

Language Songs for Children with Autism and/or Developmental Delay

WITH a big smile five-year-old Saiful runs up the steps to the 3rd floor of a special school, hangs up his bag at the hanger with his photo, gives his teacher a big hug and joins the circle of children -- all ready for a new day in the STEP-Programme.

STEP stands for Structured Teaching for Exceptional Pupils and is a one-to-one programme serving children with autistic behaviours. During the daily two and a half hours teaching-sessions children learn basic social, communicative, play and self-help skills and some of these skills by singing.

Along the melody of "Where is Thumbkin..." six children and their one-to-one teachers greet Saiful by "Hello Saiful, hello Saiful, how are you, how are you..." When all continue with "Let's shake hands with Adrian, let's shake hands with Adrian", the boy gets up to greet his peer.

legs..." Since coordinating movements with a peer is quite difficult, he tries to finish this fast and move on to his favorite circle game "The circle goes round, goes round" holding hands with the other children and teachers, sitting down, jumping up, walking fast and slow and ... best of all swinging! Saiful uses a hand sign to get his favourite activity being picked up by his teacher and a peer and swinging to the song "This is the way, Saiful swings, Saiful swings, Saiful swings..." Now he is ready to start the more serious part of the school morning!

Crystal is a verbal child with autistic behaviours. When she first joined the STEP-Programme, she always wanted to sit on a certain chair and would throw tantrums if the teacher did not follow her song-sequence. To help her become more adaptive, rules were established on turn-taking and choice of songs. Allowing another child to sit on her favourite chair was made easier by singing the song "Terry sits in the middle..."

In using the aforementioned song "This is the way..." Crystal learned to imitate and label self-help activities like "Brush my teeth...", "...comb my hair...", "...put on shoes ...".

Opposites were taught with songs like "Open - shut hands/arms, hands up - hands down, stand up - sit down..." Being a little vain, she specially enjoyed to watch herself in the mirror, singing and performing the corresponding body-movements. With this she pioneered the Aerobic sessions, expanding the song by "...shoulders up...shoulders down..." Tantrums are now past history in Crystal's life. She makes sure that all children get their turn and is flexible in the choice of chairs, songs, clothing, food and other things.

While traditional children's songs like "Mary had a little lamb" are non-functional for children in this part of the world, the alternative text "Crystal has two hands, two hands, two hands...clap, clap, clap clap..." is closer related to the children's experience.

Language-songs were developed within the behavioural teaching programme of STEP, focusing on functional skill development. Meaningless rhymes of songs can be devastating especially for autistic children, who lack communicative speech. Functionality of songs on the other hand can contribute to their communicative development.

In interacting with the students, the staff have developed a series of songs aimed at specific language structures: names, object-labels, verbs, prepositions, numbers, colours and other language goals. A song collection consisting of a booklet and a tape has been developed with melodies derived from well-known American, German, French and



Saiful imitating an action-song.

Saiful is a child with autistic behaviours. He does not talk, but communicates by pictures, wordcards and sometimes by the tune of a song. He loves songs and he has learned a variety of body-imitations by so-called 'language-songs'.

Pulling his little finger the boy initiates a counting song: "One little, two little, three little fingers" sung along the melody of "One little, two little, three little Indians". (He is much more familiar with fingers than Indians!) Picking up his toes he gets his teacher to count and gently massage his toes to the same tune.

In interacting with a peer he tries to 'pedal feet' with another child to the melody of "This is the way we ... push our legs, push our legs, push our

