



# Can you hear

# me?

**I**n a room full of light, with posters and drawings and large letters and numbers on the walls, children, aged between three and five, sit on colourful chairs at small tables, busy with cognitive exercises. The room is strangely silent. Although the children do make sounds, the sounds are not words, but uttered emotions – which they can not hear clearly themselves – that underline gestures and signs. I am at the day-care unit of the Association for Children with Language, Speech, and Hearing Impairments of Namibia (CLaSH). The children here are all deaf.

Hearing-impaired children are not that different from any other children. They are just as bright, just as eager to learn and grow, just as playful and innocent. And they are in just as much need of care and shelter and love.

Yet society is full of misconceptions about deafness. For many, deafness means dumbness. Although the word dumb actually means ‘unable to speak’, it is widely used as another word for stupid. Because deaf children can not naturally pick up spoken language and do not respond to sound, they are often regarded as slow or backward. Instead of receiving more attention to help them cope with their impairment, they often receive less, are pushed away and neglected. And so many deaf children grow up with rejection and prejudice, even within their own families and from their own parents. This, more than their actual impairment – with which they could happily cope – gives many deaf children a very difficult and uncertain path in life.

But deafness is a purely physical impairment, and not a mental disorder. It certainly should not lead to retarded devel-

opment or emotional inferiority. Development and learning do not necessarily require hearing. Children use all of their senses to explore their environment. Hearing loss is the loss of one sense, for which the other senses can compensate to a large extent.

Hearing-impaired children only need to be encouraged and stimulated to use their other senses, in order to learn and to grow. The first few years in the life of any child are extremely important in its overall development, in providing a sound foundation on which to build. Here, hearing-impaired children need specific attention, so that their emotional and intellectual development does not lag behind.

Early diagnosis of any hearing loss is therefore extremely important. But most important are empathy and sensitivity in addressing the specific needs of hearing-impaired children, and in providing a sheltered and stimulating environment that is suited to these needs.

The CLaSH Unit is a haven for deaf children, in a world where few really hear their plight, their silent voice. Here the children receive the vitally important early education that will help them deal with their impairment. They are taught Namibian Sign Language (NSL), which, for most, will be their first language, allowing them to communicate freely with each other and with their teachers.

Sadly, parents and caregivers often do not bother to learn NSL, alienating themselves from their deaf children. In many homes, communication between deaf children and their hearing parents is limited to a small repertoire of self-invented signs, born out of necessity and routine.



At CLaSH, emphasis is also placed on voice stimulation, auditory training and lip reading – hearing-impaired children can learn to speak as well as lip read, which certainly makes their life in the world of the hearing much easier. The CLaSH unit has both a deaf and a hearing teacher, who complement each other in providing a balanced pre-school education.

Today, sign language is a recognised language form, as complex and articulate as spoken language. Interestingly, there is no single international sign language, and although there is an international finger alphabet, several countries have their own, two handed alphabet. Most countries, and even different regions within a country, have developed their own sign language. Sometimes the differences are slight, like a dialect, sometimes they are enough to create another language.

Sign language is in many ways more intimate than oral language. The ‘listener’ must always look directly at the ‘speaker’. This creates a more direct and attentive communication. Many of the subtle nuances of sign language are conveyed through facial expressions, through the eyes, the mouth, a movement of the head.

On the other hand, sign language does have some obvious limits – it is impossible to sign in the dark; or to address somebody from behind. A deaf person can also refuse communication by simply looking away.

For the deaf, learning English means learning a second language. Written English has almost no connection to sign language. Although there are many different signs to express different concepts, just as there are different words in English, sign language seldom follows English word order. And sign language can not be readily translated into writing. Most written languages are based on oralism, and pronunciation and spelling are closely linked. If one can never hear written words spoken, they become abstract collections of letters, that must be memorised as entities to be learned.

This can be overcome to a limited extent by making children aware of the vibrations that the vocal cords produce during speech and connecting these to the visually perceptible way the mouth shapes words. If all of these separate entities can be taught simultaneously from an early age, some children will be able to manage them.

In Namibia, there are unfortunately still extreme disparities between the quality of education available for the deaf, compared to that available for the hearing. The CLaSH Unit is the only pre-school facility for deaf children. There are only two schools for the deaf, the Eluwa Special School in the North and the School for the Hearing Impaired at the National Institute for Special Education (NISE) in Windhoek.

There are no tertiary education facilities in Namibia that cater specifically for the deaf. Deaf people here can only dream of such places as the famous Gallaudet University in the United States (which has a deaf president), where an extensive range of courses and subjects is offered. In Europe and America, there are active and autonomous deaf societies, advocating deaf rights and a deaf culture. There are many educational institutions catering for the specific needs of the hearing-impaired. Deaf people are employed in a great variety of professions.

When I asked deaf children at NISE what they would like to become when they grow up, most said things like a cleaner or gardener, reflecting a limited self-esteem and an unambitious general outlook in life. And in a country where unemployment







is generally high, opportunities for the deaf are particularly limited, with the added restrictions of prejudice and an inferior education.

And there are many children with hearing impairments who never receive a formal education at all, never make it to CLaSH, to NISE or Eluwa; they are shunned away to relatives somewhere in the country, where they wait out their life, without any chance of realising their potential, without even being able to truly communicate or participate in society.

In a society that generally finds it difficult to accept and deal with impairments, the deaf have formed their own community. Just as others form a social grouping through their religious beliefs, their language or their ethnic affinity, so the deaf have formed a distinct cultural group.

The Namibian National Association of the Deaf (NNAD), based in Windhoek, forms the core of the Namibian deaf community. NNAD is a relatively young organisation, and still faces many challenges in asserting a deaf culture and deaf rights in Namibia. NNAD provides advice and training, access to computers and translation services, among much else. NSL courses are offered to both hearing and deaf people. There is even a football club for the deaf.

It is a small, tightly-knit community. But it is a community with unconventional membership, dictated firstly by deafness rather than family or other social links. The hearing parents of deaf children generally do not form an integral part of the deaf community. Conversely, the hearing children of deaf parents are often also at odds with it.

In Africa, there is a particularly high prevalence of hearing loss in children, due to a lack of early diagnosis and treatment of ear infections and a high incidence of meningitis and malaria (the strong medication used in the treatment of malaria is extremely damaging to the inner ear).

In an attempt to combat this, CLaSH has initiated and continues to support a mobile audiology clinic, which travels around the most densely populated areas of central northern Namibia, identifying and diagnosing children who have hearing problems and referring them for treatment. Ear operations are periodically organised for children where damage to the middle ear can be corrected.

And so the continuous work of NGOs, government institutions and the deaf themselves is steadily improving the world of the hearing-impaired in Namibia. Access to information is improving – the news and other programmes are now simultaneously translated into NSL on national television. Society is slowly becoming more aware of hearing impairments, and perhaps even aware of this distinct cultural group with its own language. All of this helps to provide a framework to support the hearing-impaired and allow them to realise their potential.

But what the hearing-impaired need most is to be accepted and loved, to be heard and understood as equal members of their own families, and equal members of Namibian society.



**Text and photos Helge Denker © (2005).** Helge is a Namibian freelance photographer and writer. Over the last five years, he has spent much time documenting the world of the hearing-impaired, with a particular focus on children.