

Chapter 8 - Social Etiquette Training, Timing is Important

Ag did 3 training courses on social etiquette. He learnt quicker than what I had expected. He was very happy in these courses. However, some of his classmates did not enjoy the course. This did not just waste time but also undercut these classmates' self-esteem. In my opinion, the issue was not the course itself but rather the readiness of the children.

Since Ag was 2.5 years old, he started attending special education. Most of the training was one-to-one, except a monthly group activity arranged by Early Education and Training Center (EETC). Six to nine children participated in this group training. I observed the group activity a few times. It was all right, but once a month was not enough. Furthermore, it spanned too long apart.

When I started my leave, I was in no hurry to arrange social etiquette training for Ag. He was not ready. The first priority was speech and language communication training. The ability to understand and follow instruction was fundamental. Having said that we did not leave this kind of training entirely out. Sue checked around and found two organizations offering training courses. They were The Boys' & Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong (BGCA) and Heep Hong Society. There was a long waiting list for either course. Sue registered first and waited. Incidentally, both organizations started a new course in the fifth month of my leave. Ag was fortunate to get a place in both. By that time, Ag had already made great progress in his language communication ability. He had some eye contact with people and his answer was much more to the point. He started to socialize with people around. In short, Ag was ready.

Commencing at the age around 5.5, Ag had attended 3 courses, spanning 7 months, with a short break in the middle.

All these courses were specifically run for children with Asperger's Syndrome or with mild to moderate degree of autism. In each class, there were six to eight children. Both organizations insisted that at least one adult accompanying the child throughout the training or stayed around in the center.

The trainer of both organizations asked Sue a lot about Ag. One of them even asked Sue to bring Ag there for a meeting. The purpose was to make sure that children-to-be-admitted possessed the basic communication skill i.e. understand simple instruction and complete accordingly. The training courses of these two organizations incidentally ran in the same period, but on different day of the week. Ag attended both. We were lucky.

There were many group activities in the courses, introducing social etiquette as well as teaching the children to cooperate, to share and to help one another.

Ag attended these courses just at the right time! Even though all the participating children had undergone a selection process, Ag was slightly more mature than the rest in either group. Before doing social etiquette training, Ag had undertaken 2 years of special education, those basic trainings such as language and sensory integration etc. By no means that I could foresee in advance Ag's progress. Would he do well in those basic therapies? When would he be ready for social skill training? Furthermore, there was a waiting list for each of the courses. Sue and I could never tell when Ag would be admitted. We were very fortunate that Ag was ready.

Why was I very sure that it was the right time? The respective instructors of each training course commented that Ag was the leader. The attending clinical psychologist also said that Ag was more mature and was willing to share. Ag did not hear these compliments. Only I did. I discussed with the instructors quietly. From what I observed, Ag was indeed more mature.

The instructors were professional. They never said openly that Ag was better than the others. I noticed it strongly. In one session, the children were given a break. The instructor asked Ag to remind the other children to resume. Ag did it in a very appropriate manner. He was polite. He reminded all children one after another, without missing out anyone. I was very amazed. "Well done", said the instructor softly. This was a very powerful compliment. Ag got it. When we arrived home, I deliberately described this to Sue in front of Ag, to encourage him.

In the training course, there were many activities. From time to time, the instructor asked Ag to take the lead or to serve as a demonstrator. She also asked Ag to help packing up. Ag finished

these without problem. I reckoned that Ag also realized that he was leading. He got applause and appreciation from the instructor, which became a powerful motivation. He paid good attention and learnt quickly.

On the other hand, there were children who were not happy to join the course. One of them was even reluctant to come in, struggling with his mother at the entrance. He came in eventually, but refused to join the activity. His mother was very sad and frustrated. I noticed that this child missed many sessions subsequently. It was a waste of time and opportunity. To me, this child was not ready. Even if his parents enrolled the course for him again, would it help? A few other children obviously had problem in sensory integration. They joined the group activities. They understood the instruction. However, they often had problem to do well in the activity. They would get more benefit if they joined the course later.

I don't mean to boast myself. I just want to emphasize the importance to be ready. If I had brought Ag to do these courses four months earlier, he would not have got much benefit. It would have defeated his self-esteem. Imagine that if Ag failed to catch a ball every time it was passed to him by the team, how badly Ag would feel?

Ag started to exhibit a good grasp of social etiquette as from June of 2008. He demonstrated caring for other people. The following were some examples:

- When taking elevator, he would hold the lift for other people, in particularly for the elderly. He was polite.
- In Heep Hong Society, he would hold the door for his classmates, until everybody had passed through.
- He cared for his brother, Gi. When we went out for activity, he reminded me constantly to buy refreshment for Gi. In library, he reminded me to loan books for Gi.
- In children playgrounds, he behaved well. He showed courtesy to younger toddlers.
- He had courtesy in his dialogue with other people.

One day, Ag and Gi were playing “Bakugan ball” at home. Gi shot Ag carelessly. It hurt Ag. He cried. Sue and I worried. Gi apologized and Ag said “No problem”. Then they continued. Sue and I were relieved. Ag behaved appropriately. He knew what to do.

Ag learnt social etiquette quickly. Right timing was one reason. Ag was also fortunate to have attended training in both BGCA and Heep Hong Society within the same period. Even though the activities in each organization were different, the themes were the same i.e. to teach the children sharing, caring, co-operating and mutual respect. Attending social training in these organizations concurrently, Ag was reinforced of the right social etiquette.

Social etiquette was not a topic which I could train Ag alone. It was necessary to have a group of children together. I relied on these organizations. To me, both were good. The question became how to determine the best time for the child. It all depended on the parent’s observation, but it was not easy. First, parents were not professional of special education. We could not tell. I could not, until Ag had started the course. Second, even though these organizations pre-printed course leaflet, one or two pages could never explain the whole course. Pre-course screening interview helped but not was 100 percent accurate. Third, there was a long waiting list in each organization. Nobody could foretell when a place would be offered. It was beyond parent’s planning and control. I really believed that it was fortunate for Ag.

Having said that, the participation and willingness of the child was the best indicator whether this was the right time. If the child refused or failed to follow the instruction or was not happy, then it would not help. It just undercut his happiness and confidence. Under these circumstances, if the parents still kept pushing, then it would drive the child away. That would even hurt the relationship, in the same way as described in “Dibs in Search of Self”.

I asked Ag repeatedly: “Are you happy? Do you like these activities?” From the very first session, Ag kept saying that he liked it and wanted to attend every week. When he arrived home, he was very eager to describe to Sue the activities. This was a good and strong indicator that it was the appropriate time.

Heep Hong Society offered two courses, actually phase 1 and phase 2. When it was time to enroll for phase 2, I checked with Ag a few times. He wanted to go again. I called the instructor and consulted her. She commented that Ag did well in phase 1. He was happy and devoted. So, I enrolled for Ag again. It was the right move.

Looking backwards, there were a few important points.

First, please don't leave this to your domestic helper. I accompanied Ag. BGCA demanded an adult to join. In Heep Hong, there was a CCTV. Parents could observe their children throughout the entire session. When each session was over, the instructor had a meeting with parents. In some sessions, a clinical psychologist was there for meeting. Domestic helper could never discuss with the instructor and the psychologist on behalf of parents. If parents do not accompany their children, it will be a big loss. It will certainly slow down the progress of the children.

Second, social etiquette is a day to day matter. It is not right to just rely on the training courses. When I brought Ag to fast food restaurant, I asked Ag to take paper towel, forks and spoons etc. When taking a lift, I told Ag to hold the entrance for other passengers. At home, Sue and I wanted Ag to share house duty and to take care of himself. All these day to day routine and practice helped Ag to learn social etiquette, mutual respect and sharing with the others.

Third, don't miss the child's golden age of learning. I see that many of these social etiquette training courses are for young boys and girls. Make use of the opportunity. Once passing the golden learning age, the child has established his own view of the world, of himself and his own judgement of good or bad behavior. The child is molded. It needs double effort to change them.

On the day Ag attended his last social training in Heep Hong Society, I left my office early so as to discuss with the instructor. When I arrived, Ag was playing with a group of children. He was giving instructions and assigning tasks to the rest! He was the leader in the group. I admired. To take leadership, the child had to know the game, the rules, the tasks and the process flow. Furthermore, the child needed to assign confidently. If there was counter proposal or other opinion from the team, the child needed to listen and then handled it in an appropriate manner.

It was not simple. These were the fundamentals to become a leader. A year ago, Ag was quiet and hardly communicated with other people. He was a totally different boy, a junior leader.

The instructor came upon. She spoke softly to me: “Actually, you no longer need to bring Ag to Heep Hong for training. You should bring him to join other boys and girls.” This was a statement which I had longed for and a statement matching my observation too. I had a very good sleep that night.