

I'm Here To Listen

DR. DONNA GEFFNER



RAISED ON NOODLE SOUP AND BOILED CHICKEN

I was born after World War II to “conservadox” parents in Brooklyn. They instilled in me a strong Jewish identity. On the High Holidays, my father would not use an elevator, opting instead to climb flights of stairs. My mother kept a kosher home and lit Shabbat candles every Friday night. Shabbat dinner always consisted of chicken noodle soup, challah, and boiled chicken. Those were sweet memories, except for the boiled chicken. (I didn’t know chicken could be cooked any other way.)

Many of my childhood friends were Jewish, and some were the children of Holocaust survivors. I remember seeing the numbers tattooed on their arms. One friend of mine, Marvin, lost his father in World War II fighting the Nazis on the beaches of Normandy. My neighborhood was full of veterans from WWII and the Korean War—scarred from their wounds, both physical and emotional, and traumatized by what they had witnessed.

After losing both my parents as a young adult, my deep sense of commitment to Judaism waned. I no longer kept kosher nor observed the holidays

like I did when I was a child. I lost that belief, only to regain it many decades later.

A JEW AMONG GENTILES

As a speech-language pathologist and audiologist, I have spent my entire adult life studying, teaching, supervising, and treating children and adults with communication and auditory problems.

When I completed graduate school with a new doctorate in hand, I started looking for university positions. There were few available. I came across an interesting and challenging one at St. John’s University, in Queens, NY. I didn’t know much about it except that it was a prominent, national Catholic institution. I went for an interview and saw an opportunity to build a program in speech-language pathology and audiology. I was intrigued with that potential, but I knew it would be a challenge as a Jew.

My goal was to educate my Catholic colleagues and foster respect for Jews. I wanted them to see that they could depend on a Jew, work alongside a Jew, and even like a Jew. I once saved a priest’s life by identifying early signs of throat cancer. Over 40 years of my service—as a professor, program director, and chair of the Department of Speech

They are not influenced by the media or political bias. What they learn is truth, kindness, and the wisdom of the Rebbe.

Communication and Sciences—I earned their trust and respect, as they earned mine. I felt as if I was an ambassador—a Jew among gentiles.

'WHAT HAVE I DONE TODAY?'

Throughout my career, I have worked with thousands of children with special needs, students in need of service (i.e., stuttering, voice disorders, language impairment, autism spectrum disorder, selective mutism, dyslexia, learning disabilities, hearing loss, and auditory processing disorders), adults with hearing loss, and post-stroke profiles (i.e., aphasia, apraxia, and dementia). I ask myself every day: “What have I done for my patients and their families today?”

One of my greatest sources of pride was developing an international test, The Auditory Skills Assessment, published by Pearson Publishers (the largest academic publisher in the world). It can be used with children as young as three and a half, for the purpose of early identification of auditory processing delays. I went on to edit and write four textbooks in the field of auditory processing, two textbooks on

attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and two tests, often collaborating with the best researchers from around the world. I have been invited to present and address audiences of professionals and parents throughout Europe, South America, North America, Australia, and North Africa. I served as the national president of the American Speech-Language and Hearing Association, traveling around the world and promoting federal legislation for the betterment of those communicatively impaired. The association represents 200,000 members today.

I can honestly say I have never regretted my choice of careers. My life's work has brought me joy, rewards, wonderful friends, accolades, and recognition. Most importantly, it has brought me satisfaction that I can help and support those in need. Giving to others is a great source of happiness, especially when you know that you can help and that the work is meaningful. When you give to others in an unselfish way, you make life better for that person, you improve the world, and you also help yourself.

WHY RELIGIOUS CHILDREN FARE SO WELL

One rainy evening, I noticed Rabbi Zalman Levitin, and his beautiful, then-pregnant wife Hindel, walking a distance in the rain to conduct Rosh Hashanah services.

My dear husband, Sandor Schaeffer, of blessed memory, and I decided to offer our home to them to stay in through the holidays so that they would not have to walk such a distance. That was the beginning of a great friendship. It was my affiliation with them and their growing family that rekindled both my husband's and my love for Judaism.

I'll never forget, some 20 years ago, helping them light the first menorah on Worth Avenue in Palm Beach. We marveled at such an achievement. Palm Beach, Worth Avenue, and a menorah was not a combination one would expect. Such experiences planted the seeds for my rebirth as a Jew.

After decades of spiritual disconnection, I felt a sense of belonging and joy while participating in Shabbat services and meals and Jewish community events. I have

ADVICE FOR PARENTS

Q&A WITH DR. GEFFNER

Q: What are early signs of auditory processing delays that parents should look out for?

A: Early signs include a history of fluid and infections in the ear, sensitivity to noise, a child who often asks “What?” and seems confused by oral instructions, a child who finds it hard to listen and stay focused, a child who has trouble following multi-step directions.

If a child is struggling to read, this is a red flag. Auditory skills play a major role in learning to read. Children have to learn the sounds of the letters and how to put those sounds together to form a word.

Many children with allergies are at higher risk for auditory problems. Children can have fluid in their ear and not know it, which creates a silent blockage.

Q: If a parent suspects their child has an auditory processing delay, what should they do?

A: I strongly encourage parents of children with delayed language and hearing problems to seek the help of professionals—speech-language pathologists, audiologists, psychologists, and special educators. Do not be embarrassed to request support from your child’s school. The Department of Education and public or private schools are prepared to identify children with special needs at early ages and provide evaluations and services at no cost to the families.

The earlier the identification of a delay, problem, or impairment, the more successfully professionals can improve and remediate. The brain is plastic and capable of learning, so the sooner we identify these children, the better the outcomes.

Q: What can parents do immediately at home to support their child?

A: Parents should be mindful to speak at a slower rate, break down directions, and repeat instructions. Encourage your child to ask for repetition and slower speech—remind them that it’s okay to ask. Have your child look at you to get facial and lip cues. After reading a small passage in a book, stop and check for understanding. Use visuals to help the child understand the story.

Q: Can professional support help children with auditory delays achieve normal milestones or will they always lag behind?

A: They can absolutely thrive. With support, intervention, and encouragement, they will succeed.

I’ll give you two stories to illustrate.

I remember a small child, age six, who was brought to me for a speech-language evaluation and subsequently therapy. The parents were observant Jews and Shabbat observers.

I worked with the endearing child, and I noticed that he was more than just very active and clumsy. He would fall, trip over his own feet, and lose his balance often. He would also throw up. I urged the mother to take him to the pediatrician and then see a neurologist for an MRI of his brain. I was suspicious. Yes, children can be clumsy and fall, but this was happening too frequently.

Sure enough and sadly, he was diagnosed with a brain tumor.

Fortunately, the parents took him to the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), a world-renowned institution for children, and he had surgery. He was watched carefully and treated and thank G-d he recovered. It was the tumor that was causing his trouble and he was able to grow up and have a normal life. I am glad I picked up on the possibility (or was that Hashem Who picked up on it, and put it into my head) that it was more than a speech-language problem, and that I was able to convince the reluctant mother to follow through. She was, understandably, afraid of what they would find.

Many years ago, a mother brought her daughter to me. She was struggling in school; she had trouble learning. I diagnosed her with a language and auditory processing disorder, and recommended sound enhancement, speech language therapy, a reading program, and accommodations in school. The mother followed my recommendations very carefully. I told her that although her daughter had learning problems, she was capable and would be okay. (Sometimes, a parent needs to know that.) She just needed to follow a road map to remediation. Years passed and I didn’t hear from them. Then, just a few months ago, this mother called to tell me that indeed her daughter was fine now. She had completed her education most proficiently and landed a job at Google.

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▲ Mr. Sandor Schaeffer and Dr. Donna Geffner Schaeffer.

grown to know all of the Levitin children and watched them grow from little people to adults. I have to admit that I quietly studied them. I found it fascinating that each child in such a large family was normal, healthy, and happy. Why? In this age of so many learning challenges, attention deficits, reading difficulties, and drug and alcohol dependency—the world I have come to know so intimately through my patients—how can these children maintain a healthy balance?

This is what I found out through my observations: The children are not glued to their phones, social media, or games and group chats. They talk to you. At the Shabbat table, when they are asked what was good about their week, they think in positive terms. When asked what they have done for others,

they think of charity and *mitzvos*. They are not influenced by the media or political bias. What they learn is truth, kindness, and the wisdom of the Rebbe. I look at this family and think, “They are doing something right.” They have a strong sense of commitment to their family and extend that bond of love to extended family. They care and work for each other and know the true meaning of doing good in the world. Their innocence and humanity will keep the world together, especially in today’s environment of hate.

And so, my advice to Chabad and religious families with many children is to keep up the great work. Continue fostering love, honesty, and commitment to the Rebbe’s words. Spend less time on screens and more time talking to one another. Focus on

the positive and let the world know who we are and what our beliefs are. I hope I did that even at a Catholic institution of 20,000 students. I think I spread the light. Many of my students have become my friends and still keep in touch. I have been invited to celebrate their family events. Many have sat at my Passover table.

Let us collectively take pride in our undaunted Jewish community and the heritage that has carried us for centuries. Let’s express our gratitude for what we have. Let’s bond together and give thanks to Hashem for our faith, endurance, and strength. ❄