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New Hope for Autistic Children

by Pang Hin Yue

When Dennis Lee is with his daughter, Sasha, nine, a camera is always at hand. Pictures of their bonding are dutifully put in her “memory book” and at the end of the day, Lee goes through it with Sasha, recounting their time together. Lee labels the emotions as he goes along. He also videotapes his one-on-one time with Sasha.

Similarly, Sasha’s daily contact with the people around her – be it sibling, relatives or her teachers – is also captured on camera to help her commit them to memory.

Everything that Lee does with his daughter is done mindfully, taking care that his words and deeds are in tandem with the principles of Relationship Development Intervention (RDI).

Psychologist Dr Steven Gutstein had noticed in his clinical work that many children with autism were emotionally and socially inept even though they had gained significant progress in language acquisition and academic achievements through therapies.

So 10 years ago, Gutstein developed the RDI Treatment Programme for Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) to address these deficits by taking the affected families through the various developmental stages which their autistic children had missed out.

Under the guidance of Jennifer Peters, the sole RDI certified consultant in Malaysia, Lee and Sasha are journeying together to put into practice what Gutstein calls, “reciprocal relationship”. “The child’s role is the key to all our engagement,” explains Lee.

Peters, a speech language pathologist with over 17 years of experience, decided to add RDI consultancy to her list of services after undergoing a two-year training programme under Gutstein and his team in Houston, Texas, the United States.

“I went into it because more than 80% of the clients that I see have autism, and RDI seems to be the missing piece to help them connect cognitively, emotionally and socially,” says Peters in her new Carespeech Centre at Jalan Yap Kwan Seng, Kuala Lumpur.

Autism is a brain disorder that impedes, in varying degrees, learning, communication and social skills. About one in 150 has the disorder.

In his book, *Mindblindness: An Essay On Autism And Theory Of Mind*, Simon Baron-Cohen postulates that persons with autism are unable to suss out the social and emotional cues of people around them as a result of selective impairment in mind reading.

Most people respond to those around them by gauging their gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice. But this natural ability is mostly absent in persons with autism. So despite acquiring language skills, many with ASD have difficulty engaging in meaningful, free-flowing conversations and they cannot adapt according to social settings.

Hence Gutstein believes that enhancing their emotional intelligence is pertinent. In his introductory guide for parents (www.RDIconnect.com), Gutstein cites a study done in the United States in 2001 which reveals that though the majority of autistic children gained grounds in language and academic development, few had gone on to work and live independently when they reached adulthood.

Over 65% of them had almost no social contact outside of their family.

The problem with most conventional therapies is that they promote rote learning, says Gutstein. They may carry out conversations based on what they learnt from social scripts for different settings but many still can't relate in a natural, spontaneous manner. Once conversations fall out of the scripts, they are at a loss.

With all this in mind, Peters focuses on training parents to meet the RDI protocol that helps their children get back on track developmentally.

The onus is on parents to videotape their time with their children, and Peters reviews them once in 10 days and teach parents how to analyse their tapes.

Because RDI is parent-centred, Peters says: "I should work myself out of the job!" Her ultimate aim is to get the parents to become the prime teachers. So it is no surprise that when parents engage her services, more than 50% of the time is spent with the former.

The first three years are devoted to transferring skills to parents who in turn apply them on their children. They include skills to foster friendship, empathy and a desire to share personal experiences, Peters explains. "Ultimately, it is to get the children to think and respond dynamically," she adds.

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