

## Development of Pragmatic and Social Skills in Autistic Children and Adolescents

**PARENTS, teachers, psychologists, therapists and students attended the talk on "Development of Pragmatic and Social Skills" by Dr Vera Bernard-Opitz during her recent visit to Heidelberg, Germany. Results and videos from the STEP Programme demonstrated specific "teaching-steps". Some parents requested the establishment of a similar STEP Programme in Heidelberg!**

The "Parent Association for Autistic Children Nordbaden" had organised the talk held on May 13 at the Institute of Education, Heidelberg. The talk centred on features of abnormal communication and social behaviour in autistic children and adolescents. Methods of normalising their behaviour were described.

Pragmatic deficits like lack of turn-taking skills, communicative intent and restricted communicative functions need to be considered in early intervention programmes. From an early age on, autistic children lack the variety of communicative functions seen in normal children. They frequently restrict their communicative acts to requesting or refusing instead of pointing out events, talking about experiences or places, commenting, asking questions or offering help. Understanding and expressing emotions, introducing topics and adapting the conversation to the listener are obvious problems seen in older autistic children and adolescents. Lack of sensitivity and communicative competence can lead to the rejection of autistic adolescents by the social environment. Abrupt interruption of ongoing conversations, incessant talk about special interests and ignorance of obvious signs of disinterest of the listeners are some of the problems.

One of the core questions of applied research and school programmes for autistic children is whether social interest, sensitivity and flexible social behaviour can be taught. Beginning steps (like expanding communicative functions, teaching joint attention, recognising and expressing feelings) and using social scripts have

been taught with success.

Some of the pupils of the STEP Programme in Singapore have gone beyond simple requesting of objects or activities. They are now able to ask questions, describe their feelings, talk about past events or future plans or even offer some help. Most of them still need prompts to say the right thing in certain situations. Role play and repeated practice in real life settings have been helpful. For example, pretend playing teacher, secretary, cleaner, shopkeeper or other roles has helped in acquiring various social scripts.

In general, teaching methods vary with the teaching targets as well as the characteristics of the children involved. While role play and self-control procedures can be used with higher-level children, massed practice or setting events are usually necessary for slower learners. For both groups, play and teaching material can be selected to facilitate social skills: puzzles, photos, sound-lottos or dolls have been geared towards the differentiation of persons, facial expressions, feelings or voices.

In an autobiographic account, Jolliffe et al (1992) described what autistic people feel like regarding social settings: "Life is bewildering, a confusing interacting mass of people, events, places and things with no boundaries. Social life is hard because it does not seem to follow the same pattern, when the circumstances alter slightly ... Normal people, finding themselves on a planet with alien creatures on it, would probably feel frightened, would not know how to fit in and would certainly have difficulty in understanding what the aliens were thinking, feeling and wanting and how to respond correctly to these things." (Jolliffe et al, 1992, pp 16).

Dr Vera concluded that even though some higher level autistic children can become competent communicators, the majority of autistic children will need ongoing help in social skills. For this group, predictable social routines might be a more realistic teaching target than flexible social behaviour.