

A look at some of the issues that surround communication disorders.

By RUBIN KHOO

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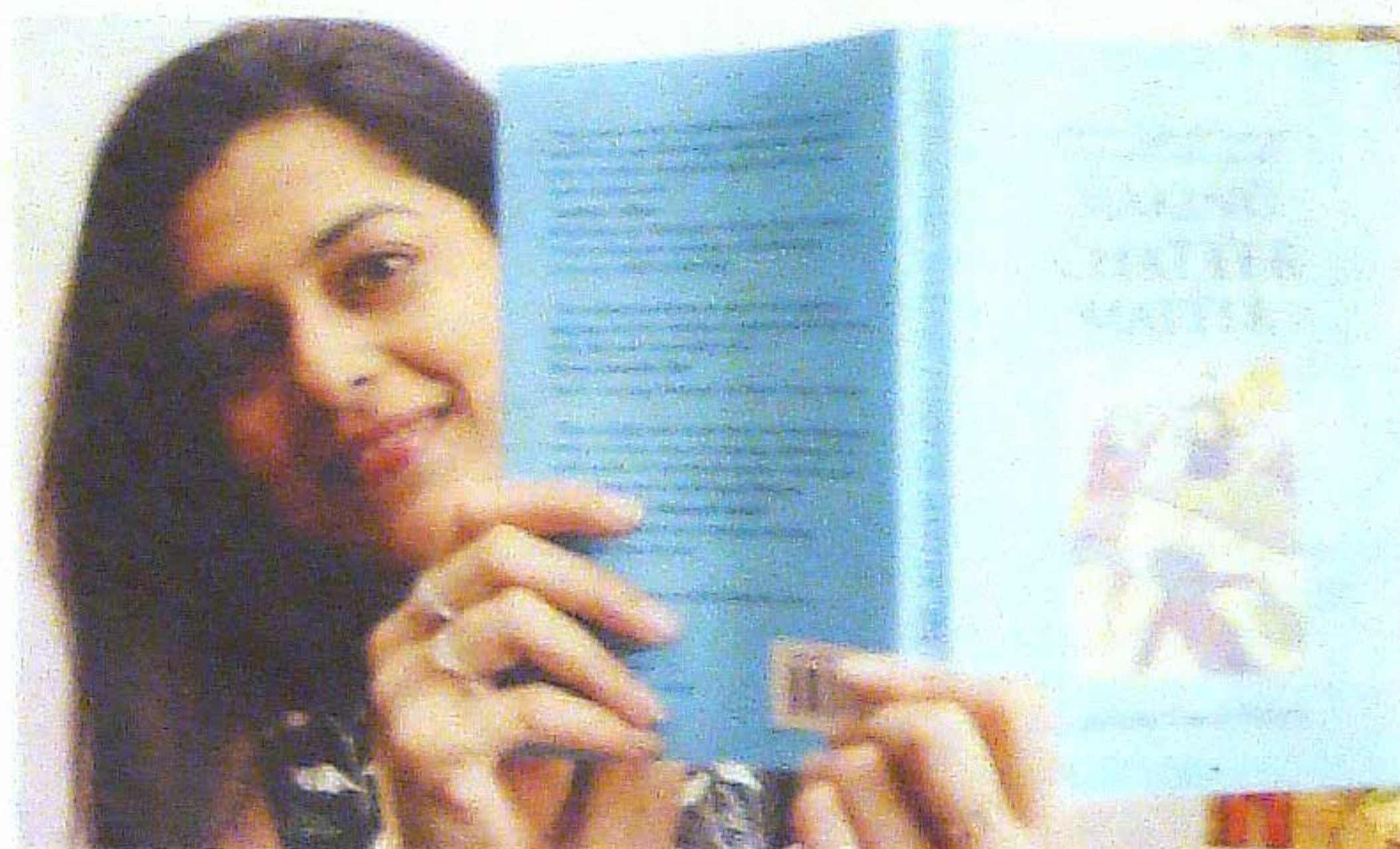
IMAGINE a situation in which you desperately want to communicate something but nobody can make sense of what you're trying to say. And you have to go through this every day. To put it mildly, it would be a very frustrating experience. Add to that the fact that you live in a multilingual environment with a medium of instruction that isn't the same as the one you use at home.

"It's very isolating if you are unable to communicate," says speech language pathologist Jennifer Peters. "Communication is in everything that you do."

For the past 15 years, Peters has been working on maximising the potential for communication among those with communication disorders.

She points out that there are many misconceptions that surround communication disorders. A common one is that disorders stem from speech, which isn't necessarily the case. Parents are usually confused about how to deal with the situation. At what age should you start panicking if your child isn't talking?

"There are certain developmental milestones," says Peters. At two years, a child will usually be able



Jennifer Peters: 'Communication is in everything that you do.'

to utter single words. By three, cute phrases will not be a problem. From four onwards, a child's language development takes off.

"If at three, your child is still not talking, then something is wrong and you should seek advice. Early intervention is vital."

Parents react in different ways. Many go into denial, seeing a problem but refusing to accept it. Others seek help but don't get involved in the process. But that is of little use. An hour a week, doesn't help solve the problem, says Peters.

"You have to participate with your child since communication is in everything you do."

Chatter

To complicate matters, there is much ambiguity surrounding communication disorders. Parents often do not know what course of action to take.

"Many people have done the rounds but didn't get the help they needed."

Misdiagnosis, advice from those who are not qualified and a lack of awareness are just some of the problems that Peters has witnessed. This prompted her to write a book, *Making Chatter Matter - Understanding Language Impairment within a Multilingual Environment*.

"I dealt with a child who had a lot of behavioural issues, whose

matters

parents couldn't really afford therapy," she says. "But they tried and weren't getting the right advice. It was then that I decided I had to do something."

Peters realises that people needed information about where to go, what to do, what to expect and also, what could go wrong.

Her book encourages parents to question the therapist and not take his word for granted. It covers many theoretical aspects, giving parents in-depth explanations.

The book also deals with multilingualism, something many children have difficulty with.

"Coping with one language is different from coping with another."

Peters has included a comprehensive list of websites and resource centres that parents can visit, and simple activities that they can carry out with their young ones.

Melissa Peter, a speech language pathologist with 15 years' experience, was prompted to write a book for similar reasons. Her aim was to tackle the many misconceptions surrounding communication difficulties.

"The speech language pathologist is usually not the first point of contact," Peter says. "The parent would have consulted doctors, teachers, maybe a psychologist. By the time they come to a therapist, they would already have had a lot of people pushing them."

Her book, *Talk about Talk: Optimizing Communication Skills in Your Child*, is written for parents and caregivers to enlighten them about speech and language development, and their role in facilitating it. The first half focuses on the growth and capabilities of the developing child.

"It is a general guide based on my experience and covers certain theories," she explains.

The book focuses on the difficulties that arise when a child's development does not go according to plan.

"I look at a handful of case histories to give a realistic view," Peter says. "A big part of the book is to help parents understand the issue."

Parents often bear the brunt when their children have developmental problems. A common assumption is that they aren't doing enough and because of that, parents often carry with them a lot of unnecessary guilt.

"When your child doesn't perform, it feels like your

dream just got broken," she adds. "But the key is to look at each child as special."

"When a child feels that he or she is not understood, there is a tendency to act out. When that happens you have to remove them from the situation. You have to tell them that the behaviour is unacceptable."

She says that the problems can be dealt with more effectively when there is early intervention. Up till the age of four, a child is still small enough to handle. Past the age of seven, the parent's role becomes crucial and there needs to be frequent interaction and co-operation between the therapist and parents.

"If the parents' hearts aren't in it, the child can't progress."

Melissa uses a "family based" intervention model. Each client is first viewed as a member of the family unit to whom he/she belongs.

Therapy is then modified to support that child's role in the family unit. This might mean that every member of the family is assigned a small task to perform with the client.

It's also essential to understand that

there are no quick fixes. Peter dealt with a child whom she met when he was four. "This boy only started talking when he was nine. For many, the important thing is that the child talks. But that is a common misconception."

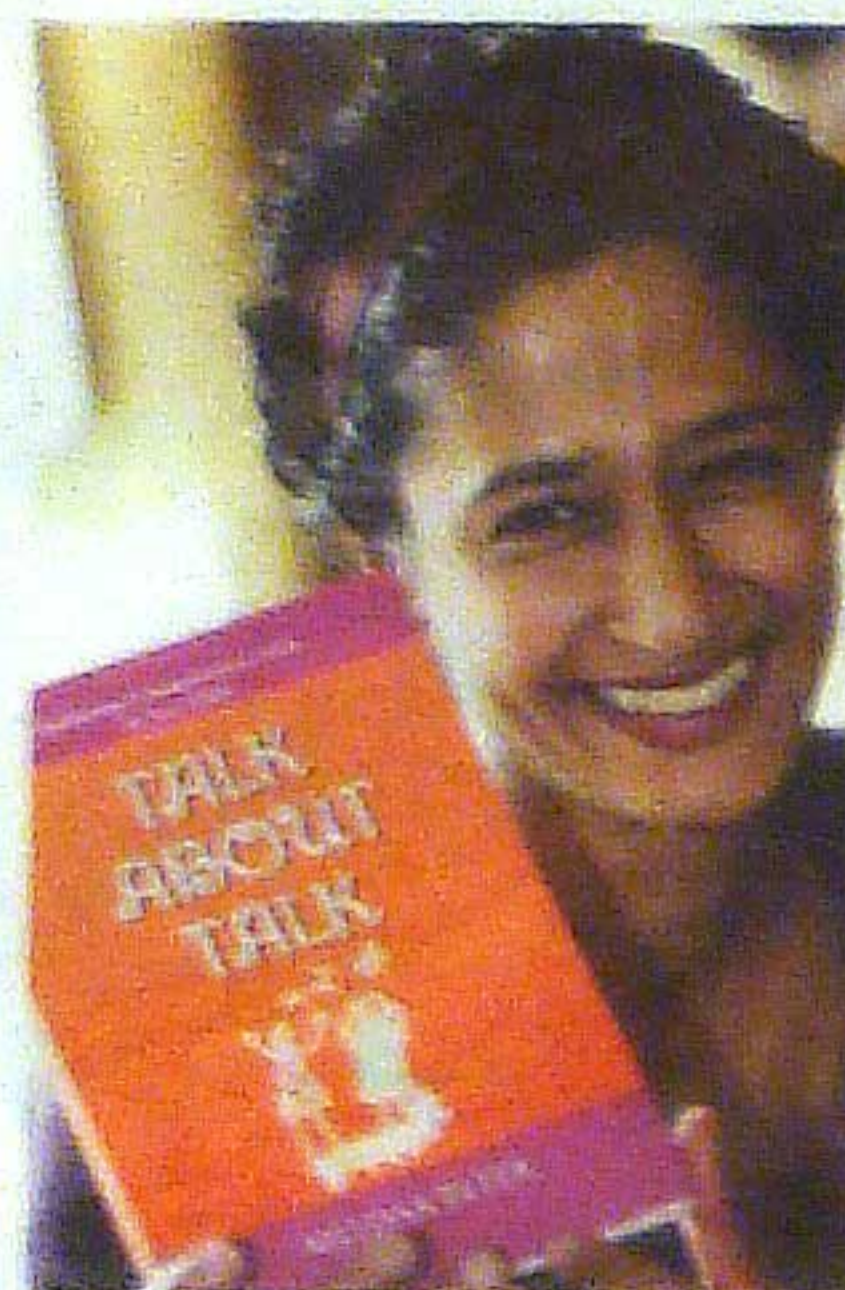
Communicating doesn't have to be verbal. Speech therapy isn't necessarily just for those who are communication-impaired. The aim, says Peter, is to optimise communication.

It is important for parents to form a relationship with the speech language pathologist.

"You must be able to get along with him or her; more importantly, your child must be able to get along with them."

Make sure that the speech language pathologist is qualified, adds Peter. To check, parents can refer to the Malaysian Association of Speech Language and Hearing by logging on to mash.org.my.

■ Making Chatter Matter - Understanding Language Impairment within a Multilingual Environment is published by Nurture Books, while **Talk about Talk: Optimizing Communication Skills in Your Child** is published by GoodBasic Media. The books are available at all major bookstores. For further info, log on to speakeasyconsultants.com



Melissa Peter: 'The key is to look at each child as special.'