

# Parents shouldn't trade blame when a child has disabilities – Florence Shekoni, speech and hearing

By COMFORT OSEGHAE | Saturday, 9 Jan 2010

Mrs Florence Shekoni, a Principal Partner of J&J Speech and Hearing Centre advises parents on the best way to handle speech and hearing impairment in children, in this interview with COMFORT OSEGHAE.

What prompted you to study a strange course like Audiology and Speech Pathology?

Truthfully, I didn't know anything about the course at first. What I really wanted was Library Studies. And that was because Mr Awoyinfa of Tell magazine was a librarian. His younger sister and I are very close. I thought to myself that Library Studies would be good for me too. I would be able to read more and have time for my kids. So, I applied for it at the University of Ibadan. UI did not have a degree programme for Library Studies then; it was supposed to take off that very year. After my JAMB results were released, I got to UI and discovered there was a notice for all applicants of Library Studies. We were advised to find alternative courses in the same faculty as the degree programme would no longer start that year. I was advised to go for Special Education. The name alone scared me. I wondered what it was, but because I didn't want to spend another year at home, I reluctantly applied for it. The plan, however, was for me to change to another faculty in my second year.

Why did you change your mind?

In my first year, we studied several disabilities, including speech, hearing and sight. You know the first two years, one has to study broadly before you specialising in an area. By the end of my first year, I was very interested in studying the course further. I went to my guardian and told him I would no longer leave the department. If there was a way I could be of assistance to my society by helping the physically challenged, then I wanted to know how. In every course, there is always an area of specialization much sought after. I had to make enquiries as to which area of special education was considered the toughest. It turned to be audiology and speech pathology. Although I wanted to specialise in it, I couldn't decide the placements because it is usually done by the head of department on merit. I just had to work very hard. So, I was surprised when in my 300 Level my classmates told me I had been listed among those to study Audiology and Speech Pathology.

What is the course all about?

The ability to hear is inseparable from the ability to speak. Audiology involves measuring one's ability to hear and detecting hearing disabilities. This can be easily resolved with hearing aids and other treatments. As for speech disabilities, I discovered every developmental disability like down's syndrome, cerebral palsy and autism is associated with speech impairment. Speech impairment is in several degrees. Some children cannot pronounce certain words; they either add or subtract an alphabet. Sometimes, the speech is just delayed. In special education, communication is the key. Even with the gifted and talented, one has to learn how to communicate with them properly or they will be shouted down for showing off. Children with

exceptional abilities can be class leaders and can even assist their teachers in teaching their classmates. They need extra work more than the average student.

If a parent discovers that his/her child has a speech or hearing disability, what would you advise?

Seek professional assistance. The earlier that is done, the better. What we do here is to design programmes to aid recovery, though that depends on the severity of the case. Even at that, I usually work with patients in their schools. They don't always come here.

Is it not better to keep such children in special schools since they might not be able to keep up with their classmates?

No. It is best to make them feel as normal as possible. Inclusion is the main thing now. If a child has a speech disability, it is not a reason to keep him/her secluded or even make them attend a special needs school. The speech disability can be overcome and the child needs to associate with his/her peers for social development. It is only in very severe cases that I would agree to separation from regular schools. For instance, a 10-year-old child who cannot perform daily living skills, like going to the toilet unaided. But if it is just a hearing impairment that can be corrected with a hearing aid, why not send the child to a regular school?

How did you meet your husband?

We are from the same village in Osun State. We attended the same secondary school, Ilelese Commercial Grammar School. He was my senior though. While he was still in school, he taught me subjects like Maths. After he had passed out, we started a relationship. We courted for about 10 years before we got married. Now we have three children, two boys and a girl. The eldest is 12.

What was the main attraction?

He is a determined person. Whatever he makes up his mind to do, he must get results. Even while he was in school, he was like that.

How do you combine your profession with family life?

We are all in the business together. My children love what I do. They are usually here. My husband too helps out whenever he has the time. They love the children I work with. My children are always quick to befriend them. In fact, they have taken it upon themselves to identify children with these disabilities wherever they are. They know all the symptoms of speech and hearing impairment. They always ask questions and they are very interested in helping me. My son even told me he wants to be a speech therapist too.

How can one identify developmental disabilities?

There are stages in a child's life when they are expected to talk, walk and so on. When the child is not doing those things as and when due, you know there is a problem. Cerebral palsy, autism, deafness, delayed speech and Down's syndrome all have their individual symptoms. Autistic children can be identified in three ways: their social interaction is very poor; their verbal communication is usually none existent; there are also behavioral challenges like being hyperactive and restless. Children with Down's syndrome have very short fingers and neck. In

severe cases, the tongue is big and protrudes, hampering the child's ability to speak. One thing with Down's syndrome patients, however, is that they are very sociable.

What is the attitude of most parents with children that have these disabilities?

Well, it differs. Some show love and care to their children and don't mind being seen with them. For others, even going out with such children is a challenge. In the children's schools, they don't want anyone to know they are related to such children. I know some who direct their drivers and house helps to represent them at school functions. There is this case I had where one of my employees complained that she discovered three live cockroaches in the food flask of one of our patients. The girl's mother wasn't very vigilant with her daughter's diet and the house help cashed in on that. We plan diets for our patients, especially if they are autistic. But we discovered that noodles was prepared for this girl everyday. Of course, she couldn't complain because she had speech disabilities. If she didn't eat the food, the house help could decide to warm that very food for her the next day.

Is there something like a counseling session for parents of these children?

Yes. Whenever I am doing an assessment of each patient, I usually invite both parents. I prefer to discuss with both parents together. If the mother comes alone with the child, I would invite the father. Most of the time, they cooperate.

What are the causes of these developmental disabilities?

For something like autism, no one knows. But Down's syndrome is a birth defect. There is no point apportioning blame when a child is afflicted with Down's syndrome. It is just a chromosomal defect. The same thing applies to cerebral palsy; it is a birth defect.

Have you had any unpleasant experience with a parent?

I try to place myself in the shoes of these parents, so I understand them. At times, it is just the frustration and burden that makes them difficult. There was a time a single mother approached me for assistance for her son who was autistic. A month after we had started his therapy, she asked us to stop. I pleaded with her to let us continue because her child's case wasn't severe. It is essential that such disabilities are treated as early as possible, because autism can sometimes develop after a child's first or second year. The child would have been talking before his speech suddenly regresses. On my way back from the child's school where I had gone to speak with the school authorities, the lady called, saying she had changed her mind. Then there are others who turn abusive. But I take it that it is the stress of catering for such kids that is getting to them.