

Born partially deaf and without a left ear, Edmund Hobbs grew into a painfully shy child. But an innovative operation has brought smiles, songs, and laughter into his life.

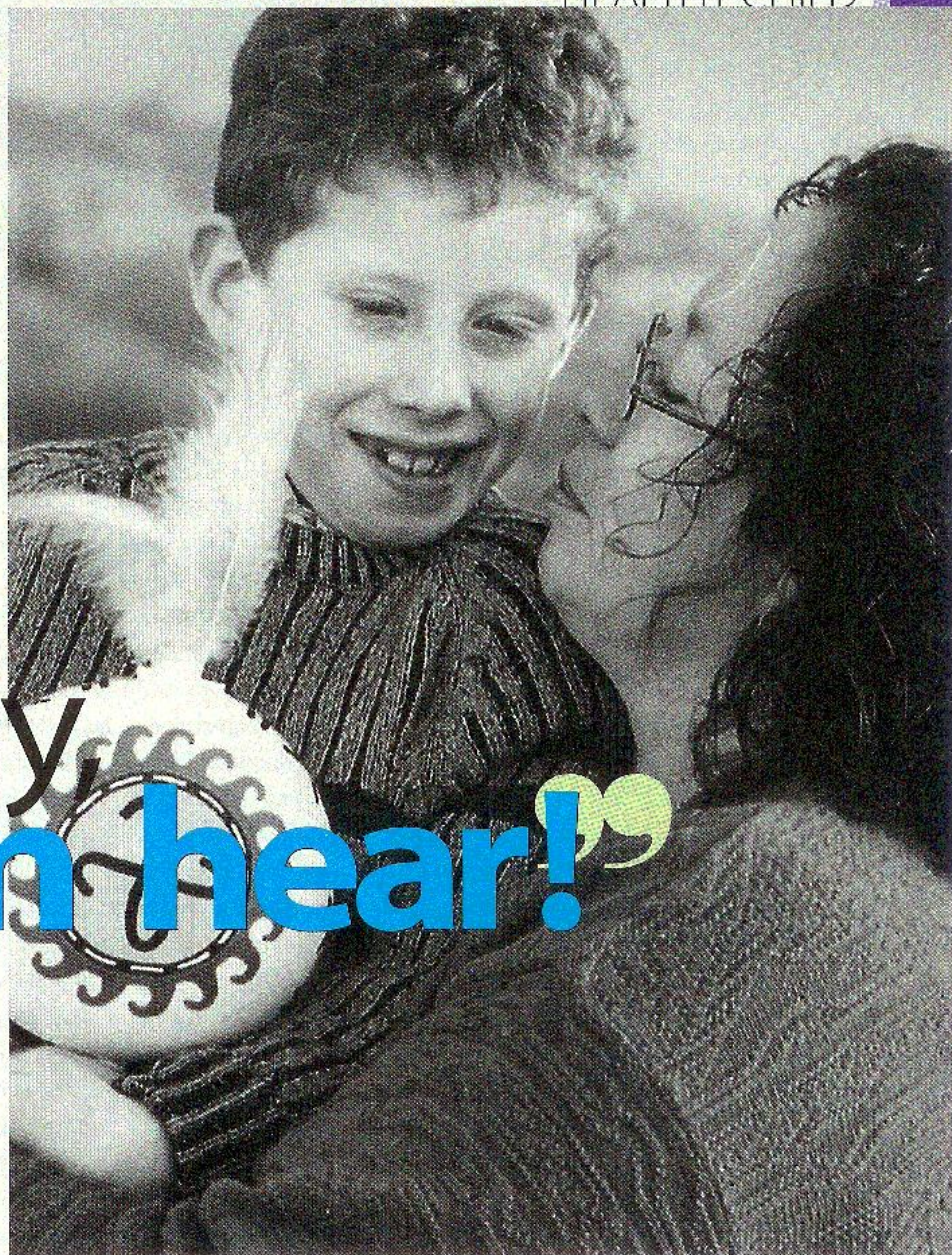
By Lisa Collier Cool

Mommy I can hear!

If you met Edmund Hobbs today, you'd never guess that this talkative, rambunctious 7-year-old had such a rough start in life. Edmund was born with a rare disorder: He had only a small ruffle of skin where his left ear should have been, a condition the doctors called microtia. He also lacked an eardrum and couldn't hear on that side. "At the time, I didn't understand how this could have happened to my beautiful baby," says his mother, Sandra. "But the doctors told me that his condition wasn't hereditary and it didn't happen because of anything I did while I was pregnant—it was just a random genetic flaw." Doctors also assured Sandra that the problem could be fixed, but she'd have to wait until Edmund turned 6, the age at which a child's ears reach their adult size.

GROWING UP SHY

From the start, Sandra, a single mom, was showered with support from her many friends and rela-



tives in the Hopi tribe, of which she and her son are members. "Everybody loved Edmund, because among our people, kids who are born different are considered very special," says Sandra, who has homes on both the Hopi reservation and in the nearby town of Winslow, Arizona, where she works as a chef. But even though Edmund, whose Hopi name is Star Boy, was never teased, he became painfully shy as he grew older and started school.

Edmund didn't play with other kids much and spent a lot of time alone, reading and drawing. As a result, he didn't have many friends. In kindergarten, when his teacher put him in the front row

HEALTHY CHILD

of the school's Christmas pageant, he was so embarrassed that he cried. And he hated to go to the barber because he wanted to keep his curly brown hair as long as possible to hide the defect.

When Edmund was 5, Sandra began to research surgery for him on the Internet. She was distressed to discover that the standard treatment involves a series of complicated and potentially risky operations in which parts of the child's rib cartilage are removed and then sculpted into a new ear. Even worse, there's no guarantee that the reconstructed ear will look natural—or that the child's hearing will be restored.

NEW HOPE

Not satisfied, Sandra dug deeper and found the Website of a doctor who had developed a revolutionary and far less invasive method to repair microtia. Instead of using rib grafts, Thomas Romo, M.D., chief of facial plastic surgery at Lenox Hill Hospital, in New York City, customizes a flexible plastic frame to match the



child's other ear. In the first stage of the reconstruction, skin from the abdomen is stitched over the frame to form the ear's normal curves and folds. Several weeks later, the patient undergoes a second surgery during which a natural-looking lobe is created, and a titanium peg is inserted that snaps to a hearing aid.

Sandra was thrilled, but she knew that her insurance would never cover the services of a top New York City doctor. Figuring she had nothing to lose, she sent Dr. Romo an e-mail describing her son's plight. Her timing couldn't have been better. The message arrived just a few months after the plastic surgeon and other doctors had started the Little Baby Face Foundation, a charity that provides medical and financial assistance for kids who need surgery to correct facial deformities but don't have the means to pay for it. Sandra was ec-

static when she got a reply saying that the foundation had decided to accept Edmund as its very first case—and would perform the \$50,000 procedure for free, in addition to paying all travel expenses.

LOUD AND CLEAR

The four-hour operation in January 2004 was a huge success, but at first, Edmund was very protective of his ear. He was afraid to have anyone—even Dr. Romo—look at or touch it. Within days, though, he was eager to have his

long curls snipped short so he could show off his new ear. "Wow!" he exclaimed. "Now I look just like everyone else."

In April, Edmund returned to New York to have his hearing aid put in. Dr. Romo snapped it on and whispered, "Can you hear me?" Edmund sat in stunned silence for several seconds. "That's very loud," he said. "Take it off!"

Dr. Romo removed the tiny device and explained to Sandra that her son would find hearing the world in stereo confusing at first. Edmund began by using the aid for a couple of hours each day, and within a few months, he had completely adjusted to wearing it full-time.

Meanwhile, Edmund's self-esteem soared. When his school had its spring concert, Star Boy lived up to his name—by taking center stage. "He was joining in with the other kids, singing, laughing, and having a great time," Sandra recalls. Since then, his shyness has vanished, she adds. "He's like a caterpillar who turned into a butterfly."

Quite simply, Edmund's life has been transformed, his mother says. Not only has he gained new friends and discovered such simple pleasures as wearing sunglasses for the first time, but his schoolwork has improved dramatically because he can finally hear the lessons clearly. In fact, he's doing so well that he's just been accepted into a program for gifted children. "It's amazing," Sandra says, "how the operation has opened up the world for him." □

To find out more about Little Baby Face Foundation, visit littlebabyface.org. More information on Dr. Romo's ear-reconstruction procedure is available online at earreconstruction.com.

