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Hearing voices is important to everyone, and I'm no exception. As a novelist, I find the key to getting inside my characters' heads is to 'hear' their voice in my imagination. And as a busy mother of two small (and vociferous!) children, dealing with the cacophony of noise roaring around me all day is crucial. In both cases, it's vital to separate out the sounds that matter from those that don't. It sounds simple, but as anyone with a hearing impairment knows, it's not always easy to achieve. Hearing aids have improved beyond recognition since I began wearing them as a child in the 1970s - especially with new digital technology. But when I was fitted with my latest pair this spring - Oticon Agil's - I found they were a leap ahead of any I've worn before.

One thing that's always been a problem for me is recognising where a sound is coming from. Now with these aids, I find I automatically turn in the right direction when I hear a sudden noise - whether it's a toddler rustling in a forbidden drawer, a car nosing out of a driveway, or just someone calling my name. Apparently this is because the aids communicate with each other at high speed to signal the location of the sound to the brain. Amazing, and the best bit is that I don't even need to understand how it works to benefit.

Another issue I've always had with hearing aids is background noise. On the day I was fitted with my hearing aids, I had the launch party for my first novel 'Foolish Lessons in Life & Love'. With lots of people and wine flowing, it was a noisy evening. I was delighted to find that every conversation was easy to hear - I could pick out the voice I wanted from the general clamour without having to concentrate. As a

result, I wasn't exhausted by the end - a real benefit when I'm already sleep-deprived with a baby still waking up in the night.

There are some clever gizmos that come with these aids as well. I have a small neckloop 'streamer' that I can wear to channel sound directly into my hearing aids from my mobile phone, home phone, radio and TV. Now I can answer my mobile without picking it up and have a conversation while I walk around the house with both hands free to do other things - and the sound quality is fantastic. That would have been great in my previous job as an IT consultant when I was always juggling phone and keyboard - but equally useful now. Last week I was able to take a call from a bookshop organising a signing while pushing a buggy through the windy playground.

I've always found it tedious to have to pay too much attention to my hearing impairment. What I really want from aids is for them to get on with the job of giving me better hearing and leave me free to get on with everything else. The perfect aid doesn't yet exist (in my opinion it would have endless battery life and be waterproof...) but the Agil's are by far the best I've had. I can even eavesdrop on strangers' conversations more easily - always useful for a writer!

**Penny Rudge**

**Penny Rudge** has been a Cubex customer since 2000. Her debut novel '*Foolish Lessons in Life & Love*' is a warm and funny story about Taras Krohe, a young Londoner wedged between two women - his Russian girlfriend, Katya, who wants more commitment - and Mami, his overbearing Bukovinian mother who's determined to keep her little *pourchi* under her thumb. From a funeral in South London to the top of the Monument, Taras is dragged along a journey of self-discovery which he's not equipped to handle - with joyously laugh-out-loud results.