

Chapter 10 - Overcoming Asperger's Syndrome, A Wonderful Journey

I try to answer three questions with this book.

1. Is there a way to overcome Asperger's Syndrome?
2. If yes, what to do? When to do?
3. If the golden opportunity of early education is missed, what may happen to the child? What journey the child may go through? Is there still a way to overcome?

In the case of Ag, he had overcome. This was not just my personal view. Clinical psychologists, early education experts, therapists of different centers all had the same conclusion. It was no longer valid to regard Ag with Asperger's.

The second question is how to overcome? Similar to Ag, many children sought help from special education center. I met Ag's classmates many times in many different centers. The parents of these children did the same as I did. Why Ag turned around much quicker and overcame successfully? This question has been in my mind for almost one year. It is not a good idea to write a summary of all activities and trainings. I want to analyze it in a holistic view. I want to figure out a perspective or a new horizon whereby the concerned parents can follow as a good reference.

I have never invented any new therapy. All those mentioned in previous chapters were the advice of professionals, therapists and trainers. Nevertheless, I managed to consolidate their advices and put through all these training thoroughly, orderly and timely. These training added up and fit together extremely well. It formed an integrated training program which was unprecedented. Moreover, this program was tightly coupled with Ag's day to day routine. Ag had never realized that he was undertaking special training. He just took part in these activities happily. After years of special education and activities, Ag has changed and overcame the syndrome.

Since every child is different, copying and applying the same training program will not help! In this case, the most important question becomes: “How to work out and fit together various trainings to form the most suitable program?” In fact this is my ultimate goal of writing this book.

The Program Features

Let me first outline the features of this integrated program.

- A. Very long hours of special education
- B. Very high quality training
- C. Ever coming up new activities with fun
- D. Coupled with day to day living

A. Very Long Hours of Special Education

How many hours of special education per week is enough? There is no hard-and-fast rule. For Ag, he had undertaken two categories of special training.

The first category was formal training or therapy conducted by professionals. At 4.5 years old, Ag was diagnosed. Since then, he undertook special education continuously in several centers, including EETC of Hong Kong Christian Services, Heep Hong Society and PDA. He also did a training course in The Boys' & Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong. He took play therapy in YWCA. In a period of 2 years, the number of formal training per week was maximum 5 sessions, the minimum was 2, majority of these sessions being 1 hour each.

Is this a good rule of thumb? I cannot tell. I quote it as a reference for the concerned parents.

Since Ag was attending special education at different centers, the training courses were for different purposes i.e. speech therapy, sensory integration, social etiquette, play therapy etc. I considered this a “mixed” mode of training program with different theme and focus. This mixed

mode of training was good. It offered varieties and opportunities to Ag to meet many people, which benefited Ag.

The second category was informal training. During that 6 months period, I was virtually with Ag all the time, except when he was in kindergarten. I took Ag to training centers. After training, I accompanied Ag all the time for many activities, each with a purpose. I boasted myself as good as professionals for certain activities. For example, I inspired Ag to have long conversation with me. I brought Ag to children playground. Many activities there were as good as those training in special education centers. Running around, climbing a tree, playing children soccer, jumping from on boulder to another and bouncing up and down a trampoline etc. had provided Ag with huge amount of good quality exercise. The effect, in my opinion, was as good as formal training.

At home, Sue and I guided and taught Ag to take care of himself which was also good training. I estimated that the total 'informal training' was 10 times as much as 'formal training'.

For Ag, adding all the above training together became adequate. How about other children? There is no rule of thumb. Parents have to judge themselves.

B. Very High Quality Training

First, Please do not leave your child to domestic helper. It will not help. I personally accompany Ag to all special education. I observed Ag's progress. I cherished every opportunity to discuss with professionals. I also made use of the time going to and returning from the centers. If I had left this to my domestic helper, I would have lost all these opportunities and education hours. According to the consulting therapist of PDA, children being taken care of by parents learnt two times as fast as those by domestic helper.

Second, I take the advice of professionals seriously. Following their advice, I conducted a lot of home training with Ag. Occasionally, I got ideas from books. These books were referred by or written by professionals. In other words, I learnt everything from professionals. As such, all special education fit Ag.

Third, Ag was ready. To illustrate, when Ag took indoor rock climbing course in Heep Hong Society, he was ready. Ag enjoyed every session. However, a few of his classmates were not happy to join the course. Some were afraid of climbing. They yelled, struggled and even cried. For them, it was a really scary and bad experience. When participating in the social etiquette training course, Ag was happy too. It was a pleasure for him. However, not every child enjoyed. One boy was very unhappy. In a few sessions, he even refused to go into the classroom. It is important to train the children step by step and at the right time. Yet it is easy to say but hard to put through. In reality, I saw parents too eager and kept pushing their children. It won't help. Time and money was wasted. Even worse, it hurt the children and they would go further away.

Forth, Please respect the child and become a playmate with him. For example when I played "Bakugan ball" with Ag, I became his playmate. I dropped my role as his father. It was not easy. I asked myself several times: "Am I stupid? Why I become so childish? Will it help to speak with Ag with those silly terms and meaningless jargons?" If I had not given up my entity as a father, I could never have become a good playmate with Ag. I would have failed to motivate him, made him enjoy and made him speak.

C. Ever Coming Up New Activities With Fun

Ag improved speedily in 2008. PDA, Heep Hong Society and EETC were unanimous that Ag was no longer with Asperger's at year end 2008. In year 2008, Ag participated in a great deal of activities, very diverse in nature. Actually, most were not formal trainings, but rather activities and games.

- In the first 3 months of 2008, Ag and I went to playground daily. All together, we had been to around 15 different playgrounds. From April onwards, the weather became hot and humid. We went to indoor children playground, at around 7-8 locations.
- Then, we started play therapy. Firstly, we undertook 8 sessions. We took a break and did another 4 sessions afterwards.
- In May, Ag started roller skating. He did the beginner course, then intermediate and advanced. Finally, he did hockey course in April 2009. It was a one-year-long activity.

- In early June, Ag started to participate in the social etiquette course of Heep Hong Society and The Boys' & Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong (BGCA). These courses lasted for 2 months each. After the beginner course, Ag had a break of one month. Then, he took the advanced course.
- In September, Ag joined the indoor rock climbing course of Heep Hong Society. He took 3 courses and stopped in early 2009.
- In addition, on every Saturday of 2008, Ag participated in a variety of activities in community centers, such as painting, handicrafts, mini-chefs and many other games. Ag enjoyed all these. He became more and more open and was willing to communicate.

Why Ag enjoyed all these? Sue and I kept arranging new activity for Ag. Furthermore, as soon as we found that the activity became too easy for Ag, we switched. Finally, we made sure that Ag was ready for each and every course. I brought Ag to playgrounds for activities first. Seeing that he became a lot more swift and energetic, we enrolled him to rock climbing and roller skating. I knew that Ag was ready.

D. Coupled With Day to Day Living

Ag never knew that he was undertaking training. He played. He took part in activities or games arranged by his parents. From his perspective, it is for fun, for leisure or to have exercise. Every day, every hour, every minute of his day to day living was enjoyable, and with people. This continuous enjoyable experience with people made Ag change quickly. He became social.

This was why Ag could overcome Asperger's Syndrome quickly. It was a high quality training program, conducted at the right time, step by step, very enjoyable and integrated with day to day living.

How to find the best fit integrated program?

Every child is different. There is no single training program which can help every child with Asperger's. The most important question then becomes how to identify the best fit integrated program. Let me recall Ag's training history.

- At 2.5 years old, Ag started speech therapy.
- At 3.5 years old, he started training in Early Education and Training Center.
- At 4.5 years old, he was diagnosed as with Asperger's / autistic.
- At 5.5 years old, I began to take leave. This was the turning point. Ag accelerated noticeably. Even after I had resumed work, he kept learning quickly. There was no sign of slowing down. He was happy to participate in other group activities.
- At 6, all professionals and therapists advised: "No need to consider Ag as a child with Asperger's". At 6.5, Ag stopped special training.

This was a four years long journey of training and special education. There was no such genius on earth who could pre-determine an integrated training program 4 years in advance. If there was one, this genius would definitely deserve a Nobel Prize. Actually, this integrated training program was the combined effort of 4 -5 special education centers, conducted by many therapists and professionals, not one single person.

How to work out this integrated training program? The answer was by "step-by-step exploration". Then, the question became how to explore it and determine the best fit program. Using Ag's case for example, it was the joined effort of myself, therapists, professionals and trainers together. They all devoted extra time and effort to explore the best training. Without their help, it would not be possible. How to do it? There were several pre-requisites.

First, I had a very strong determination to overcome. I accompanied Ag every moment. I observed. I discussed with therapist and I read a lot. What was the driving force of this powerful will? It was the successful education of my first child, Gi. The experience made me believe that good education was powerful. When I started my leave, I brought Ag to playgrounds daily. Very quickly, he made a sharp turn. His attitude changed and he improved quickly. This built up my confidence. On top of this, Gi was assessed as gifted. The big difference between my two sons

was shadowing me all the time. It was paramount to narrow the gap between them, otherwise, the whole family would suffer. Lastly, realizing that I was with Asperger's before, I knew what would be happening to Ag. I vowed not to allow my child to repeat my difficult footsteps and my bitter experience.

Second, I took leave for 6 months. This allowed me time and energy to focus, to strive for one single goal. Taking leave was surely the best decision in my life. When I looked back, could I have accomplished so much if I had not taken leave? The answer was negative. It needed huge amount of time and dedication.

Third, I was grateful to Sue. She took care of everything in the family. I dropped everything behind and focused just on Ag, nothing else.

Forth, All therapists and trainers had given me supports and encouragement. When I started my leave, nobody commented. However, within one or two months, everybody witnessed Ag's quick changes. Everybody, not just therapist but also social worker and kindergarten teachers, started to share ideas with me. Since then, they had never stopped to give me advice and encouragement. They introduced me readings. They recommended other special education or training courses. When I described what I did at home, they paid attention and then provided feedback. I was very grateful to Social Welfare Department and EETC for conducting additional assessment or training for Ag. At those days, I was ignorant. I did not know what was going on, what sort of assessment they conducted and why. After each assessment, they explained the result with a smiling face. It was the best motivation and strongest support. Trust, friendship and appreciation were built up in those discussion. Actually we became friends afterwards.

It was the joint effort, two years long, of all therapists, psychologist and trainers that eventually worked out the best program for Ag. I owe them a debt of great gratitude.

Fifth, I had repeated many times that Ag was fortunate. He joined several training programs at the best time e.g. social etiquette course and play therapy. There was a long waiting list for social etiquette course. I had no control on timing i.e. when a place was available. I took Ag to play therapy purely by chance. One day, I happened to read a YWCA member brochure and

found play therapy there. Ag was fortunate to have attended these training courses at the right time, the perfect time. He was ready, so he learnt quickly.

Sixth, For Ag, the most intensive training took place when he was 5 to 6 years old. This was the Golden Age of education. Ag was studying in a kindergarten. He attended school just in the morning. There was no homework. We could fit in special education in the afternoon. This was the best arrangement. In the year after, Ag started his primary school, which was full day in Hong Kong and with lots of home work. It would not be possible to spare time.

Seventh, Lastly, I was with Asperger's Syndrome before. From time to time, Ag's behavior suddenly invoked memory of my childhood. For example, in fast food restaurant, I taught Ag to ask for paper towel. He was five years old, yet he said frequently: "I am afraid." He repeated and repeated. Other parents might be disappointed and even frustrated, but not me, because Ag's answer reflected exactly my mind when I was a child. It took me many years to overcome. So I was very patient with Ag. I kept trying every possible way to motivate him, step by step, very small steps. I knew very well that children with Asperger's were fragile. It was very easy to destroy their confidence but very hard to re-build.

The above were the conditions which I rode on to work out a successful integrated program. Without these fundamentals, it would be very difficult. I made it and I was proud of myself.

No doubt it is the joint effort of parents and professionals together to work out a program. The execution, however, depends more on the parents. The program is bundled with the concerned child's day-to-day living, activities, special education, school life, family education etc. These are all day long activities, round the clock. Nobody, other than the parents, can have a chance to put them through. I was once listening to a radio program about autism. The clinical psychologist said: "Professionals can give advice, design program and conduct training, but the successful execution depends on the parents." This matched with my view.

The book is a complete record of the program for Ag and how I make it. If I can, then other parents can as well. It is a matter of dedication, care, trust and co-operation with therapists and professionals.

A Special Dialogue

In June 2008, Ag suddenly had a dialogue with me.

Ag "When I grow up, I shall get marry and have children."

I asked "How many children do you want to have?"

Ag "I want to have three."

I asked "Why?"

Ag "If more than three, the mother (i.e. meaning his wife) will have too much to do."

Two days after, we had another dialogue.

Ag "When I grow up, I want to have a car."

I asked "Why?"

Ag "I want to get marry. I need to pick up mom (i.e. his wife) and the children."

In another day, Ag asked.

Ag "When I grow up, how can I marry a woman?"

I said "You first need a job and have the ability to take care of your family"

Ag "Urrrr....." He paused for a moment, then closed the dialogue.

Ag was 5.5 years old. My intuition was telling me that Ag was considering. He started to notice the role and relationship of family members. Though just a little bit, it was a big step forward.

That night, I said to Sue: "I think that I have done what I should do in this leave. I can resume my work without worries." I did not mean that Ag had overcome completely. He had opened up.

He no longer needed a close accompany all day long. He could march on without me alongside every minute.

My conclusion was right. I resumed my office work shortly after this conversation. Two weeks after, Ag was awarded "Academic Merit" by his kindergarten.

I went through a wonderful journey to help Ag overcoming ASD