

Understanding kids with autism

Parents need the right approach to cope with an autistic child, says care advocate

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KLANG: At five, he was unable to speak a word. He could not even call out “mum” or “dad”.

Unlike most toddlers, Sam had echolalia – which could be a sign of communication disorders in autism. He babbled most of the time, and had a glazed look.

When he was not babbling, he would run in circles, presumably “at play” by himself.

Realising her son was different, his mother was desperate for help but did not know what to do.

At the regular kindergarten he went to, Sam was not learning and could not complete the easiest writing exercise.

And when his father found out, he caned Sam for being playful.

“Most parents have no idea what is happening to their children,” said Ruth S. Arunasalam, the founder of Ruth Training & Development Academy, as she recalled her early encounters with Sam six years ago.

After a decade conducting extensive research on autism and advocating awareness, Ruth believes parents just need the right understanding and approach to cope with an autistic child.

“It is usually a lack of awareness or denial that makes things difficult for parents, teachers and caregivers,” she said.

“Many times, they just don’t know that a child is showing symptoms of autism. And even when they do, they have no idea how to live with an autistic child.”

A lawyer by training, the mother of two from Kuala Lumpur discovered her passion for autism when she was collecting data as part of the coursework for her Masters in



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English as a Second Language more than 10 years ago.

“One subject called Human Communication Disorder exposed me to various children’s disorders. It inspired me to study further,” says Ruth, who is in her 50s.

She founded the academy here earlier this year to help people teach, communicate and deal with autistic children in their daily lives.

“Autistic individuals are trapped in their own world.

“They are disconnected and oblivious to people and their surroundings.

“Only when you understand what autism is can you connect the world of an autistic child to ours,” she said.

The word “autism” originates from the



Driven by passion: Ruth explaining autism to a student at her academy in Klang.

Greek word “autos”, which means “self”. It implies that autistic children are inclined to be with themselves as opposed to being connected to the outside world.

“In normal schools, children with this condition already suffer missing links in their developmental order and that is why they cannot function or communicate.

“This is where early intervention is needed to teach the children about instinctive responses, and to communicate,” she said.

Frequently invited by NGOs and corporations to speak on autism, Ruth also lectures on developmental psychology and autism in several institutions of higher learning.

In Sam’s case, Ruth spent hours explaining autism to his mother.

“I am relieved to know that everyone in Sam’s family realised the problem and got involved to help the little boy,” she said.

Sam, who is 11 now, is able to function properly at home. His social skills have improved by leaps and bounds, and he goes to a typical primary school, where he studies and makes friends.

Having helped many parents with their autistic children, Ruth said people should recognise the problem instead of thinking that it will go away.

“If they think their children are different, they should get a proper assessment. Developmental psychologists will use the right tools to determine the level of autistic traits,” she said.