

Chapter 11 - Let Go, The Child Will Run Fast

I was very fortunate to have worked with a group of professionals to turn my child around. On top of this, I learnt another insight from them, i.e. to accept children with Asperger's, to let them go their way.

Social Welfare Department assigned a clinical psychologist to Christian Early Education and Training Center. It happened that this psychologist handled my case. He was very experienced and insightful. I sensed that he was not handling a case of one child with Asperger's, but rather of one family. He did a lot of extra work. Once I did not know that these extra were special and invaluable. I realized only when I began writing and recollected.

Even in our first meeting, I started to admire this psychologist. In the end of the assessment, he said softly "Mr. and Mrs. Lok, I have to write down an assessment. If I don't do this, I cannot arrange any special training for Ag. I am going to write "mild degree of autism". Do you have any concern?"

I understood that he did not want to hurt Sue and me. In fact, I was there throughout the whole assessment. My heart was sinking. My mind was losing. My body were trembling. I almost fell. I did not have any courage to face it. I just nodded blankly. In a few years, we became friends. When we had lunch, I mentioned the assessment. We grinned. Both of us understood each other.

After the assessment, Ag started special training in EETC. In that 2 years, there was a periodical review in every 3 – 6 months, depending on how well Ag did. Sue and I of course attended the review and paid good attention. In the review, this psychologist taught us a lot. I learnt how to analyze Ag's drawings. I learnt the basics of 'Theory of Mind'. I also learnt to see children with Asperger's from another perspective. Let me list some points.

- Children with Asperger's liked exact answers, black or white. There was no grey. If there was no exact answer, he would be confused.

- They did not understand jokes. If you joked to them, they would not be happy. They would question why you make jokes.
- Ag liked sketching and included lots of details. However, there was no human beings in any of his drawings. This proved that Ag paid attention to a lot of things, but no man!
- Ag would be a good boy at school because he followed school discipline and teachers' instruction strictly. Ag would become a gentleman.
- Ag had good memory of what he read, a kind of photographic memory. However, this memory power was for information, data and facts only. He would not be interested in social matter.

I paid attention to all the above remarks. To me, these were lessons for the concerned parents, not for the child. Parents should learn these and accept their child.

The above remarks were straight forward. Let me turned to some advanced topics. In the second time we met, this psychologists asked me and Sue: "Do you think that Ag is happy?" I answered without hesitation: "Ag is not unhappy." Actually this question had been in my mind for a long time. I observed and kept asking myself. I knew that Ag did not have unhappiness. However, I could not determine whether he was happy.

Since then and in the subsequent two years, the psychologist repeated this question a few times. Why? Because he wanted to bring out an important point. This question changed my view on children with Asperger's. We need to accept them. There is a limit of what parents and therapist can do. As long as the child is happy, we should not push too hard.

In another review meeting, he asked: "Do you agree that children are born with an intuition to find their best talent and their best way to go forward?" By that time, Ag had undertaken training for quite a long time. He had improved considerably. However, I had not thought about this yet. I replied: "I was not sure." Today, I believe that every child indeed will make use of his born ability. Concerned parents should give their children freedom and they will learn very fast.

In another meeting, this psychologist suddenly switched to career development i.e. the type of job Ag would be suitable for. “He would do well in research. He would not perform if a lot human interaction and communication was required. If he became a doctor, the best would be a pathologist.” It was weird. Ag was only a small boy and was undertaking special education. Why jumped to the topic of career? I was not even sure if Ag could do well in primary school, not to mention university education. Why jumped step to discuss career? Furthermore, this psychologist was very assertive. He was predicting what would happen 20 years in future i.e. what job Ag could perform well! In my mind, he was telling me: “Don’t expect to change Ag a lot. Career which needs a lot of human interaction does not fit Ag.” Why was he so sure? I had a lot of doubt.

Why did this clinical psychologist raise those questions? What was his agenda? What message he wanted to pass on? I did not know then. While writing this book, I re-consider. Now I know.

At first, Ag carried typical autistic symptoms. Nobody dared to say the possibility to turn him around. If Ag did not possess any learning power, it would be very bad. The chance of overcome would be zero.

After a year of training, special education trainers and therapists realized that Ag had learning power, actually a lot. He had very good memory with data. EETC arranged a test for Ag. He was outstanding in analyzing two dimensional geometrical graphics. He was six but his capability was equivalent to age 10. They tested Ag’s intelligence quotient (IQ). He scored very high marks. In one training session, the trainer was teaching Ag arithmetic. I was very surprised. When the class was over, I asked quietly: “Why don’t you teach Ag social skill?” She replied: “All training materials in the center are too easy for your son. So I am teaching him arithmetic.” I was amazed. I became speechless.

Everyone in the center, including the psychologist, speech therapist, occupational therapist and even the social worker involved in this case, realized that Ag was very intelligent. However, Sue and I failed to see this. We were obsessed by our preoccupations i.e. Ag’s autistic behavior when he was a little boy. We were overloaded and had been worrying for years. We failed to see Ag’s ability. Sue and I once asked a very stupid question: “Can Ag go to normal primary school after kindergarten?” From the trainers’ point of view, Ag was more than capable.

However, Sue and I failed to see this. We worried that Ag needed to join special education school.

The clinical psychologist was insightful. He knew that Sue and I worried too much. I explained a few times that Ag's brother, Gi, was gifted. The gap between them was very big. This was loading extra pressure on the family. I took leave for 6 months. He knew my target and what I was eager for!

I kept a file of Ag's special education. I collected all assessment reports, all my observations and my notes which I took down during review meetings. I also kept all training course leaflets, progress reports, instructors' comment as well as the report of kindergarten. I brought this file with me to all review meetings, so that I could refer whenever necessary. This psychologist welcomed and admired my effort. However, in the second last meeting, he suddenly ordered: "Enough. I don't want you to carry this file anymore." I was astounded and bewildered. That night, I thought about this seriously. The psychologist had handled my case for 2 years. He concluded that Sue and I had done what we should have. Ag had learnt a lot. The IQ test proved that Ag was very intelligent. However, this psychologist declined to disclose the exact score. He did not want to load more onto our shoulders. It was time to slow down, to relax and to let Ag go his way, to follow his natural talent. This psychologist clearly understood my obsession. He did not hard sell his idea. He just told me to stop bringing the file. He did it in a soft way.

Ag has largely overcome Asperger's Syndrome. He has been doing very well at primary school. He is a class monitor. He has won 4 times "Conduct and Diligence" award. He possesses basic social skills which is good enough at primary school. He is not talkative. He still needs to learn to communicate better. He does not enjoy himself in a large group. He likes reading. His favorite topic is dinosaurs. He keeps reading all the time. Once he gets up, he starts reading when taking breakfast. On his journey to school, he reads when taking Mass Transit Railway. In weekends, he reads when I stop my car at traffic light! He is very happy when reading. To me, this is not really a bad habit, so I let him do it.

As long as the child has a happy life, it is not a concern even if he has just very few interests. If he is not causing trouble to other people and himself, then I should not push him. If a child with

Asperger's has picked up the basic social skill, then the parents should let go. Help the child to explore. Once he finds his talents and his interest, he will learn quickly. He will be happy.

Ag will not be talkative. He will never be as articulate as his brother Gi. He will not become a good master of ceremony. He will not be a member of school debate team. Ag might do research or even become a scientist. He has repeated many times that he wants to become a paleontologist. I think that it is good. This probably suits him.

Having a child with Asperger's in the family is not the end of the world. Help him to overcome and develop his ability. Let him run fast in his own way.