

## **Chapter 5 - Play Therapy, A Joyful Experience**

This was a wonderful experience which I would never forget. Towards the end of my leave, by chance I brought Ag to “Play Therapy”. It was marvelous. Ag became a lot more confident. He learnt to do role playing. Even more importantly, he started to care for other people. This was a major milestone of overcoming the syndrome. I learnt a lesson too, that is, to ‘respect’ my child. It was a great lesson for me, as a parent.

I met a good social worker. She taught me a lot. She also introduced a book to me. It was a good book, very easy to read and very informative. It explained the power of Play Therapy. I recommend it to all parents, no matter your child needs special education or not.

What is ‘Playing’? There are 5 key points. First, it must bring happiness to the child. Second, it is not for an objective, but just for fun. Third, it is self-motivated. Forth, it is led by the child, not by parents, not to mentioned trainer or therapist. Lastly, it is full of imagination.

I had lots of discussion with many professionals and therapists. They all emphasized that when I conducted training at home, I better treated myself as a ‘Playmate’, not a father. As such, I would get the best out of the activity or training.

During my leave, I brought Ag to children playground daily. My goal was to help him to overcome sensory integration dysfunction. I kept reminding myself to make it joyful for Ag. However, one day, Ag said: “Dad, you don’t have to take care of me every day.” I was taken aback. I knew that Ag did not want to go. He wanted a rest. What should I do? I was running against time, to help him to catch up. It was early summer. The weather was becoming hot and humid. Mosquitos were around in the playground. It was no longer very pleasant there. After all, Ag had good progress already. It was time to have a change.

Clinical psychologists and early education experts kept telling me: “Let Ag explore more. Try different activities as much as possible.”

Following these recommendations, I kept exploring for Ag. I happened to find that there was a children 'play room' in Hong Kong Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) Lok Wah Estate. They offered Play Therapy. It was conducted by a trained social worker.

According to this social worker, this service was to help children to relief their stress. She emphasized a lot that this service was not training, but allowing the participating child to play. I explained the background of Ag. She took down notes very seriously. Then she scheduled 8 sessions of play therapy for Ag. It commenced in May 2008. Ag was around age 5.25 then.

The responsible social worker did not allow me to join the play therapy sessions. She even advised me not to ask Ag what had happened in the session. I was very surprised and confused. In the past, I joined every training with Ag or at least observed in the room. I wanted to know how the training was as well as Ag's progress, so that I could do the right thing at home. Every trainer or therapist allowed my presence, some even asked me to join. But this time, I was recommended not to present, not even to ask: "Ag, what did you do in the session?" I was not happy.

The social workers explained that this arrangement was to give Ag total freedom. In the session, Ag would be allowed to play any toy he liked, any game he wanted and in any way he preferred. She would not intervene at all, even if Ag played in a 'wrong' way. For example, if Ag did not put a mini-train on the rail but used the train as a hammer to knock, she would not stop or intervene, unless Ag hurt himself or caused damage in the play room. Ag would be allowed absolute freedom of choice. If she saw Ag behaving in any way abnormal, she would inform me after the session.

This social worker also told me the following principles when conducting play therapy.

- First: Do not disturb the child. Allow him to do what he likes.
- Second: Do not teach the child to play in the "right" way because this will undermine child's creativity.

- Third: Do not ask questions such as, "Why do you hit this person (the doll)? Do you hate him?" This disturbs the child. Then, he will not show his mind, his feeling and his will.
- Forth: Do not show appreciation, because appreciation constitutes a target or a goal which defeats play therapy. For example, if a child makes a good shot with a basketball, then it is no good to commend. Good shot becomes a standard thus creates an expectation. Instead, therapist should encourage: "You are focus. You don't give up. You keep trying ....." Praise the good behavior, not the success.
- Fifth: Pass on the responsibility to the child. For example when the child asks for help to do a task which he/she is capable of, then encourage the child to do it. This nurtures his sense of responsibility.

The first and second points were self-explanatory and not difficult. However, the third, fourth and fifth points were not easy. I tried at home. When paying attention, I managed to do the fifth. However, if Ag was doing something silly, how could I keep quiet? How could I refrain from asking? Interruption and inspiration was only a line apart. I could only remind myself constantly.

The social worker was professional and enthusiastic. She told me her observation at the end of each session.

Session 1: At the beginning, Ag was nervous but soon relaxed.

Session 2: Ag was comfortable.

Session 3: Ag enjoyed completely. However, the social worker observed that Ag was quiet. He seldom talked. He never laughed. This was exactly what I had observed. Trainer and therapist in many centers gave me the same comment.

Pieces of good news came steadily. In one session, the social worker told me that Ag started to murmur, telling story to himself. These stories all had a positive ending. For example: "A little rabbit was playing. There came a tiger. Little rabbit dashed behind the bushes and escaped." "A child started a journey, firstly on a car. The car broke down midway. This child took an aircraft. However the plane ran out of fuel. The child went on board a ship. The ship was slow. Eventually the child arrived his destination safely." Notwithstanding the hiccups, Ag's stories ended positively. According to the social worker, if the story ended in a negative way, then it

was a bad sign. For example, the tiger killed lots of prey. There was serious casualty or tragedy in the journey. In these cases, there was something wrong in Ag's mind. We would need to help.

Obviously Ag enjoyed these sessions. The stories which he murmured to himself became longer and longer. At home, the same was happening. There was good, better than I had expected.

We did not have any doll at home. In one session, Ag picked up a baby doll. He bathed the doll and dressed her with care. This was a surprise to me. Later, Ag even asked to borrow a doll in another early education center. It showed that he started to care for other people.

In the last section of play room, Ag suddenly gave recommendation about the setting of Play Room. Both the social workers and I were very surprised and pleased. This implied that Ag started to pay attention to what was around. He was willing to present his idea, to start communication. This was a good indication that he was on the way of overcoming autism.

According to the social worker, play therapy is a way to help kids to 'speak', to show their feelings and present their ideas. Children have a limited vocabulary, hence not expressive verbally. Their behavior exhibits their affection and their mind. Therapist observes and find out. This helps adults to understand the children, those ideas hidden in their mind. I have learnt a lot in these 8 sessions of play therapy.

In addition, these sessions helped to build up Ag's confidence. In the first lesson, I told Ag that I would leave him alone in the center and came back after one hour. It was clear on his face that he did not feel very comfortable. It was the first time ever that we left Ag alone with a stranger. It was a good experience for Ag.

After each lesson, I had a time with the social worker. I knew the progress. I could make corresponding training at home. The fact that Ag liked to have a doll was a good example. It was just the moment that Ag started to show that he cared for other people. At the end of every session, Ag reminded me to buy afternoon tea and refreshment for his brother, Gi. He would also hold the lift for other passengers and let them exit first. Of course, I took this

opportunity to praise him. In the mid-term report of Ag's kindergarten, the teacher wrote 'Ag is a helpful boy'.

'Role Play' was a good way for Ag to learn social relationship. It was an excellent time to have play therapy. Ag started to try role playing. For example, he held a toy taxi in his hands and imitated himself as a taxi driver. Children with Asperger's are weak in imagination. At home, with toys around, Ag could imitate. However, once without any toy on hand, he could not. Unexpectedly, play therapy helped me a lot. In the play room, there were far more toys and varieties than what Ag had at home. As such there were more roles that he could imitate himself easily, a doctor, a cashier, a builder, an astronaut etc. Furthermore, every session was 7 days apart. It became an attractive event which he looked forward to each week.

Even better, there was absolute freedom in the sessions. Ag chose his favorite, did whatever he like and in his own way. There was no 'the wrong way to play'. Ag was free. This enabled Ag to develop his imagination.

In all special education centers, trainers told me unanimously that for little kids, the best training were built on games and activities. They did everything possible to make the training interesting. Having said that, the trainer was the leader in these activities. In the play room, however, Ag was the leader and the only one. It was another world for Ag. In addition, this social worker was a charming lady. Her care and patience helped Ag to relieve and be home in the sessions. All of these together brought a joyful time to Ag.

Before this play therapy, I was in a bad mood. It was the fourth month of my leave. Ag was no longer eager to go to playgrounds. At home, he even declined to join me for various activities, which were actually training. These had become too easy for Ag but I could not figure out anything else to inspire him. I had several sleepless nights. It was by chance that I found play therapy in YWCA Lok Wah. This turned around the situation immediately. After two sessions, Ag kept saying: 'Great fun. Must go again'. As such, I resumed a good relationship with him. We were fortunate to meet a very good social worker. Ag got along with her very well. In the following Christmas, Ag insisted to send her a Christmas card. It was a very pleasant experience for Ag.

This was a joyful experience. Was it by chance? Was it fortunate? Was it due to the fact that I took expert's advice seriously? It was the perseverance to search for the right activity that made this good journey. I learnt a lot, not just play therapy, but more importantly to respect my child, to turn and find the most suitable activity for Ag. This was the only way, the right way to overcome autism.