

## **Chapter 7 – Skating, Rock Climbing, Confidence Building**

### **Roller Skating**

In the fourth month of my leave, Ag had great progress in both sensory integration and verbal communication. He was energetic in any playground. He was no longer afraid of going high up, yet therapist still recommended Ag to have more activity, a more vigorous one i.e. roller skating. "Make Ag to run after people, but not to chase an object". The idea was to make Ag focusing on people. After checking around, I found that YMCA offered roller skating courses for children. I decided to give it a try. In a few months, it turned out to be an excellent training, exceeding my expectation a lot. Ag built up confidence. He became more willing to express himself. More importantly, he learnt that "Success comes with Hard Work".

Ag started with the elementary course. There were nine kids. Ag was the youngest. Two boys did the same course before. They had the basic skill. They could balance quite well with their skates on, and even could skate forward. All the other children joint the course for the first time. Once with the rollers on, they could not even stand. Ag was helpless with rollers on too. Every time he attempted to stand up, he slipped, then fell in a second. I worried that he might give up.

At the end of the first training class, Ag was sweat to his skin. However, he voiced out loudly: "It is fun. Must come every day." This was a big surprise to me. My worry was all gone.

There were a total of 10 sessions. At the end of the third sessions, Ag was obviously behind other children. He was one year younger than all the rest and was not as strong physically. The last session was assessment. If pass, Ag would be qualified to do the intermediate course, then the advance course, and eventually in-line roller hockey course. I knew that if Ag failed the assessment, it would be a blow to him. It would not be easy to persuade him to re-take another roller skating course again, which was actually the best training to "chase people, not to chase an object". There was no easy substitute. I had to help Ag to pass the assessment.

I bought a pair of roller-skate for Ag so that he could practice. It was easy to say “Practice two hours a week”, but actually it was not simple. The first issue was to find a venue for practice, then to encourage Ag.

In Hong Kong, there were not many roller skating ring. I spent some time on internet to search. There were skating rings not far away, at Shun Lee, Kwun Tong, Tseung Kwan O, Sai Kung and Kowloon Tsai. These were all within 15 to 20 minutes by driving. However, they were all outdoor. It was mid-summer, too hot to practice under strong sunshine. Moreover, the skating ring in Tseung Kwan O and Shun Lee were far too small. Ag needed a big ring so that he could accelerate and go in big circle. Only this would give him enough stimulation. I happened to find a basketball court at Choi Wan Estate. It was covered and large enough for Ag to speed up. This became the main practice ground.

By that time, Ag had changed quite a lot. He enjoyed skating with other children, running and chasing one another. He did not enjoy much to practice alone. To encourage him, I brought water, mosquito repellent, towels and his favorite chocolate beans. After each practice, I bought him ice cream. The biggest encouragement, however, came with the people passing by, who might gossip in a distance “See that little boy who is skating ... He manoeuvres and is fast.....” This inspired Ag most.

From the fourth session onwards, Ag practiced once in the middle of the week. His skill improved steadily. At first, he landed all his body weight on his left leg and used just his right leg to push forward. He was unable to cross his legs to push himself forward. It was a problem of body co-ordination. After practicing several weeks, he managed eventually. This was a big success and Ag knew. He realized that his skating skill improved. He was in midstream among all the children. This was very good, considering that he was only 5.5 years old, two years younger than the best in the team. I was very proud of Ag.

A few days before the assessment, Ag became very eager. He practiced hard and wanted to be qualified for intermediate class. His strong desire surprised me since he had never shown this before. On the assessment day, he asked to go one hour early because he wanted to practice. Sue and I admired his positive attitude. This was actually what we had been cultivating. Assessment was not my worry because I talked to the coach two weeks in advance. Ag should

have no problem. Ever since Ag was born, he had undergone numerous assessments, by many special education trainers. Ag was never aware of these. This assessment was the first one that he knew, the first one which he had to prove himself. He was very excited when he passed. He ran to Sue and me to show his certificate. We were excited too, because this was the first time Ag showed his feeling and his success voluntarily. Children with Asperger's hardly seek for sharing. This was a break through. The whole family went out for dinner for a big celebration.

This roller skating course was not just a training to improve Ag's body co-ordination. It built up his confident quickly. Roller skating was not popular in Hong Kong. When the security in our housing estate learnt this, he would compliment Ag: "Good boy. Roller skating is difficult. I can't do it. You are better than me!" This was flattering but it did boost up Ag's confidence.

I explained to Ag that he was the youngest in the class. He noted and was happy with his qualification. Even more importantly, he knew that after the first 3 sessions, he was behind other children. However, after practicing hard, he became qualified. I reminded Ag many times his journey. "Ag was first behind. We took actions. We bought a pair of roller. We searched for the right place to practice and found a sheltered basketball court. Ag practiced every week, then caught up...."

He learnt the golden rules. "Hard work brings Success....", "Keep trying....", "Don't give up easily..." He learnt an important lesson.

Ag never knew that his brother, Gi, was assessed as gifted. But he knew that Gi was good. This time Ag was ahead of Gi because Gi had not taken any roller skating course. Later, Gi wanted to do roller skating too. I asked Ag to explain how to skate. Ag was very serious. He kept talking and explaining details. I had never seen Ag so eager to speak and demonstrate. It was because Ag considered himself leading his elder brother! This experience boosted Ag's confidence. In the end, the two boys skated together. This brought the whole family a joyful topic and endless conversation which had lasted for a very long time.

In the training class, Ag sweated a lot. I made Ag to take care of himself. When he finished his bottle of water, I showed him how to refill. Then he did it himself. After the course, I wanted Ag

to remove the rollers and put on shoes himself. Taking care of oneself was part of the training offered by special education centers. I made use of the opportunity. In the group, there were children older than Ag. However, they were taken good care by respective domestic helper, even to dry the sweat by a towel! When the coach witnessed Ag doing all these himself, he came upon and complimented Ag. This was good. Ag was encouraged. He was happy and he learnt.

Roller skating opened up Ag a great deal. He learnt a lot and became confident. It happened that we did it at the right time. After months of activities in playground, his body co-ordination had improved so much that he was ready to do vigorous exercise. He could balance well and he was strong enough for skating. I was on leave. I helped Ag when he fell behind. I accompanied and encouraged Ag to practice. Moreover, his language ability was good enough to communicate with the coach when he was alone in the ring. Parents were not allowed to enter the ring! If I had arranged Ag to attempt roller skating a few months earlier, then he would have failed. It would be a totally different story.

### **Indoor Rock Climbing**

Other than roller skating, I also took Ag to do indoor rock climbing. By chance I found that Heep Hong Society at Choi Ha Estate offered indoor rock climbing course to children who needed special education. So I registered. Three months after, Ag began to attend a course at Choi Ha center. The first lesson took place in September 2008.

There were two instructors on site, teaching and guiding children to climb up a wall of about 3 meters high. Each child took turn to go up. Ag succeeded to reach the top in his first attempt! What a big surprise! Hurray, everybody including all eight children, their parents and the instructors gave Ag a big applause. This was the first instance ever that everyone in the scene applauded Ag together. This was of course the best opportunity to encourage Ag. Once I arrived home, I asked Ag to share the experience with Sue. He did. He kept speaking!

Ag and I did not know that there were a few different 'routes' up the wall, some easy, some difficult. In the second session, the instructor told Ag to attempt a more difficulty route. He

could not reach the top. This was good. It became more interesting. In these 8 weeks of rock climbing, Ag had fun. In the last lesson, Ag tried an even more challenging route. I really had no idea how many different routes there were. I was just sure that Ag enjoyed rock climbing. So I enrolled the same course for him repeatedly, 3 times all together, until it became very easy for him.

Ag had benefited from rock climbing course a lot. He did it at the right time. On the other hand, some children in the same course clearly had difficulty. They panicked, yelled, struggled hard and refused to climb up the wall. A few even cried. I fully appreciated that their parents were anxious to help. However these kids were obviously not ready physically. They were scared. Pushing them up would not help. In my opinion, the parents were creating 'defeat' to their children! It would just drive the kids away! In a few times, I wanted to share my view with those parents, yet finally I refrained myself. Why not bringing these children to a playground and allow let them to run around? They would enjoy and stay close to their parents. Attempt rock climbing only when they became ready. Young kids would not be able to judge. It was the parents' responsibility to observe and determine the right time. If I had taken Ag to rock climbing a few months earlier, Ag would have panicked and struggled too. We both would be frustrated and disappointed. Since I did this when Ag was ready, he was delighted and motivated. Ag was the best in the group. Although he did not say anything, I reckoned that he knew. He was among applause. When arriving home, Ag was happy to tell Sue. He shared his experience and became more social.

Ag's experience in roller skating and rock climbing changed him a lot in just a few months. He became confident rapidly. The taste of success motivated him. Ag was eager to go to both courses. He talked about the course, his goal to pass the assessment and his wish to join the next course. He became lively, energetic and enthusiastic. He was quite happy to share his 'success' even with strangers. He was no longer the same boy who exhibited typical Asperger's behavior a year ago.

I read a book before about nurturing gifted children. I was impressed by two main points "Don't repeat what you have taught the child" and "Always bring the child new challenge, but within his/her capabilities." I believe that I did it right for Ag. When the activities in children playgrounds became too easy for Ag, I switched quickly. I brought Ag to skating and rock climbing. These were new challenge for Ag, yet within his capabilities. He knew that these activities were a lot more demanding than going down a slide or going up children rope courses.

He was happy and became confident. Most importantly, Ag learnt through his personal experience “Work hard, practice a lot, don’t give up, then it brings success.”