

# mother knows best

*Two sets of parents of autistic children share with Koh Jia Ling why mothers should trust their instincts when it comes to their child's development*



It is every parent's dream to have a healthy, happy and normal child. But when signs indicate otherwise, the next best thing to do is to spot the problem early and seek professional help so that your child has a better chance of leading a life that allows him to realise his potential.

In the case of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), most children are diagnosed only when they are about three to four years old, which hinders the possibility of them recovering well enough, socially and mentally, to match their peers and cope in a mainstream school. Although a child slightly over a year old may display many red flags of autism, some developmental paediatricians are of the opinion that children so young may simply be working out the kinks of growing, and will eventually right themselves.

That was what happened in Jenna's\* case, when she tried to seek help for her son Jackson\* whom she suspected had a problem.

"Jackson was about one when I noticed that things just didn't seem right. He started doing repetitive movements with his head and he just kept on nodding his head constantly. And everything with him just seemed a struggle, like getting him to go from, say, a bottle, to drinking from a straw. I also noticed that he never actually paid attention to anything I was doing or what anyone else was doing; he just liked to do his own thing. When he was 16 months I took him to a developmental paediatrician

who told me he had a lot of red flags of autism, and suggested I look into putting him in an early intervention programme. At the same time, her attitude was that sometimes things just work out on their own, and six months later he might be fine."

After some time, when it was apparent that things were not going to work their own way out, she decided to take things into her own hands. She did some research on possible early intervention programmes that could help her son, and came across ABC Center Singapore's Infant/Toddler (IT) programme for children under the age of three who are diagnosed or 'at risk' of being diagnosed with ASD.

"Research has consistently shown that early intensive intervention offers the best chance for improving function and maximising a child's progress and outcomes," says Loh Hui Ling, M.A., BCBA, Site Administrator of ABC Center Singapore. "There is growing evidence to suggest that a small minority of persons with autism progress to the point where they no longer meet the criteria for a diagnosis of ASD. However, the age at which intervention begins for a child with ASD is critical."

## Early Intervention

Knowing this, another set of parents, Faith\* and Andy\*, decided to enrol their son Kyle\* in the IT programme as well, as they learnt from family and

their own research that early intervention and ABA (Applied Behaviour Analysis) is an effective form of therapy for children with ASD. They had been looking for more intensive programmes for their 16-month-old son, but met with great frustration as most therapists they saw were unwilling to enrol their son in the number of therapy hours they wanted for him, citing his young age. They also liked how the programmes at ABC were structured around ABA — the proven science of using interventions and stimuli to influence human behaviour, rather than explaining it away as internal constructs beyond our control — and the fact that ABC Center was a US-based company run properly by professionals with BCBA (Board Certified Behaviour Analyst) certification.

The IT programme in particular focuses on facilitating emerging skills such as initiation, eye contact, imitation, play, and responding to social reinforcement with children under three years of age, so as to increase the child's range of behaviour across different areas and situations, and help him or her eventually be successful in typical community environments. It started only last August in Singapore, but already, of the five children who have been enrolled in the programme, two of them have graduated and gone on to mainstream schools and are doing well.

Both Kyle and Jackson have improved much after joining the programme. After only three months in the programme, Kyle's eye contact has vastly improved, and he is interacting a lot more with his parents and has started speaking; while Jackson has shown great improvement in his skills after nine months in the programme.

Says Jenna, "When we enrolled Jackson in the programme, he couldn't do anything — he couldn't clap his hands, he couldn't wave... he really couldn't do anything. He's definitely improved immensely in his play skills, in his gross and fine motor skills, and also in following simple instructions."

Her advice to parents: "I always hear of mothers whose kids are not diagnosed until they're three or four. If you do think that you've got a problem with your child, or your child's got some bizarre traits, you should follow up and really push the paediatricians to listen to your concerns, because I too was told by the paediatrician that every kid develops differently. Trust your instincts, your gut feeling. The mother always knows best."

*\*Names have been changed*

## FACTS OF AUTISM

### What is autism spectrum disorder?

It refers to a range of pervasive neural developmental disorders that range from mild to severe, affecting how information is processed in the brain.

### Causes:

The cause of autism is unconfirmed, but it is likely that both genetics (rare mutations, or rare combinations of common genetic variants) and environmental factors (such as the advanced age of parents, maternal illness during pregnancy, extreme prematurity and very low birth weight, exposure to high levels of pesticides and air pollution during pregnancy) combine to play a role. However, of the parents we spoke to for this article, none of them had a family history of autism.

### Signs of autism include:

- Impaired social interaction: as early as infancy, babies with ASD may be unresponsive to people, focus intently on one item to the exclusion of others for long periods of time, fail to respond to their names and often avoid eye contact with other people.
- Impaired communication skills: delayed speech and language skills, failure to point or respond to pointing, uses few or no gestures.
- Impaired play skills: unusual interest or behaviours such as lining up toys or other objects, playing with toys the same way every time, like parts of objects (wheels, lids); may develop routines that might seem unusual or unnecessary (i.e., looking in every window that he/she walks by). Not being allowed to do these routines might cause severe frustration or tantrums.

### When to seek help:

If your child is displaying the above signs, and is not meeting the typical developmental milestones of his peers, you should look for a developmental paediatrician to have him checked out.

*ABC Center Singapore is the newest centre in the ABC (Applied Behavior Consultants) global family, established in Singapore on January 2010 to provide specialised ABA services for children and adults with autism and other developmental disabilities. It is located at 318 Tanglin Rd, Phoenix Park Office Campus 01-57 to 59, S247979. Tel: 9423 6248 Email: admin@abccentersingapore.com Website: www.abccentersingapore.com*



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