come from low-income group. They are taught free or have to pay fees on a sliding scale.

It invites world-renowned consultants annually to conduct staff development workshops to keep in touch with new research and technology. Over the past 13 years, the centre has extended its facilities and included therapy & habilitation for hearing impaired children who have had cochlear implants. An auditory verbal approach is required for their post-operative habilitation, and the centre has several years of experience in this method. Several members of the staff have attended training programmes in Austria, Australia, Denmark, the UK and the US. This has helped to keep the centre abreast of progress in technology and habitation.

Also, various events like regular picnics, group interactions, fancy dress, birthdays, and festivals like *Diwali*, Christmas, etc take place at AURED.

The facilities

AURED has a well-stocked library with the latest books on auditory verbal approach, as well as audio & video cassettes, which are regularly updated. This enables teachers and parents to update their knowledge on new technology and on the amazing possibilities available in this field. Teaching aids and books developed by AURED are available and can be used by parents and therapists

irrespective of what language the child is taught in. These aids follow the development stages of the auditory approach.

A number of graduate and post graduate students from the Ali Yavar Jung National Institute for the hearing handicapped are provided with the facility to collect data from student records at AURED, and are also able to conduct speech, language and audiological tests on students, which facilitates their data collection.

AURED conducts workshops for professionals. The purpose of these workshops is to introduce the auditory approach and cochlear implant management to professionals who are working with hearing impaired children.

The organisation also develops CDs for teaching, within the parameters of the auditory approach in keeping with the different stages of auditory development in individual children. A pilot project was undertaken to determine the practicality of developing CDs as a tool for teaching. Based on the findings, a platform has been outlined, known as 'teach your own child' series. The first of these is already available to therapists, teachers and parents. Each CD has structured lessons through illustrations and animations for developing listening skills. This package will be of great assistance to outstation children who cannot attend regular bi-weekly sessions. These CDs can aid therapy in any language, as these are 'silent' CDs.

Other facilities include:

- ◆ Audiological management
- ◆ Visual reinforced audiometry - freefield (VRA), which is frequency specific apparatus. It has been developed by Hydari
- ◆ Hearing aid bank and loan facility for cochlear implants
- ◆ Mobile testing unit to test pre-school and school children
- ◆ Hearing aid trials and selection
- ◆ Audiograms & mapping for cochlear implant recipients and hearing aid users
- ◆ Free medical advice and attention from the panel of honorary doctors
- ◆ Distance learning via email
- ◆ A CCTV system for central monitoring of therapy sessions, to enable visitors, parents, therapists to view sessions without disturbing the child

Going forward

AURED is all set to develop an early detection and intervention centre for young babies, and affiliate centres in other cities. "With early detection and intervention centre, we would like to reach out to as many children as possible on a

free or subsidised basis. For this, we require equipment that will cost almost Rs 20,00,000 and enough space. By setting up affiliate centres our reach will be tremendous. Our aim is to reduce disability. By setting up affiliate centres, thousands of children will have the opportunity to develop their skills in listening and speaking, and therefore be an integrated part of the society," says Hydari.

Children are often labelled slow learners, dyslexic, autistic or just lazy, when the reason for substandard performance may just be an undetected hearing loss. It is, therefore, important to diagnose these problems as early as possible to enable immediate intervention, preventing further damage. Thus, AURED is launching a 'Mobile testing unit' soon to start neonatal screening for early detection and intervention.

Also, it intends to extend its reach to rural areas. A noise pollution awareness campaign is next in line with emphasis on the effect of noise on hearing. A CD is being developed to visually substantiate facts. This will be shown in schools, colleges, housing societies and public places. There would be camps to test children in schools,

pre-schools, nurseries and crèches for labourers and slums.

Need to hear

The spirit & teamwork between parents, habilitationist, audiologist, teacher and child is all what makes AURED a success story for hearing impaired children. Unlike many other NGOs, which tackle the hearing impairment with sign language or lip reading, AURED is taking an unexplored path of 'Auditory approach', which without the help of sign, language is making children listen. **MM**

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Key achievements

- ◆ Selected as 'NGO of the month' (March-2007) by the Institut International des droits de l'enfant (IDE), the international institute for the 'Rights of the Child', Switzerland
- ◆ The Aziza Grid has been recognised internationally and has been included in a training programme 'Need to know', developed by Jill Bader, Denver-USA (The programme is being distributed by AG Bell. It is useful for those setting up new cochlear implant management centres)
- ◆ International Affiliate of the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
- ◆ Certificate of Recognition from the World Bank

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