

FENG XIAOHUA - Working Hard in Secondary School

Xiaohua is the autistic child in our family. He is 15, and is currently studying in the (faster) Express stream in Secondary 3. He now works on his own, and does not need to be supervised every day. Although his results are not outstanding, his teachers say that he is hardworking and well behaved, and does not appear any differently from his peers. His recent promotion to the rank of officer in the Boys' Brigade, through a lot of hard work and passing tests, had him reveling in pride for quite a while. He has come a long way since the time in Secondary 1 when he was sent back in the night during a camp.

It was more than 10 years ago when I learned from psychologist Dr Vera that Xiaohua had autism. He was two and a half then. I was deeply saddened, disheartened and helpless. Dr Vera advised me to learn more about how to teach him, rather than question how my son could have autism. Her words woke me from my nightmare. Indeed, the most pressing task was to educate him. My approach should be one of sparing no effort in teaching him, regardless of how much progress he could make.

The big question was how. Hence, we attended the parent-training course conducted by Dr Vera. Many times, we sought information, and consulted her on how to handle problems and to teach him. As we put ideas into practice and kept up our efforts, Xiaohua began to show signs of improvement. We encountered many setbacks during that period, but our confidence also grew with the progress that we saw.

At about the age of five, Xiaohua started attending the

STEP-Programme run by Dr Vera at Margaret Drive Special School. By then, he was already able to sit and listen to instructions, as well as speak some simple phrases/sentences. With Ms Nizah and other teachers teaching him, Xiaohua progressed at a much faster rate than before.

Being a Mandarin-speaking family, we had to struggle through using broken English at home in order to provide Xiaohua with more exposure to the language. At that time, Ms Nizah's systematic, step-by-step teaching laid a good foundation for his English. With enhanced language and comprehension skills, his problem behaviours were considerably reduced.

From the time Xiaohua entered Primary 1 till now, we have encountered many difficulties, but we have also gained a lot with the help and guidance of caring and patient principals and teachers. They have played a big role in his achievements.



Isn't life confusing?
 — When the class teacher asked to write a composition about "A trip to the zoo" He was stunned and called upon his former STEP-teacher, "Teacher Nizah why must we 'trip' to the zoo?"

The journey ahead is long, and we cannot predict how Xiaohua will progress from now. It is our hope that he will grow up happily, break free from the boundaries of autism and be self-supporting and independent.

To sum it up, upon being awakened by Dr Vera, we had wasted no time in teaching Xiaohua. If we had believed that Xiaohua was a "slow developer" and waited for him to grow, our story today would have been different.

From the bottom of our hearts, we wish Dr Vera good health, a fulfilling family life and a smooth-sailing career in the United States of America.