

## **Chapter 4 - Bakugan Balls, From Icy Silence To Happy Communication**

I read several books about Asperger's Syndrome. Generally speaking, children with this syndrome do not have problem in speech capability. All therapists in various training centers also made the same comment. However, Ag had problem and needed speech therapy.

This was extremely disappointing to Sue and me. In both my family and Su's family, no child had ever undertaken speech therapy. I checked with my father. I did not have any problem when I was a little boy. Furthermore, our first child, Gi, started to talk when he was only 11 months old. He was ahead of other children. Sue and I were very pleased. When Ag was born, Sue quitted her job and became full time at home. Ag was taken care of by Sue from birth. He had even more time with Sue than Gi, who was taken care of by our Filipino domestic helper from birth to age 4. In other words, Ag had more chance than Gi to learn Cantonese, yet he was absolutely speechless before two year old. I observed Ag closely. I knew that he was not deaf. However, he just did not talk, not a single word before age two, absolutely.

Finally, we took Ag for speech therapy. I could see four distinct phases of therapy.

Phase One. From age 2.5 to age 3.25, Ag undertook speech therapy. There was good improvement. He started to talk. Very soon, he was able to communicate with us about his basic physiological needs.

Phase Two. From age 3.5 to 4.5, Ag undertook training in Early Education and Training Center (EETC). Speech therapy was part of the program. His speech ability improved steadily but not as quickly as phase one.

Phase Three. At age 4.5, Ag was diagnosed as with Asperger's. The training program was changed immediately. He was given more training hours with focus on tackling autism. His speech capability improved faster.

Phase Four. I started my leave. I accompanied Ag to attend all training classes. I arranged exercise and activities for Ag, giving lots of new experience to him. Ag enjoyed. He became a lot more social and confident to express himself. His speech capability improved very quickly.

Let me describe these phases in details.

### **Phase One**

Since birth, we have brought Ag to Hong Kong Governmental Child Care Center for regular check-up. I raised my concern several times that Ag was behind in speech ability. Every time, the duty officer answered: "Don't worry. Please continue to observe it." At around age 2, the duty officer replied: "Let us schedule an assessment". However, there was a long waiting list. When Ag was 2.5 years old, Sue and I decided not to wait and consulted private speech therapists. I learnt from our friends that Speech Therapy Department of The University of Hong Kong (HKU) offered a special service. Therapy was conducted by university student, under the guidance of professors. Ag undertook speech therapy there for a total of approximately 8 months.

Sue took Ag to these lessons, once a week. I took leave and accompanied every two lessons. In that period, Ag started learn to speak, first by single word, then by short phrase, then extended to simple dialog. I really admired these student therapist of HKU, because I did not see many training aids, as compared with other speech therapy centers which I visited subsequently. These students bought or even made training aids themselves, specifically for Ag. I guessed HKU did not provide training aid deliberately so that the students needed to solve their own problem.

Training aids were small toys such as small chair, small table and small cars. The student therapist trained Ag word by word e.g. a chair, then phrase by phrase e.g. sit in a chair. Gradually, Ag learnt and started to speak. In fact, Sue and I knew the tactics. We taught Gi before in the same way and Gi was very articulate. We trained Ag also in the same way, but we were just unable to make Ag speak.

Speech therapy center encouraged Sue and I, or at least one of us, accompanying Ag. To me, the focus was not to learn how to train Ag but rather to have a clear understanding of Ag's progress so that we could do corresponding training at home.

We carried on with the therapy in HKU. The student therapist told us that Ag was doing well and improved steadily. I agreed. By the end of the eighth month, the professor guiding the student therapist suddenly came to Sue and me. She told us that Ag had possessed the ability to learn speaking at home. It was no longer necessary to bring Ag to HKU for therapy. This was a big surprise. I could not tell how the professor got this conclusion. From what I observed afterwards, the professor was right. Nevertheless, it did not mean Ag was all right. He had problem in speech and verbal communication, in many other dimensions.

### **Phase Two.**

Ag started to line up for Early Education and Training Center (EETC) at age two. Just a few weeks after stopping speech therapy in HKU, we received a notification from EETC to bring Ag for assessment. The result was bad. He was behind the average for 1-3 years, in various child development such as fine and gross motor, speech ability and self-care ability. Within two months after this assessment, we received a notice. Ag started special education in EETC.

This training center was near to my home, but far away from my office. I could no longer join and observe on site. Initially, Ag undertook two training sessions per week, which included one hour of speech therapy.

Ag was approximately 3.5 years old. He spoke to us only about his physiological needs, for example, "hungry", "eat", "rice", "noodles", "drink milk" and "T shirt". He never said anything other than these needs. He would never greet other people. He ignored other people's greetings. He was cold to people and stayed alone. Sue and I had to repeat and repeat our question, only then he responded. He answer was very short. He used the same word and his tone was absolutely flat. It was just like replaying from a voice recorder!

I discussed with Sue many times. I told myself not to worry. Mr. Albert Einstein was behind other children for years in speech ability, but he was the great scientist of centuries. Subconsciously, I was afraid of facing the reality. Fortunately, I turned and changed my mindset.

As Ag undertook speech therapy. He started to speak. However, it was very weird that Ag liked English more than Cantonese, our mother language! Sue and I read story books to Ag, knowing that this was a good way to teach him. However, Ag liked very much English stories but did not like Chinese at all. He wanted Sue or I or our Filipino helper to read English stories, again and again. If we switched to read Chinese stories, Ag was unhappy. Occasionally he stayed with us until we finished. As soon as we finished, he insisted to switch to English story. If we refused, then he turned and left. Ag was about four years old. His favorite was a book series "Thomas, The Little Train". This was a series of short story books, each in the range of 15-20 pages, 70-80 words a page. Ag had a very good memory. We read the book a few times, say 7 or 8 times. Ag could remember every single word. If I made a mistake when reading, he pointed out immediately. I found it weird that Ag could point out our mistake only with English story book. He could never do this with Chinese stories. Why? Furthermore, Ag wanted us to read. He never read himself. Sue and I tried to persuade him by every means but we never succeed. If we insisted, he simply left. At age 5, Ag's kindergarten asked each child to read a story in class. Ag was excited. He practiced at home. That was his first time ever to read out loudly. He kept practice and practice. We did not need to persuade him at all. I reckoned that by that time we had read 3-400 books to Ag, 90% was English.

At home, Ag started to communicate with our Filipino helper in English, and only in English. There were lots of grammatical mistake, but he was very confident. He never hesitated. Gradually, I noticed that his proficiency in English was a lot better than Gi of the same age. At approximately the age of 5.25, Ag started to mutter to himself. This was a good sign because all children went through this before speaking fluently. What surprised me most was that Ag muttered in English, even when he was dreaming and talking to himself!

At home, Sue, I and Gi all spoke Cantonese. Even our Filipino helper spoke a bit Cantonese. Why Ag liked English better and learnt English quicker than Cantonese? I had no clue but I worried. I started to do some research. We consulted Ag's trainers and other speech therapists. We even consulted the governmental Child Development and Assessment Center. We did not miss any opportunity to consult but to no avail. I was sure that this would slow down Ag's learning of Cantonese.

In a meeting with a clinical psychologist, a proposition came into my mind. In general, children with Asperger's had good memory of text. When I read an English story book to Ag, I read the text. When I started over again, it was the same piece of text. Cantonese, however, is a local dialect. When I read a story, I was not reading the text. I was reading the content in Cantonese, a dialect. In a sense, I was translating the written Chinese text to a spoken dialect. Each time I repeated the story, I was doing another round of translation of the content. The translated piece was not exactly the same as the previous one. This confused Ag! He did not enjoy. He liked exact. Children with Asperger's did not like ambiguity. This was the reason why Ag liked English story. The above was my own proposition. I had no proof. I had never discussed my idea with any expert. I asked Ag many times: "Why do you like English story better?" He never gave me an answer. Anyway, I would like to share my proposition.

At the age of 3.5, Ag started special training. Gradually his body co-ordination became better. He had better control on gross and fine motor. However, there was not much improvement in social skill and speech ability. Actually, he still did not have social interaction with people.

Ag never said good morning to other children, no matter how much we encouraged him. He never greeted the teachers at kindergarten. He ignored Sue and me at home. He hardly responded to anyone. It was more precise to say that Ag had "social barriers" rather than speech incapability.

Finally, at age 4.5, we brought Ag to a private special education center for assessment. The result was that Ag was with Asperger's Syndrome. EETC arranged a clinical psychologist to assess Ag quickly. The result was "mild degree of autism".

### **Phase Three**

The private training center did not conduct speech therapy for Ag. They believed that it was a cognition issue, rather than a speech ability issue. Ag never said: "Good Morning". In his mind, he did not have any idea of human interaction and social etiquette. So he did not say: "Good Morning". If Sue and I encouraged Ag, he greeted other people occasionally, but never out of his own initiative. His cognition was limited to physiological needs such as food, drink and body

feeling such as coldness. He knew his parents, brother, Filipino maid, teachers and classmates but did not have a good understanding of the relationship. Of course, there was no social interaction.

Private training center took Ag onto swings in the center. There were many different kinds of swings, all very different from those in children playground. They were specially built for training, to stimulate the development of speech ability.

Frankly speaking, I did not understand how swinging a child could help. I was also not happy that private training center did not conduct speech therapy for Ag, but I did not oppose. I had no knowledge to challenge the professionals. Moreover, therapists of other centers also mentioned that going onto swings would help speech development. So I just kept paying attention. In a few months, Ag's speech ability improved steadily. I was happy. I could never tell whether Ag had benefited from the training or whether it was the Ag's natural footstep to start talking. Anyway, Ag started to speak more and in Cantonese. Then, the real big progress came after I took leave.

#### **Phase Four**

I started my leave when Ag was 5 years old and accompanied him every day. At that time, Ag could speak in full sentence, but it did not mean that he could communicate. He had the following problems.

1. Ag was a cold person. He hardly responded to parents, teachers and classmates. Even if he responded, his tune was flat.
2. When he spoke, there was no any facial expression. He hardly laughed.
3. He never formed group and played with other children. In his classmate's birthday party, he did not join other children. He stayed alone in a corner even Sue and I encouraged him repeatedly.
4. When conversing with Sue or me, he side tracked from time to time. We were not sure whether he did not understand the topic, the conversation or whether he was not attentive.

5. From time to time, he used expression or phrase which nobody could understand.
6. He spoke rapidly and focused on his own interest. Once finished, he turned and left. Sue and I advised him repeatedly but he simply ignored us.
7. If he finished his own topic on phone, he would hang up abruptly, in a poor manner.
8. In special education center, there was a monthly training session on social skill. Each participant was asked to introduce oneself. Ag managed but he repeated exactly the same piece of introduction ever and ever. It was like replaying a recording.

I knew nothing about speech therapy. I tried to research in the public library but to no avail. I could find books about sensory integration and play therapy. I read and I could follow. However, I could not find any book on speech therapy! This was a surprise to me. I could only seek advice from therapists. Some told me that it was a cognition problem, in particularly social skill and social interaction.

All therapists encouraged me to chat more with Ag, to inspire him, such as telling stories, playing games, reading poems or even singing. Sue and I had attempted all these but not successful. He was never motivated.

I borrowed sets of story cards, or “scenario” cards from EETC. There were 6 cards in a set. Sue and I interpreted these with Ag, telling him the story. He followed us to repeat the story once or twice, maximum 3 times, then never again. In my opinion, these story cards were too easy or not interesting enough for Ag. His favorite was “Thomas, The Little Train series” which was in English. Of course I read the story in English. Sometimes I deliberately interpreted it in Cantonese. In either way, Ag just listened. He refused to read. I tried with other Chinese story books, but to no avail. All these helped just a little bit i.e. he listened only but refuse to read or talk. None of the training aid was powerful enough to inspire Ag. I looked for other methods.

One day, Ag’s cousin came to visit us. He brought some toys. Gi, Ag and their cousin started to play together. Suddenly, Ag started to talk and talk, much more than usual. I was amazed. Then I found out why. There was a cartoon series “Bakugan Battle Brawlers”, being shown on TV. Ag’s cousin brought several pieces of Bakugan ball. The boys played together. They were very excited and started talking to one another. Subsequently, Ag and Gi asked me to buy “Bakugan

ball” for them. I did. From then all, they started to speak with jargons which I did not understand at all: “Shoot, Bakugan Ball, Explode...”, “Crab Beast”, “Holy Light Fighting Tiger”, “Evolved Warrior”, “Gate Card”, “Three thousand drops of blood” and many other phrases .....

All of a sudden, it enlightened. This was the right training aid to inspire Ag to speak. Since I was on leave, I started watching this cartoon series. I learnt the story, the characters and the jargons. I started playing with Ag. He was very happy. We conversed as we played. Very soon, we had a lot more topics. “Where to shop for Bakugan ball?”, “What model to buy?”, “Which one was a good buy?”, “Which one you like?”, “Which Bakugan ball is powerful?” Bakugan balls were cheap, just Hong Kong \$10-\$15 each. They were available for sale everywhere. No doubt these little Bakugan balls increased the dialogue between Ag and me as many as TEN folds. Furthermore, the dialogue between Ag and Gi also increased enormously. These little balls were 10 times more powerful than any other training aid or media to trigger Ag to talk! This solved all my problem.

Later, I even used ‘Bakugan ball’ as an incentive to teach Ag, e.g. to do a little bit of housework, to have courtesy, to exercise a bit more in playgrounds, to behave well, to be a good boy etc. Ag learnt very fast and changed. Actually, in these respects, Ag had never paid so much attention to Sue and me before. It was amazing.

In EETC, Ag was undertaking speech training with a girl. Two of them practiced to have conversation. One day, I purposely took several pieces of Bakugan ball to the training class. Once I took the balls out, the two kids started to talk and talk. They both watched the same TV cartoon series at home. There were many topics between them! Normally, these kids followed the therapist, strictly phrases by phrases. They were not motivated. However, with Bakugan ball on the table, they behaved as if they were two different persons. They kept talking and talking until the therapist told them to STOP! What a big difference it was? Then the therapist began to ask the children what that little thing was. Of course, she did not know. During day time, she worked in the center and had never watched the series on TV. When the class was over, I recommended her to get Bakugan balls to the lesson.

I kept using Bakugan ball as an incentive to motivate Ag until the end of the TV series. Then, Bakugan ball was sold out in market.

In the fourth month of my leave, Ag started to mumber, telling stories to himself. This was a good sign. But his stories was extremely short. He stopped quickly. I wanted to help.

Ag played himself with toys, such as little tiger, little deer, little sheep etc. His story was brief. A tiger approached a little sheep from behind. It ambushed, caught the sheep, end of story. It was very simple and short. Ag did not have much imagination. I wanted him to keep going. So, when he began his own story telling, I joined. "There is a little sheep grazing. A tiger approaches quietly from behind. It ambushes but misses. The little sheep escapes.....", "An elephant comes. The tiger is taken aback. It retreats....", "A lion comes. Both the tiger and the lion hunt for the sheep. They fight....." When I joined Ag for stories, we kept going and going. I could easily extend the story much longer. This helped Ag to speak more as well as enriching his vocabulary.

With little toys on hand, I could easily extend the story with Ag. However, it became very difficult once there was no toys around. For example, if I said: "It starts raining..... The wind is strong....." Ag stopped right away. In reality, there was no rain, no wind. He could not imagine. I said: "Little sheep runs away and hides behind a tree....." I moved the little sheep behind an object e.g. a stool, a book, whatever I could grab easily, or just behind my arm. However, Ag would also stop talking, because there was no tree. There was just a stool or a book but no tree. He was extremely short of imagination. The only thing which I could do was to keep more small toys at home. As soon as I said: "Little sheep goes behind a tree, " I immediately took out a toy tree from my collections. Then Ag would continue the dialogue with me.

As I kept talking and playing with Ag, his weakness of lacking of imagination diminished slowly in around 6 months. I said: "Little horse runs up a hill...." I took a chair and moved the toy horse up the chair, as if it went uphill. Ag started to accept and continued the story with me. This was good, indicating that he started to have imagination. At that time, he was approximately 5 years and 9 months old.

During the period I took leave, I helped to bath Ag daily. I did not want my Filipino helper to do this. I wanted to accompany Ag as long as possible. When Ag was taking his bath, I looked after him as well as talked to him. One day, he had a plastic doll with him in the bath tub. We took it as if it was water skiing. An idea came to my mind. I named the little doll with one of his

classmate's name. Ag was inspired. He took it as if his classmate was water skiing in the bath tub. Ag and I started to make up a story. His classmates was water skiing. "Oops, he loses balance and falls into the water...", "He submerges, but comes back up...", "Another classmate joins. Two of them start to race. More and more join. It becomes a racing event, first heat, second heat.... then final", "The runner up is ..... The winner is ....." Ag was extremely excited. We kept on talking and talking. We had never had a dialogue so long, actually made up such a long story in his bath.

On the following few days, Ag insisted to bring that little doll to his bath again. Obviously, Ag was excited with the story that his classmates were water skiing with him, racing in the little bath tub. This was a very good experience. Naming the little doll with his classmate's name inspired Ag a great deal. His story telling time tripled at least.

Ag never sang. Sue and I knew that he had learnt a few songs in kindergarten. We asked him many times to sing at home, but he refused. We kept trying, but never succeed. One day, our elder son, Gi, got a piece of home work to do. He needed to do recording, using our computer at home. After Gi had finished, I had an idea. I asked Ag to sing and record it with the computer, and then replay. He did without hesitation! That was the first time that he ever sang at home. From then on, whenever he learnt a new song at school, he would record it into our computer. Obviously, Ag was excited to use the computer, to do recording and replaying, not singing! To me, it was fine. It made Ag having conversation with us. It was a kind of speech therapy as well as a training to make Ag more social. Years later, Ag exhibited very strong interest to operate our computer at home.

Playing or having fun with Ag was not the only way to inspire Ag to speak more. There were many other opportunities in the daily routine. From time to time, we asked Ag to do a little bit of housework. For example, after dinner, we made him responsible for taking his bowl and his own pair of chopsticks to kitchen for washing. After bathing, we made him to dry himself, to dress himself. When teaching him, we had a dialogue with Ag.

When we shopped in supermarket, we asked Ag to pay by presenting our electronic payment card. Ag found this interesting, so he did and we had a conversation.

On minibus, I trained Ag to tell the driver where to drop us off. When we had lunch in a fast food restaurant, I trained Ag to take care of himself such as to order food, to pay money. I even purposely missed to get paper towel. Then I encouraged Ag to get it from the service. At first, I accompanied Ag and let him ask. After a few times, I encouraged Ag to go himself. Further on, I asked Ag to get folks and spoons. When he could manage, I got him to ask for drinking water from service. The tasks which I assigned to him became more and more demanding. Actually, getting a glass of water from the service counter to the dining table was a good training of social communication as well as body co-ordination. This trained Ag to hold and balance the tray with a glass of water on.

Were these easy? Yes, each was easy. However, it was even far easier for me if I made Ag to stay at his own chair and I did all these myself in a restaurant! These are nothing for any adult. I suspected that the majority of parents would choose to do all these for their child with Asperger's. However, I chose my way, the difficult way. I had to spend more effort, not only to train Ag but also to observe closely, day-after-day. Once Ag managed, I worked out another task, another training which was right for him. I dedicated to help my child through.

When I arrived home, I commended Ag before Sue. Sue knew my purpose and encouraged Ag too. In about 3 months, Ag built up his confidence. He managed to do a lot by himself in fast food restaurants.

It would be an easy life for me if I had made my Filipino domestic helper to bath Ag. I could rest. However, I decided to take this up instead. Then I could chat with Ag. Honestly, I struggled when I first played Bakugan balls with Ag. I had to watch the TV cartoon series and learnt all those terms and jargons. These terms were nonsense in real life. Was I silly? Could what I do help Ag? Fortunately, very soon Ag spoke more, and more, and more. No doubt, I was right.

I recommend parents to spend time with their child. When playing with him, please forget that you are his parent. Make sure that you become your child's playmate. It is not easy. I tried it before. Once you become your child's playmate, it helps significantly. Please consider this "When you have fun with your good friends, you become talkative, right?"

Do whatever you can to bring him fun. Give him good experience. Bring him good memories. Money is never a concern. It costs very little to buy several pieces of Bakugan ball, or pieces of small toys, such as small animals, small car, small aircraft. Use computer recording to induce him to sing. All these help the children to talk. The most challenging piece is to be with your child all the time and figure out a way. If I had not taken 6 months leave off duty, it would have been very hard. Sue and I had a lot of time with Gi and he learnt fast. If we did not have those good experience in educating Gi, then I would not have the courage to help Ag.

At the end of my 6 months leave, it was just Ag's quarterly review. Ag showed very good progress. He spoke to people in a more organized way. When having a dialogue, his points were more relevant. When speaking over the phone, he had slowed down and started to listen. He also started to have eye contact as he spoke. Furthermore, he became more ready to respond when Sue or I talked to him. Of course, there was still room for improvement. Overall speaking, we were happy.

After another 3 months, there came the following assessment. Ag's verbal communication ability improved again. According to the therapist, he was able to 'associate' and 'categorize'. He exhibited ability to 'classify', 'group' and 'deduce'. In all these aspects, his ability was quite close to the children of the same age. His use of vocabulary and phrases was rated as 'more or less sufficient'. Given a series of story cards, he could deduce what had happened. He could tell the complete story. After taking part in a game, he could recollect and told us very briefly what he did. However, he could not tell what his partner or other participants were doing, not even how many participants there were. Strictly speaking, this was not a problem of speech ability. Again it was a social skill issue, i.e. not paying attention to other people. Irrespective of this, Ag's verbal communication skill had improved a lot. Sue and I were very pleased and satisfied.

Ag will never be talkative. He will not be good at debate. He will not be a good Master of Ceremony. Nevertheless, he will be able to make friends and communicate with one another. He can do it.