

# Speech therapy

By **JENNIFER EILEEN PETERS**

WHEN I decided to become a speech and language pathologist, I didn't know what I was getting into. I wanted to work with children and what would be easier than teaching children to speak, or so I thought. Like most people in the early 1990s, I had little idea what speech therapy entailed.

For those who are unfamiliar with this discipline, speech language pathologists diagnose speech disorders in individuals, in their language, voice and fluency. We also identify problems in eating habits and swallowing, and treat our clients to overcome these issues. The job is demanding and often misunderstood.

Armed with a degree from the University of Reading and a licence to practise from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, UK, I returned home brimming with enthusiasm. There were only a handful of speech language pathologists working in Malaysia then. There was little public awareness about speech therapy and scant support from the medical profession at that time.

My career started in a rehabilitation centre where I worked with both adults and children. After a year and a half, I set up my own practice with just one client. With time, as my caseload increased, I realised that almost 50% of my job involved talking and supporting parents or family members because family dynamics are always affected.

This was difficult for me initially. I am by nature, reserved. However, my job necessitated that I speak, bond with, advise and mentor people. I had to learn not to let emotion enter into the equation. Today, advising or guiding caregivers comes naturally to me.

Although qualified to treat both children and adults, I opted to work with children. Getting uncommunicative children to communicate brings me great joy. Opening up the world of a child through communication is intensely satisfying.

One of the things I love about my job is that no two clients are the same. They may have the same disorder and be of the same age but every child is different. The challenge lies in providing a holistic approach and an individualised therapy programme to meet each child's needs.

The interesting part is in finding the right balance for each treatment programme and connecting with my young clients.

Sometimes there are hiccups along the way. Parents can have unrealistic expectations and demand: "So when can my child speak?"

Then there is the tedium of dealing with caregivers who lack commitment because they do not understand how speech therapy works.

This lack of awareness drove me to write *Making Chatter Matter*, a simplified book to understanding Speech Therapy.

On the whole, the parents that I see these days are very co-operative and I have great respect for them. It has been a fulfilling 18 years. Work can be energy-draining but I wouldn't have it any other way. The reward comes from helping my clients and their families to struggle through the hard work and, eventually make progress after each session.

By laying the foundation for better communication with people around them, it allows the child to reach his full potential, and changes his quality of life.

■ For more details on Jennifer E. Peters' work, check out [www.carespeech.com](http://www.carespeech.com).