

Chapter 1 - Family Education is Paramount

Sue and I had never raised any child with Asperger's Syndrome before. However, when I decided to take 6 months leave from work, I was very sure that I could help a lot. In the end, the outcome was much better than what I had expected. Why was I so sure before? It was all about my experience raising my elder son as well as my several firm beliefs.

Firstly, I believed that family education was paramount and should start early. Since I became a father, I began to read about child mentoring and education. I attended many seminars too. All books, teachers and experts talked about the importance of early family education i.e. before the age of six. It would be hard to change a child after six because his / her personalities were formed, actually solidified. The period before six was the "Golden Age of Education" which parents could not afford to miss. In early 2008, Ag was around five years old. I would regret if I did not grab this golden age.

Secondly, I believed that emotional quotient (EQ) was more important than intelligence quotient (IQ). Personality was more important than IQ too. Among all intelligences, creativity was the most important.

Thirdly, I believed that for family educating, a good start was winning half of the battle. When children were praised, they would be motivated. They would learn fast and happily. In return, there would be more applause and more motivation. This cycle would repeat and repeat. The children would become self-initiative, leading to a bright future. Parenting would be easy and enjoyable.

Once I was proud of the fact that my elder son, Gi, was gifted. I firmly believed that it was built on good family education. Several kindergarten teachers had said to us: "Mr. and Mrs. Lok, seeing what Gi has achieved, I'm sure you two have put in a lot of effect in family education."

Gi was indeed intelligent and articulate. He was able to recite Tang poems when he wasn't even two. He once joined a competition at a mall just by coincidence and won a prize. Since then, his

talent was unfolded. In kindergarten, he won story telling competition at K1 and K2. The school requested him to perform at the graduation ceremonies. Gi had no cold feet. He went straight to the stage and performed very well.

In K3, Sue and I stopped Gi from joining the competition again. We did not want him to win again and became arrogant. In that year of K3, he had got the “Conduct and Diligence” award for three consecutive years. He was nominated to join the “Outstanding Student” competition in the district and he won that too! Indeed, Gi got approval all the time. Sue and I just needed to help him a bit, making sure that he was on the track, then off he went his way and performed well.

When Gi was admitted to primary 1, he was immediately appointed the class monitor. He excelled in all subjects and won lots of awards. Sue and I did not push Gi. We just checked his homework and asked him to correct mistakes. We had never arranged extra tuition for Gi, but he did well. At weekends, he joined various activities and he enjoyed all of them. Every teacher and coach said that he was good.

In primary 2, the school teacher told us that Gi was gifted. Sue and I did not believe. We did not take any action. However, at the end of the school term, he was recommended by the school to attend an assessment by The Chinese University of Hong Kong and another university. As predicted, he was found to be gifted

I thought about this seriously. I was rather sure that Gi was not with an extremely high IQ. However, he was passionate about everything. He was eager to learn and paid good attention to the teachers and instructors. But why? Probably because he had a good start. He had received lots of applause since he was a little boy. This built his confidence and steady attentiveness to school. He had an inquisitive mind. We never forced him to do anything which he didn't like. All the activities which he participated in were within his capabilities as well as slightly challenging, which inspired him.

What Sue and I considered most important was Gi's moral education. Let me explain.

Our living quarter was reasonable comfortable. We owned a car and had a domestic helper at home. We insisted Ag to be polite with the helper. He went to bed early and got up early. He always greeted his parent goodnight before going to bed.

We seldom bought him expensive toys and instilled him “value for money”. We taught him not to be wasteful. When a toy was broken, we checked if the problem could be fixed. When a shoe was broken, I checked if possible to mend this using super glue. I asked Gi to observe so that he learnt not to waste.

In the McDonald's fast-food restaurants, we encouraged Gi to help himself, for example, getting paper towels, straws, spoon and fork himself. These were the best ways to train children. Gi was about four years old, but he handled all these well. Miss McDonald would not hesitate to praise. Gi heard this. He was encouraged and became more willing to try. When Gi was 4.5, we trained him to bath himself, tidy up and dress himself. We stopped our domestic helper from helping Gi.

It is not easy. If the parents both go to work and there is a good helper at home, then the child will have very rare opportunity to learn self-caring. In this case, how can the child become a class monitor?

I kept on instilling "Don't be afraid of difficulties. Face Challenges" concept to Gi. When Gi was five years old, I asked him to push a baby trolley up hill, with Ag in the trolley. It was a long walk. The sun was blazing. Gi sweated a lot. He face and his neck were wet. Sue and I did not offer to take over but we encouraged him all the way: “Good boy. Keep going. You can do it”. Yes, Gi did it. Once arriving home, our domestic helper greeted Ag with a big smile: “Good boy. Well done.” We enjoyed ice cream together happily. This happened more than four years ago but Gi still remembered this scene and laughed.

I took Gi to country side. On our way, a big cockroach somehow landed on Gi's shoe. I told Gi to shake it off and step on it. He was only 3 years old but he did it without hesitation. In primary school, all students were afraid of cockroaches. They screamed and fled except Gi. He stayed calm and stepped on the cockroach. All his classmates considered Gi as a junior hero.

Summer in Hong Kong is wet and humid. Our bedrooms are all air-conditioned. One summer night, I brought Gi to sleep on the floor in our sitting room. I did not want him to be spoiled. With this experience, he learnt to be adaptive to environment. Air conditioning was not a must. In primary school, he became a leader. He could adapt.

In primary school, all students were required to wear shoes with shoe laces. I taught Gi to tie shoe laces. I stopped our helper from doing this for Gi. In a parents' gathering, the school principal shared her experience. A year 3 student got his shoe laces undone. The principal was just standing by. This student asked her to help because he could not do it. I told Gi this story, reminding him to take care of himself.

I have many stories of this kind. I can keep going and write a very long chapter. I firmly believe that family education is the foundation to nurture a warm, polite, inquisitive, adaptive and well performing child.

Is it easy to teach? Yes, for each of these training independently, but no, when grouping them all together as one piece. This needs many years of commitment. In Hong Kong, many parents work long hours of overtime. When arriving home, it is time for the child to sleep. How to spare time for parenting? On weekends, parents are at home. However, it takes steady attention to cultivate. Parents must pay attention all the time. It is a lot easier to rest or play games or watch TV with the child, leaving all house duties to the helper. I was very fortunate that when Gi was a kid, my office work load was not very heavy. I spared time and paid attention.

I was once very proud of myself in good parenting. Now, I still have a sense of pride, but more modest. The journey with Ag to overcome Asperger's Syndrome has allowed me to learn much broadly. I know that there are still a lot to learn.

Let me share my journeys of overcome with you.