

THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL



Françoise Nicoloff

It is not improper to compare language to a melody, no more so than to maintain that the area destined to receive sounds—and especially musical sounds—on the left temporal area of the brain is precisely the one on which the sensory control of speech is grafted.

—Alfred Tomatis, *Écouter l'Univers*

Françoise Nicoloff

Françoise is the founder and director of the Australian Tomatis® Method in Sydney, Australia, and is a registered psychologist. Françoise was trained by Dr. Tomatis in the late 1970s and has been involved in expanding the Tomatis® Method around the world ever since. She has extensive experience in auditory processing, learning and communication difficulties and is considered to be an expert in those fields. Françoise is also becoming an expert in the field of autism as she follows regular training sessions in biomedicine in Sydney with Mindd.org and works with other DAN (Defeat Autism Now) practitioners. Françoise initially began using the Tomatis® Method in France 33 years ago, and she initiated the training and development of the Japanese Center in 1993 while living and working in Tahiti, and, more recently, for the center in Manila (in the Philippines) in 2007.

Françoise has assisted thousands of families in four continents, helping children with emotional and communication problems and learning disabilities. She also works with adults, and has had very positive results in helping them to recover from stress and depression, and in keeping their mental and emotional state at a positive level. She also helps singers with their pitch and shows them how to access the full potential of their voice. She introduced the Tomatis® Method to Australia over 15 years ago to further develop Tomatis's work. Françoise has been president of the International Association of Registered Certified Tomatis® Consultants since 2004 and she is passionate about her work, lecturing all over the world. Her passion is helping people to unlock their abilities and potential.

Françoise is the mother of Segolene, her 20-year-old daughter who was born in Tahiti, and stepmother to two sons. She is married to James, a French *pâtissier*, loves traveling and discovering new countries and people, and enjoys singing and painting.

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CHAPTER 12

The light at the end of the tunnel

A MOTHER'S STORY ABOUT HER SIX-YEAR-OLD AUTISTIC SON

Michael's story began on 17 July 2002, when my wonderful little boy was born. We thought he was a beautiful little angel, who was very good natured, and other people around us saw him the same way.

Michael started walking very early, would slip out of his bed very easily and started saying a few words at a young age. Nevertheless, I noticed that there was something repetitive in his games and gestures. He was a tough little boy with a sturdy character and was headstrong, which all seemed very normal to us. We often found ourselves saying, "He's got a temper!" but the truth was that his behavior was becoming difficult. He refused to make, and avoided, eye contact when his name was called out.

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to our ears, although he seemed oblivious to the racket. But on the other hand, he screamed when the vacuum was on. He stayed alone, not seeking the presence of any other child, and we justified this by saying, “He’s probably a lone wolf, that’s his right. After all not everybody has to like the company of others.”

Then came the day when we really started wondering about him. Michael was 18 months old by that stage and he’d stopped speaking. The first words he had started to pronounce, like “daddy” and “mummy,” had vanished as if they had never existed. And all the deviant behaviors he had been showing were becoming more blatant.

We became increasingly worried. Michael started hurting himself. We thought it was strange, but always put this down to his strong personality. Sometimes he cried endlessly, with no evident reason, and was inconsolable. He started eating yogurt in huge quantities and refused to eat anything else. He didn’t respond to us and wouldn’t turn his head to face us, though he was still a very smiley, laughing boy most of the time. At other times though, he would be anxious for no obvious reason.

By 20 months it was clear he was lagging behind developmentally, so we started seeing a speech therapist. Those sessions clearly showed that Michael hardly communicated, and his deficiency was not only verbal, it was non-verbal as well.

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At three years old, the age when most children are playing every day, Michael was very different. He was still cut off from other

people, he cried a lot and slept poorly. He'd fall asleep very late, as if he wanted to postpone the moment for as long as possible, and he'd wake up several times a night. I was totally exhausted and would cry with despair and exhaustion. I couldn't see a way out of this problem, and still refused to accept Michael's condition as something that was irreversible. The very idea of it shattered me.

We were being progressively cut off from any social life, as going out with Michael had become such an ordeal. And this wasn't the only obstacle. Making him go to the toilet was very difficult, although, paradoxically, potty training was very easy and natural and had been achieved in just one week—it turned out that Michael was desperately scared of the noise of the toilet flushing. Giving him a shampoo was also a nightmare as Michael couldn't bear water running along his face ... and there were so many other things that upset him as well! To let me know that he wanted to eat or drink, he would start screaming in front of the fridge, and rolled around on the ground.

Michael eventually learned to repeat the therapist's words during his speech therapy sessions, so I tried to teach him the same way. Step by step, he became more familiar with the process.

In 2006, Michael went to preschool for the first time. At the beginning it was terribly difficult. He needed over a term to adapt, and didn't say a word for more than six months. Even after this his speech remained scarce and sporadic.

Michael's second year at preschool was just as difficult. He made some progress—for instance he managed to control his fits of anger to some degree—but his language was

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still delayed. Even with some signs of progress we could see he was still closed to the world. We tried taking him horse riding once a week, which helped, but he still couldn't build any relationships or even interact with other people with any success. We felt that everything we had tried had only limited success, and we needed something else for him.

Then came the day that we heard about Tomatis®. I remember that moment as if it were yesterday—I had been crying and telling someone how sad I was, because I'd tried my best for Michael, but I wasn't getting anywhere. This person told me that actually I hadn't tried everything; that there was one thing left, something called the Tomatis® Method.

As soon as I got home I rushed to my computer to look it up on the internet. What I read filled me with hope and I immediately had a gut feeling that I was onto something good. Tomatis® might be the answer we'd been looking for. I immediately wrote a long email to the practitioner I found, Françoise Nicoloff, in Australia. Her answer came back to me the next day—Françoise said she would be happy and willing to work with Michael, and that she'd successfully treated many other children with similar symptoms. I cried with relief, hope and happiness.

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By November 2007, Michael was five and a half. We traveled from New Caledonia to Australia for our first session of 20 hours at the Tomatis® center in Sydney. Traveling was hard with my boy—he panicked and struggled on the plane, and it was the same just taking the lift up to Françoise's office in Surry Hills.

The first two days were very hard. Michael resisted wearing the headphones. We kept telling him firmly that he had to keep them on and that there was no other choice, and finally he resigned himself to wearing them.

From the third day I started seeing improvements in his behavior. He

became calmer and more serene. After a few days, his speech started improving—it became more accurate, and he even started initiating bits of sentences. To us, this was amazing. I soon noticed more creativity in his games. My son was happy, and so was I!

We decided to come back two months later for two sessions of 30 hours each. Traveling on the plane was still a problem, but the results were so good we were willing to go through the pain of getting to the center.

Eventually we completed 90 hours of Tomatis® listening, and so many changes occurred! People who know him well say that there is literally a “before Tomatis®” Michael and an “after Tomatis®” Michael.

At the end of those 90 hours, I had a completely different little boy. To start with, his speech had transformed. He previously had a very “copy and paste” speech pattern, but following Tomatis® he had developed his own voice. He could even communicate in the abstract, saying things like, “I miss Sydney,” “I like,” “I dislike.” The use of “I” came more and more naturally to him.

When we returned home, we decided to set up activities in order to help his socialization and integration with other people, so we had him pony riding, enjoying music, swimming ... whatever we could think of.

In January 2009 we returned to Françoise at the Tomatis® center in Sydney for a 30-hour booster session, and after that Michael’s assessment was excellent. His tests and behavior showed great improvements.

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2009 update

Michael’s echolalia (the habit of constantly repeating the same sounds, words or phrases) has totally vanished. Michael has opened up to the world

around him and shows real curiosity about everything. He has become very talkative and often sings or hums.

For his birthday in July, when I suggested to him (with no real expectations) that we could invite some friends over to celebrate, he surprised me by giving me a list of names! How happy was I? Again, more tears of happiness!

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Concerning his verbal skills, he is now able to make himself understood completely, even if he still produces sentences that are a bit awkward. He can correct himself, and he even questions us!

Michael doesn't resort to fits of anger to express himself when he's frustrated anymore. His anxiety is still present but he handles it very well. He's now better able to face new or stressful situations, and the way he copes with his fears now has led to small miracles! He used to be so scared of having a shampoo, because his head would be under flowing water, but he is now calm and remarkably confident in the water. He is learning freestyle and backstroke swimming, and even loves being in competition with others. Michael also used to be terrified of diving—he'd love watching others do it but he'd never try it himself. Today, he'll be the first one to take the plunge and can dive more than five feet underwater!

All these little victories keep coming and each one strengthens Michael's sense of success. All the barriers he had set up out of fear have now been dismantled. He tries new food more easily. He's learned to give in at times. He's more self-sufficient, initiating things on his own, dealing with changes and the unexpected very well. He's now more comfortable in planes and the way he controls his anxiety is remarkable.

Michael communicates well now. He is no longer in his own world, and seeks out other children's friendship. The most important thing for me is that we have very good communication between us. He understands everything

I say and he answers my questions! Françoise told me: “I’ve opened all his channels. Now you should flood him with words. Don’t stop talking and keep explaining everything to him.” And that’s what I’ve done!

And the result? Michael’s vocabulary is very good; he keeps learning more words, and always uses them again appropriately. This process has been going on since his first sessions of Tomatis[®], and now it’s become a positive habit for him. He’s always on the lookout for new words and uses them as soon as he can. We first noticed him doing this when he began taking phrases from his favorite cartoons—and the remarkable thing is that he always uses them in context.

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October 2010 update

Michael is finishing year two and is the top student in his class. His report is quite surprising and excellent. He achieves straight “A”s, and is especially talented in mathematics—he is quite gifted in math and his level of calculating mentally is quite incredible for his age. He is very social, has lots of friends, and is always being invited to parties—in fact, children are attracted to him because of his paradox. He still can show some delays in his reactions, however he works very quickly and very well. He is a high achiever. He is also learning judo and enjoying it. I am looking now to have Michael assessed for Asperger syndrome, as there are still some paradoxes in his behavior and his love for numbers is quite astonishing. His life revolves around figures and numbers and he creates games with them—at night if he cannot sleep, there is no point in telling him stories, but counting will do the trick! However, as his symptoms have been taken care of at an early stage, he is more able to fit into society, even with his incongruence.

I know that the Tomatis[®] Method revealed what was deeply buried

at the core of Michael's personality. The Tomatis® Method—and Françoise—helped Michael go through a rebirth. He is totally transformed and his inner self continues to blossom. Mozart's music, and Françoise's great skills and talents, have allowed his deeply sleeping consciousness to emerge. Michael used to be constantly afraid, but now he is a happy little boy full of *joie de vivre*. These days, he laughs, his eyes sparkle and he is very creative. He is into games and will even initiate jokes! Françoise's guidance has been priceless!

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Today, we can see light at the end of the tunnel; we have found our way out of the darkness. Of course, there is still a lot of work ahead, but we now have solid ground to work from. We believe that the Tomatis® Method has been a huge contributor to this wonderful improvement in the quality of our lives. Thank you to Dr. Tomatis and

Françoise Nicoloff!