



The Shepherd Centre

When a child is diagnosed with hearing loss, it can be a lonely and frustrating experience for a family, but this service is helping kids adjust and thrive, while also providing a welcome support to parents



(from left) Andrew Mair and Sebastian Gibbons play with playgroup coordinator Jamil Romeo, while Jules Chase supervises her daughters, Zoe and Milla, at The Shepherd Centre

"Im not alone here," Olga Chekanova says, as her eyes well with tears of relief. The young mother is one of many parents in this colourful, lively room, playing with their children. At first glance, it seems like a typical playgroup, but there's one big difference – the children are deaf or hearing-impaired. We're at The Shepherd Centre, located at Macquarie University's Australian Hearing Hub. The weekly playgroup includes language skills and group therapy, but mostly it's a fun, safe place for children to play and parents to bond – and for both to realise they're not alone in what can be a daunting journey.

Olga's one-year-old son, Pavel, was diagnosed with severe hearing loss soon after birth. He has been coming to The Shepherd Centre for about six months and last month was fitted with cochlear implants. "He is now hearing my voice. It is just amazing," Olga says. The Shepherd Centre has been a huge

support to the family. "Coming here, I have many friends and I understand I am not alone. It's changed our lives."

In its 48 years, The Shepherd Centre has helped more than 2500 children with hearing loss through its five centres across NSW and the ACT. Its programs help these children speak, develop, attend mainstream schools and live full, active lives. Early intervention is key – most children here are under two and will graduate at the age of five, with social and language skills on a par with their non-hearing-impaired peers.

Diagnosis can be overwhelming and distressing. Anne Lam says that's exactly how she felt when her daughter Naomi, almost 3, was born with a physical condition called microtia, where her ears didn't form properly.

They've been coming here since Naomi was six months old. "Naomi loves coming here. It's very inclusive and has a family atmosphere – everyone knows everyone." Naomi attends a mainstream day care

four days a week and will be ready to tackle mainstream school in a few years. She plays next to counsellor Natalina Cannon, who works with families right from diagnosis and offers a calm, comforting and maternal influence.

"I try to normalise [parents'] responses," she says. "We are the most vulnerable around our children so if there is something wrong with them we can become very distressed. Then it's all the decisions parents have to make. Here we are about speech – so we help them make decisions about things like devices."

"We have a holistic approach to support. A lot of people say it feels like home."

Three-year-old Milla Chase is having a wonderful time cooking in the play kitchen. She's happy and so is her mum, Jules. She holds her youngest daughter, one-year-old Zoe, as she tells me about Milla's diagnosis only six months ago.

"Milla was two-and-a-half when they found the hearing loss. She passed the newborn hearing screen, so we're not sure what happened," Jules says. "Her language wasn't great so we had it checked and discovered she had moderate to severe hearing loss."

"[Kids] can be very clever about it – she was observing and taking cues from the observations and reading lips, so we didn't pick it up until late. We do these groups once a week and see the speech therapist once a week. It's great to meet other



parents with similar issues," Jules says. "Milla loves it here. I feel very fortunate."

It's hard to imagine what Milla went through – trying to understand and follow directions when she couldn't hear them.

To help people understand their children's world, the centre recently launched a virtual-reality experience.

When you put on the goggles, you are immediately transported to a schoolyard – you can see the kids playing, but the sounds are muffled. A girl talks to you, but you can't hear her, so she gives up and runs away. Then you're in a classroom and the teacher asks you a question, but you can't make out a word.



(clockwise from above left) Kate and Ruby Willis, 10 months, with Olga and Pavel Chekanov, 1; Rachel Heywood, with Callum, 2, gives the virtual-reality goggles a go; therapist Sally Hewett with Naomi Lam, 3

At this point, you'll probably feel sad and isolated. But then the goggles take you to a time when you can hear again, play with your friends and understand your teachers. You realise what a difference The Shepherd Centre makes to the lives of the children it helps.

No wonder everyone in the room is so happy to be here.

LET'S GET LOUD

Loud Shirt Day, on October 19, is an annual event that raises funds for hearing support centres around the country. For more info and to register, visit loudshirtday.com.au

