



# CHANGE OF HABIT

AUTISTIC CHILDREN CAN BE TAUGHT NEW SKILLS AND WAYS OF DOING THINGS THAT WILL HELP THEM INTEGRATE INTO SOCIETY. SUNUJA NAIDU FINDS OUT HOW ONE CENTRE DOES THIS

I remember talking to someone whose son was autistic some months ago and sensed a tinge of sadness in her voice when she spoke about him. All parents wish to have their child be normal, yet as some parents have discovered, having an autistic child is not the end of the road.

Autism is a spectrum disorder, meaning the abilities of autistic kids range from mild to severe, from low-functioning to high-functioning. Not all children will have the exceptional abilities of the Dustin Hoffman character in *Rain Man*; in fact, very few will. But many of them do manifest the social shortcomings of that character. Most

autistic children lack social skills. They do not make eye contact, lack greeting skills and are unable to interact with others. "Most children with autism prefer to be alone," says Ms Hui Ling Loh, Senior Behaviour Analyst, ABC Center Singapore.

They are also deficient in play skills and are unable to pretend play or play appropriately with toys. They tend to line up their toys or repeatedly play with the same toy in the same fashion, are unable to engage in turn taking, sharing, imaginative or substitution play and are unable to functionally communicate what they want or need.



"Children with autism in general are unable to take in natural stimuli in the environment to learn the way other children do. They are enclosed in their own world and are sensitive to certain variables in the environment such as light, sounds and texture," says Hui Ling. ABC Center employs a method called Applied Behaviour Analysis to help these children function more effectively in society.

The first thing the centre does is to meet parents to discuss their concerns and goals and to assess the child's current skills level. Various strategies are then employed to help the child learn new skills. One of them is to place the children in a restricted environment with few distractions so that they are not overwhelmed by external stimuli and are better able to receive information. Once the child has acquired the skill in this structured environment, the next step is to teach generalisation, where the child is taught to generalise the skill across stimulus classes, settings and time, to natural environment and social community. On developing the child's programme, the child's daily routine is factored in where all the activities are broken down to small manageable steps and taught to mastery. These steps are then chained together and integrated into the natural routine.

The centre provides training programmes for parents to empower them to teach their children. Many parents, points out Hui Ling, have difficulty managing the everyday life of their autistic children. Her advice to parents in this situation:

- Find out what autism is and how it affects your child; look for scientifically proven methods that are effective in managing him or her.
- Teach and encourage independence in daily routines.
- Create goals for your child and introduce these goals systematically through structured teaching.

According to one parent, Irene Tan (not her real name), ABA helps her son express himself, manage his behaviour and motivates him to do things. "He is doing well academically, but he needs a support teacher to help him to focus and be attentive to lessons and instructions. Also, socially he needs encouragement to communicate and interact with his peers."

Whether a child is able to join a mainstream school depends on the child's skills level and how well the child learns in a natural environment. The child could also go to school with a classroom shadow to give him the support he needs in integrating into the school environment. The autistic child can be taught skills but transferring those skills requires some pre-planning on the part of parents, school and the behaviour analyst working with the child, advises Hui Ling.

## A SILVER LINING

Alan (not his real name) was 18 months old when his parents noticed that he was not making much eye contact, pointing at objects or babbling. He was also prone to tantrums. His worried parents took him to see a paediatrician who referred him to the Child Development department at Kandang Kerbau Hospital. He was given speech therapy before being formally assessed by a psychologist at Kandang Kerbau Hospital at the age of two years seven months.

Shares his mother, Mrs Lim, "Although we suspected he had autism, it still came as a hard blow when the developmental paediatrician at Kandang Kerbau Hospital confirmed our suspicion. The informal diagnosis was autism with global developmental delay. No words could describe the pain that followed: Why did it happen, why him... It was just too painful to see your beloved child having such a bad start in life. From anger to sadness, helplessness to fear for his future... these feelings and thoughts just kept haunting me throughout the months. It is a tough and painful journey I wish no parents would have to go through."

She enrolled him in speech and occupational therapy and also in an intensive ABA programme by ABC Center. At ABC Center, he clocks an average of 25-30 hours a week. This is supplemented by home-based teaching by his mother.

"I spend many hours a day doing one-to-one teaching, playing turn taking games with him, teaching him self-help skills and keeping him engaged in meaningful activities, such as playing his toys appropriately, hugging his sister, story time and music time. TV time is limited to half an hour a day. He is also on the GFCF (Gluten free, Casein free) diet as he suffers from wheat, dairy and egg allergy."

Mrs Lim is very pleased with the progress Alan has made at the centre. "He is now talking in two to three-word sentences, has good eye contact and responds to all greetings spontaneously. He is also imitating a lot. His play skills are also emerging quickly. He now seeks my husband and I for a game of chase, tickle, a hug, pat a cake game and he calls for mummy if he doesn't see me nearby. He spontaneously requests his favourite snacks and food and will say 'hi' to his younger sister."

"Academically, he can read at least 100 words and has no problem naming A-Z and counting 1-20. He can even sing 'Twinkle twinkle little star'. His tantrums have subsided and he has been shown more appropriate ways to make requests. He plays with his toys better, pulling his Thomas train around the tracks and not throwing them around."