

Chapter 9 - PDA, A Special Experience of "Non Traditional" Training

I have written a lot of training which Ag had undertaken, including speech therapy, sensory integration training, play therapy, social etiquette training etc. Let me describe these as 'Traditional' training. Ag needed these. He undertook lots as from age 2.5. To overcome Asperger's Syndrome, Ag needed more, to make him understand the mind of other people, to become social and to enjoy meeting people.

When Ag was 4.5, we began to bring Ag to Potential Development Association Ltd, PDA, for training. Little by little, I found that PDA's training was different from what I had expected. PDA emphasized more on training Ag to focus on PEOPLE, to enjoy meeting with PEOPLE, to understand that the world was CHANGING. Ag undertook training in PDA for two years. I heard many new ideas and new theories which I had never thought of or read before. I like to describe these in more details. Let me call these as 'Non-Traditional' training. However, I must emphasize that I am not professional. The terms 'Traditional' and 'Non-Traditional' are just my personal opinion.

PDA emphasized "CHANGE". Therapists reiterated again and again to Ag that "Things Can Change". How did PDA get the message across? In PDA, therapist guided Ag to stack and assemble blocks. These blocks were colorful and large. Stacking just 4 pieces together, one above another, was as high as an adult. Therapist also stacked paper bricks with Ag. The paper bricks were the same size as concrete bricks. I had never seen these kinds of block and brick in any other centers. While doing this, the therapist kept on reminding Ag "There is another way to assemble these. Now they are different." PDA wanted Ag to learn "CHANGE".

In PDA, there were a lot of swings, more varieties than I had seen in other centers. This was a just small difference. The main difference tied with when and how to train. Other centers considered that it was no longer necessary to put Ag on swings but PDA continued, and swung him vigorously. These swings were very different from those in any children playground. They swung in any direction as well as turned simultaneously. Other centers changed to do speech therapy. PDA did not believe it was the right time for speech therapy, but kept putting Ag on swings for another 6 months before starting other training.

I had no expertise to judge the right time to stop and start another kind of training. I let each center to make their decision. Anyway, this illustrated a 'non-traditional' training. In PDA, there were many other trainings which were new or even surprising to me. PDA wanted Ag to focus on people.

A therapist brought Ag into a small tent. However, she brought no training aid, nothing. In other words, there were just the therapist and Ag in the tent. They were isolated, thus Ag would not be distracted. The whole purpose was to make Ag focusing entirely on the therapist, to interact with people.

There were around ten rooms in PDA. A therapist hid herself in one of these rooms. Ag was told to look for her. This activity was again to make Ag focusing on people.

Ag and the therapist each held a small stick and waved to each other. The therapist moved around and asked Ag to follow. This was to make Ag paying attention to people too, not to toys or objects.

All special training centers made use of toys in various training and activities, PDA too. However, therapist there steadily and purposely reduced the use of toys. The objective was to bring Ag's attention to people. I witnessed once the therapist brought just a piece of scarf to training, but nothing else. She asked Ag to suggest activity using just this piece of scarf. In the session after, she did not bring anything and insisted Ag to propose. Ag had to figure out an activity without any object on hand. This made Ag to focus on people, people and people but not on object.

In another session, the therapist communicated with Ag with just gesture, body language and facial expression. She kept silent all the time. This was to make Ag focusing on her alone, and learnt non-verbal communication.

In a small room, the therapist pushed Ag to the wall by her own body. She kept quiet. She scratched Ag by her fingers, making Ag itchy. This forced Ag to speak, to show his feeling and idea and ultimately to communicate.

I considered all these to train Ag to focus on people, to induce him to communicate with people. To me, all these trainings were very unusual which I had never come across anywhere else. There was a speech therapist in PDA, but she did not conduct any training session with Ag. I was puzzled so I asked the consulting therapist. She replied: "Ag is not ready. Better focus on other training first". This was a surprise, but I decided to follow.

These unusual training methods kept coming up one after another. They brought me new perspectives. To me, they were all "Non-Traditional", but the explanation sounded right. Was there a set of guidelines, program or methodology to follow? I had several rounds of discussion with the consulting therapist. The answer was "No". I was disappointed. If there was, I would like to learn, to see if I could do something at home. Ag was in PDA for more than 2 years and I had observed as long. In the end, I believed that there was indeed none. There was no fixed rules or methodology.

To me, PDA was very conscious of the child's cognitive capability. Ag was weak on this. For example, Ag was asked to lead a game with the therapist. Ag set the rule of the game. He took an object, passed to a second person, then to a third person. Game was over! It was simple. There was neither win nor lose. There was no fun. There was NO POINT! Ag took out bits and pieces of his past experience from his memory but these pieces did not add up together to form a proper game. Ag did not understand. He just copied. There was no cognition.

If your child has cognitive difficulty, please do not label him as "stupid". Please be patient. I had no clue how to help Ag to overcome his weakness in cognition. I checked in library but I could not find any readings, except 'Theory of Mind'. I had a very vague idea what cognition was. I could only rely on PDA.

Below were part of what PDA advised me to do at home.

- Every night, I massaged Ag. Ag was overly sensitive to touching of other people. Massage would help. However, I was advised to keep silent in the entire massaging period, because this would distract him.
- Took Ag for a stroll. Held his hand and kept silent. He would be touched.

- When teaching Ag anything from books, treated Ag one year older than his real age. When teaching him anything regarding social interaction, treated him one year younger.
- Brought Ag to a zoo and watched the mother animals taking care of their offspring. When watching birds, pointed out to Ag: "See the mother bird? She is feeding her little birds. She takes care of them."
- Bought a baby doll for Ag. Encouraged Ag to take care of the baby doll, bathed it, combed it and dressed it. It had never occurred to Sue and I to buy a doll for Ag. He was a five years old boy. This did not sound appropriate. However, after we bought Ag a doll, he indeed spent quite a period of time to take care of it. His concern for people became more prominent.
- Made Ag excited. Had vigorous exercise or activity with Ag, such as chasing people. This could trigger his empathy and affection.
- Played less intellectual games such as solving puzzles. Had more role playing games with Ag. Encourage him to imitate a doctor, a cashier, a bus driver, a cook, actually any role. Played games which required Ag to use his imaginations.
- Emphasized "Change" to Ag. Took Ag to a sandy beach. Wrote or drew on the sand. Built sand castle. Guided Ag to see the changes. At home, cut meat into small pieces and seasoned it. Showed Ag that when the meat was cut, the size, the shape, the appearance of the piece of meat was changed. Mixed crayon and showed Ag the change of color.
- Encouraged Ag to run after people, not object. Ice skating was good. Skated fast in big circle or in figure of eight because Ag would have to focus on other skaters. t. Another good activity is to play on trampoline, bouncing up and down quickly.

I got these pieces of advice in a period of two years. Each and every time I heard these, I had question in my mind "Will these help at all?"

Ag had be undertaking speech therapy in Early Education and Training Center (EETC). I considered this "traditional" training and Ag improved day after day. At home, I also motivated Ag to speak more. PDA did not object but did not arrange speech therapy for Ag. PDA considered this more a cognition issue rather than a speech capability issue. The focus of training was to make Ag more social and to pay attention to people. In several training sessions, the instructor conducted training within a small tent. Ag had to focus on the instructor, nothing

else. When I first heard this proposition, it was odd and a bit weird. Would it help? The only way to prove was to try.

I once asked Ag to draw several pictures, the theme being "Skate", "Tap Mun Island", "New Year". I was taken aback to see that in all Ag's drawings, there was no human beings. There were landscape and a lot of other details. I showed the drawings to a clinical psychologist. He advised: "Ag did not pay any attention to people. His focus was only landscape, nothing else." This matched with what PDA advised me i.e. there was no people in Ag's mind.

Ag had 3 years in kindergarten. He could never recollect and tell us what happened in school, what he did and whom he met. PDA did not consider speech capability was the main issue, but rather Ag never paid attention to other people. Ag enjoyed handicraft very much. I arranged him to do small handicraft in a community center. When returning home, he was very happy to show us and describe his handicraft. We asked Ag: "How many children were there?" Ag could never tell, not even an approximate number, more boys or more girls! He was about six years old but he still never paid attention to people or his playmate. Therapist in PDA trained him by playing a game with him for 15 minutes, and asked him to recall and describe immediately. Then, they played the same game, but this time the therapist made Ag taking the lead. This trained Ag to pay attention to people and understand. It also instilled the idea: "Different people have different way to play a game."

Please do not under-estimate this issue. If a child does not observe and cannot recapitulate, he/she may be labelled as "stupid". How to train? One of the 'traditional' training method is to use a series of story cards. Train the child to interpret and describe. I did this with Ag at home too. In fact, all research and study indicate that children with Asperger's syndrome tend to learn fast by interpreting images, drawings and pictures. PDA had no objection either, but therapist there did not using story cards to teach. They mentored Ag one-on-one, in order to stimulate his attention to people.

PDA emphasized to arouse Ag's interest in people. Their explanation and theory were new to me, beyond what I could image before. I listened carefully and took down notes. From time to time, I was skeptical first. At home, I thought about these seriously. It sounded right. I decided to follow.

The development of the brain has big impact on the behavior of children with Asperger's. The brain controls body balancing, co-ordination of eyes and limbs, verbal communication and cognition too. If there is no cognition, of course there is no communication. Before 5 years old, Ag had never asked our domestic helper to get him a glass of drinking water. He did this himself. In his mind, he never had the idea of "asking dad, mum or domestic helper for help, then he will get water". Without knowing the role of everyone, the relationship and the process, he would not ask. It was a matter of cognition, not speech ability.

The clinical psychologist of Social Welfare Department once arranged a test for Ag. It was found that Ag used his right brain a lot more than other children. He was six years old, but his ability to analyze two dimensional geometrical graphics was as good as that of 10 years old, only 1 in a hundred.

I was convinced that Asperger's Syndrome was an issue of development and functioning of the brain. Please don't label the child as "stupid". This would merely hurt the child but not help in any way. Parents should follow the advice of therapist, to train and educate. I sent Ag to undertake both the traditional and non-traditional training. The result was excellent.