

# Center's 'Snail Babies' choir is music to the ears

Chen Huizhi

A SPECIAL singing flash mob surprised visitors to the Jinqiao Life Hub mall in Pudong on Saturday afternoon — a choir made up of children with “ears” behind their ears.

Their additional “ears,” in fact, are hearing aids or cochlear implants, devices for people who have permanent, severe to profound hearing loss.

For this reason, the choir was named “Snail Babies,” which in Chinese reminds one of the cochlear implant and also bears the meaning that the children might be slower than their peers growing up but are nonetheless tenacious.

The choir was established two years ago at the Shanghai Rehabilitation Center for the Disabled Children, formerly Shanghai Rehabilitation and Vocational Training Center for the Disabled People, a government-held organization with more than two decades of history.

The rehabilitation services provided by the center are free of charge to children born to parents who have Shanghai *hukou* or those who have residence permits in Shanghai and fulfil certain requirements.

This is part of the effort of the city to increase the quality of life for children born with hearing impairment and their families. Last year, only five such children were enrolled in the city's special schools for various reasons, while the rest went to normal schools.

With the flash mob show scheduled at 2pm, Hao Hao, 4, one of



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Wu Jing

Hao Hao's mother

the choir members, felt a bit drowsy before it started, but singing along with his young friends in front of cameras made him feel alive again.

Wu Jing, his mother, said this was the first time he had sung in public after joining the choir.

Hao Hao was diagnosed with congenital hearing impairment when he was six months old.

This is one of the most common deformities in newborns, with an incidence of 1 to 3 in every 1,000 newborns. About one-third of these children suffer serious hearing loss and need hearing reconstruction. For 20 years, Shanghai has been providing hearing screening services for newborn babies.

After the diagnosis, Wu was told that Hao Hao would need a cochlear implant and was entitled to subsidies from the city's federation of disabled people. Half of the cost was covered.

Hao Hao was operated on when he was 12 months old, and started his rehabilitation at the rehabilitation center attached to the federation one month later.

At first, Wu and Hao Hao attended a class for parents and toddlers under three years old in which the children are given first ideas of making sounds through games.

“I got worried after some time because with all the input, he still wasn't able to speak a word,” Wu said. “We even started to make meaningless noises at home to try to get his attention, but we were told not to because it could be just a phase.”

Then came the moment when Wu realized that Hao Hao was actually calling her Mama with “Nana” and his Papa (in Chinese baba) with “Dada.” But the first clearly articulated meaningful phrase for him, Wu fondly remembered, was *ayi*, which is used in Chinese to address certain women.

Hao Hao was able to utter his first sentences when he was two and now Wu said his language skills as well as cognitive and learning abilities have almost caught up with normal children of his age.

He's been attending a one-on-one class which teaches children with hearing loss to listen and speak using their hearing technology. The method is known as the auditory-verbal therapy.

“Now we're at the stage of training him to pick up sounds and messages under noisy settings, which is more difficult for children like him,” she said. “The



The Snail Babies Choir puts on a flash mob show at the Jinqiao Life Hub mall on Christmas day. They performed “O The Sea, O My Hometown” and “Listen As I Say Thank You.” — Dong Jun

teacher advised us to talk to him at normal speed and under any given setting.”

## Pick up sounds

Wu was also encouraged to let Hao Hao socialize with children with normal hearing.

“Sooner or later he will find out that he's a little bit different from others, but through normal interaction with others, he will realize that the difference is totally ignorable,” she said.

About 130 children are taking part in therapy at the rehabilitation center, and half of them are under 3 years old, said Li Yongqin, director of the education and rehabilitation department. Li is also an experienced teacher for children with impaired hearing.

“When it was first established, the center focused on listening and speaking skills of the children, but in the past decade we have diversified our programs to provide comprehensive rehabilitation services based on pre-school education,” she said. “On certain parameters, the children from our center have even got ahead of their peers with normal hearing.”

Some children like Hao Hao

who attended the center as toddlers were able to enter normal kindergartens. Some of the choir members alongside Hao Hao in the flash mob are “graduates” of the center.

At the center, the children have music classes, and in cooperation with the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, they formed a choir. Huang Heting, a graduate student of music education at the conservatory, is the coach of the choir.

“Some children are better at grasping notes, while others are not, but as a choir they're as good as those made up of children of normal hearing, if not better,” she said.

A total of 27 teachers work at the center. Some who provide one-on-one therapy have seven or eight classes a day, which is quite demanding.

“We're devoted to our job which is so much a first-aid help to the children and their families with a dire need,” Li said. “In a not small number of cases, the children are born to families with inherited deafness. It's an immeasurable satisfaction to us when parents, who often come to us in desperation, have hope in their hearts again after two or three years.”

