

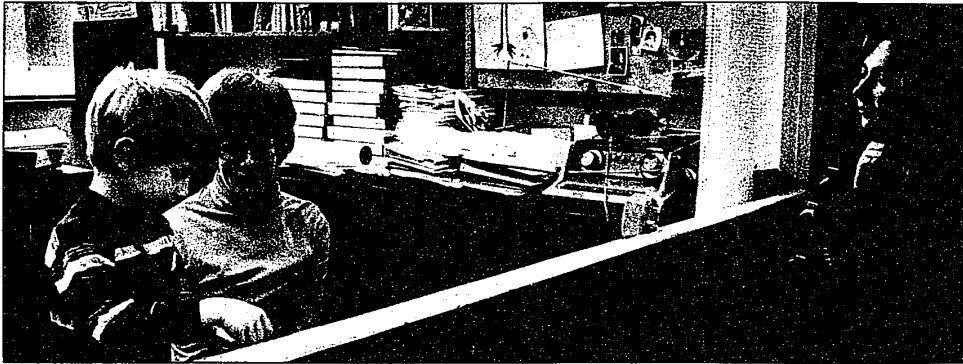
Breaking sound barriers



A noisemaker tests out Rachel Alexander's hearing aid. Mary Smith, deaf education clinician, works with the infant twice a week.



Clinician Mary Smith shows Mary Lambert of Ferndale how to talk into her son Bill's ear so he can hear her.



Connie Shelton of Avon Township looks on through a one-way window while her son Cory, 5, gets individual attention from Nancy Hagle, speech and language consultant.



Kathy Bolik, speech and language consultant, takes notes of what preschoolers Arlus Miracle and Mary Allen say while they're playing.



Sarah Phillips isn't about to sit still for Milton Hill's tests — especially at naptime.

Story: KATHY PARRISH
Photos: DAVID FRANK

It's naptime and Sarah Phillips knows it. The 7-month-old squirms unhappily on her blanket, which is lying not in her crib but on the floor of a small soundproof chamber.

Even daddy's voice calling "Hey Sarah" from a wall speaker doesn't interest her.

In the adjoining control room, audiologist Milton Hill coaches John Phillips. "How would you do it at home?" he asks the worried Madison Heights father.

"Hey Sarah. Hey punkin," Phillips tries. Sarah searches eagerly for the familiar sound.

"She's responding. She's OK," says Hill, obviously relieved. "Our prayers were answered. I'm glad I didn't have to be the heavy today."

Hill isn't always so lucky. All too often he and other members of the Oakland Schools Speech and Hearing Clinic staff must tell parents their children have hearing problems.

They then undertake the large task of helping youngsters and parents live with those unhappy test results.

"They're usually here because they suspect something, but we're usually still the heavies," sighed Hill, who admits the job of disappointing families isn't any easier after 25 years experience.

"Parents are parents. They love their children. It's no fun telling them their child has a hearing problem."

FOR 20 YEARS, the clinic in Pontiac has been lending support to parents and teachers in the 28 Oakland County school districts which fund it through a special property tax.

More than 1,000 youngsters are tested and treated there yearly for speech and hearing problems. And the number is growing.

"We're seeing a lot more than we used to — and a lot more kids in trouble," said clinic Director Mary Lu Robertson, explaining that more children are surviving pregnancies today. "And we don't know what the pressures of the times do to kids."

Set up in 1960, the clinic diagnoses problems and helps teachers treat them.

About 80 percent of its work is with preschoolers, usually not served by their local districts until they are 3 years old. Its Deaf Baby Program fits youngsters with hearing aids and promotes language development. A preschool is available until children can go into a local program for the hearing impaired.

Both programs offer parent training and guidance, which Miss Robertson believes is essential to helping the child.

"The thing we try most to do is help children become comfortable with themselves and help other people become comfortable with the kids — where they're at," she said.

Direct speech therapy is not part of the clinic's work with preschoolers. "We don't sit down at a table and attempt to drill words into them," said Miss Robertson, who used to accept only children 3 and older but now takes 2-year-olds because if Oakland Schools doesn't "someone else will."

(Continued on Page 3C)