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Youngsters Aspire to a better quality of life

A project to help children with Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism, is working to change the way people view the condition, writes *Florence Lui*



FIGHTING IGNORANCE: Asperger's Syndrome youngsters take part in the Project Aspire training programme at Hong Kong Institute of Education. Photo: Project Aspire

THE GRADUATION WAS like many others with children smiling, laughing, but wistful at the thought of leaving behind not only a stage in their lives, but also a favourite place.

What made this graduation different, however, was that the children all had Asperger's Syndrome and were graduating from Project Aspire, a programme run at the Hong Kong Institute of Education especially for them.

For parents and teachers at the ceremony, the children's musical performance was a triumph. Children who had difficulty communicating, despite their normal to high intelligence, were working together, obeying instructions and singing harmoniously.

Chen Mei-yee had tears in her eyes as she recalled how she had been given a hard time by teachers in her son Ah-ming's regular primary school.

"They didn't understand. They would tell me to take better care of him, that I was an indulgent parent and should quit my job in order to watch him more carefully," she said. His teachers had never heard of Asperger's, a condition that affects 18 out of every 5,000 children, with boys outnumbering girls four to one.

Ms Chen said she hoped Project Aspire, which she credited with improving how her son related to others, would help combat ignorance about the disorder. "This is good, it will educate the public. I hope more people will know what Asperger's Syndrome is and that schools will learn more about it," she said.

Asperger's is a form of autism. Children with the condition usually have normal to high intelligence and good rote memory, and often display great talents. However, they have difficulty interacting socially, cannot read body language and cling to routines.

The graduation marked the successful beginnings of Project Aspire, founded and run by Winifred Ip Fok Woon-yee, former head of the Office of Academic Development at HKIEd. Mrs Ip had appealed to Merrill Lynch for a donation and received \$2 million from the bank and its staff.

The three-year project has been running for 15 months, the first six spent training instructors and identifying children. It initially targeted pupils aged six to eight, but is now to be extended to older children. The 14 children who graduated at the end of their nine-month course last Sunday had been referred by schools or child assessment centres.

The programme involves group training sessions with clinical psychologists and makes use of the HKIEd's resources.

The student-teachers at the institute are volunteers and learn about a condition many teachers are unaware of. One volunteer, Lam Mau, said she would be going on to teach art in a school with special needs children in September. "My experience with Project Aspire will help me to deal with these children, and others with problems," she said. She would like to see government support for such programmes.

Mrs Ip said that with current funding, the programme could continue for three to four more years, though with additional funding it could last beyond that. She said she hoped it would act as a pilot scheme and increase awareness of the condition, especially among young teachers.

"Many people have the notion that an autistic child cannot be helped or integrated into society. They don't know that these children are high-functioning,"

she said. "Project Aspire aims to let the public know we can't label and limit them. We want to increase awareness of these children's difficulties and potential."

With greater awareness, the children would have a better chance of being integrated into mainstream schools, she added.

Parent Kwan Pui-kei said the journey to Project Aspire and improvement in her daughter's condition had been long and hard. At age two, Sui-ching could already speak individual words. She was ahead of most toddlers her age. When she was three, however, her development slowed. When other children were speaking coherently, Sui-ching had trouble with phrasing.

Doctors said there was nothing wrong. However, her condition grew worse. Teachers at her preschool were frustrated, not knowing how to handle her behaviour. She would linger in the toilets to avoid social contact.

"There was no problem academically, but there was socially. She didn't know how to start a conversation. Teachers simply thought she was naughty," Ms Kwan explained.

Sui-ching was finally diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome and referred to Project Aspire via the Child Assessment Centre in Kowloon. She has benefited greatly from the programme, with support from speech and occupational therapists, clinical psychologists and Asperger experts.

Leung Chee-wai, aged seven, has a similar story. His mother, Leung Kwan-fong, said she, too, had experienced frustration. Although her son exhibited signs of the syndrome at an early age, Ms Leung recognised them only with hindsight.

Chee-wai would refuse to get into taxis unless they had a particular tyre pattern, for instance. When his parents tried to cross an empty street while a traffic light was at red, he refused to let them, saying they had to wait for it to turn green.

Ms Leung also recalls trips to the grocery store in which she was unable to purchase things in "buy one get one free" sales because Chee-wai was put off by the free gift. He would force her to give it back to the store, saying it was not part of the purchase.

Chee-wai's dislike for the unfamiliar extended to his school, where he could not tolerate the occasional absence of his regular teacher.

With Project Aspire Chee-wai has shown marked improvement. His father, Aaron Leung, said he owed much to the programme. "My son has improved in many ways. And the programme, besides teaching him, also teaches us as parents," he said.

Mr Leung touched on a vital aspect of Project Aspire - parent involvement. Parents have to watch each session from an observation room.

Mrs Ip said she was pleased at the dramatic progress of children over nine months and was looking forward to receiving her next intake. "One child is extremely talented and can draw 3-D objects, another is very good at music. They all have their own talents, but because of their lack of social awareness, people may ignore them or think they are crazy. We want to do a little more, to get to know these children better. The parents felt so helpless before, now they're confident."

Ms Chen agreed, remembering a recent event that showed just how much Ah-ming had improved. "The other day, I was sick with fever and my son brought me a damp towel and placed it on my forehead. He's never, ever, done that before," she said.

(Names of parents and children in this article have been changed at their request.)