

Learning with our son, Jacob

*"When long and steep the path appears
Or heavy is the task,
Our Father says, "Press on, My child,
One step is all I ask."
- DJD*

MY husband and I pondered over the choices we had with our son, Jacob who is special. How could we understand him when he could not speak at all?

After coming to terms with ourselves, we decided that we had other choices – choices on how we could change his environment and nurture him. This became our focus.

We tried many methods, talked to many people and read widely, hoping to find a prescribed or ready-made solution, a theory or a template.

Most advocate a structured learning environment, so we tried to have him seated on a chair. But we failed to even get anything out of him. We gave up trying to teach him to sit down and work with him. He was growing and we had great difficulty controlling him physically and exerting our will on him. But we continued to play and sing with him. Miraculously, he responded.

The first time I got him to imitate was when he was lying down and I looked over him, made some funny faces to attract his attention (something a cheeky child would do to his parent to get attention) and started to "ah" and "woo" at him animatedly. He actually followed me and what joy it was that he made the effort to look at me and imitated the sounds.

So I tried to get his attention whenever I could. I sang animatedly. I repeated songs or words with actions that he enjoyed and slowly he started to respond to me even when I was not so animated. I had stumbled on "Incidental Learning".

Then we met Dr Vera, who taught us the finer points of Incidental Learning. She opened our perspective and showed us that learning could occur anywhere. It was like the opening of a window and fresh air gushing in. We followed her advice and practised them.

In the bath, we played body parts and blow bubbles from the bathing soap. We taught him to label the items used. Eating and drinking provided another excellent opportunity to inject some learning. And because it involved food and drinks, he learnt without us having to use rewards and incentives.

It all seemed so easy once he started to respond. We started to involve everyone who has contact with him - my mother and our family members and

our domestic helpers. We set goals on his behaviour. All of us would sing the same tune until he could understand and use it appropriately.

But the early days were tough. Sometimes, we could only get him for a few fleeting seconds before he flew into a tantrum because he did not get what he wanted. We had to take it one step at a time. There were times when it was heart-breaking to see him trying and yet we could not give in simply because we were asking for more. With a little success, we were impatient and wanted more response from him. These were the times when we had to make hard decisions whether to give in or expect more from him. It was trial and error.

The trial and error period is almost over; rather it has become continuous improvement for both Jacob's and more importantly our behaviours, through observation and getting feedback from Jacob first-hand. We had to be there for him and to pick up all his cues and signals.

Slowly, step by step, as we used more and more opportunities and fine-tuned our own behaviour to obtain the desired response, he communicated more and more.

We would interrupt his behaviour when he was talking to himself by "barging in" and trying to strike up a conversation. When he was jumping we would jump along and then changed the activity to something we wanted him to do. When he was singing, we would try to sing along with him. When he wanted to get something from us, we would "bombard" him with a series of questions. Getting ready for bed or school, walking up in the morning and sitting in the car were opportunities not to be missed for they have to be grasped at the precise moment in time.

These sessions taught him unconsciously eye contact without us having to force him. Today, when he addresses me, he will insist that I look at him and acknowledge him just as I have asked of him. He has shown tremendous improvement, thanks to the efforts of the many people who have helped and taught him. We have almost forgotten how trying times were when he did not even have some words to communicate. But, one thing we learnt as parents is that we have to take him step by step just like a new born child who begins to discover a whole new world outside the womb. He can only blossom and venture if we are there for him at every corner to guide him as he attempts the first step and we are there to give him courage to press on.

We share this story with the parents who are struggling. We write with humility as we are still discovering the many strengths that we have to call upon for Jacob who is in fact showing us the way.

Jacob's Mum
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