

SEBASTIAN - Surviving Mainstream Schooling

By Richard Schwaab

My son, who has autism, will turn 16 this year. He has survived mainstream schooling and is in the last year of school, in Secondary 4, at Anglo-Chinese School (Barker Road). And the school too has survived him, much to its credit! Sebastian will be sitting for Normal (N) Level examinations this year.

He has been quite comfortable academically as the curricula in Normal (Technical) stream are less demanding. Mathematics remains his strongest subject, which boosts his self-esteem as he regularly aces the tests while his classmates struggle with the concepts.

English Language is a different story. Composition and comprehension continue to confound him but he is saved by the grammar components of the paper. He is relieved of the anxiety of the (Chinese) Mother Tongue paper, having been granted exemption from it. Sebastian is quite self-motivated to do well in his exams.

And next year? Students from the Normal (Technical) stream are slated for the Institute for Technical Education, which is very probably where he is headed. He would be quite happy working in an area related to Information Technology.

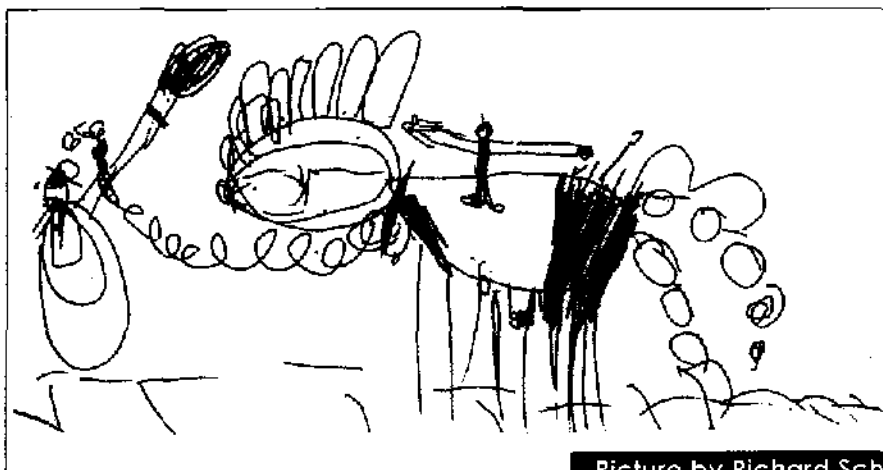
Sebastian retains many challenges in social skills. In school, his classmates have been generally accepting and supportive. While he is a ready target for bullying, fortunately

that problem has not gone out of hand. It is not surprising that he has not made any close friends, and has not felt their absence.

We continue to be fascinated by him-his special talents and yet the obvious lack of common sensibilities, his all consuming obsessions (one being the recent World Cup - Who needs to refer to the timetable for fixtures when you have Seb to ask, and the same goes for the results of matches played! He would also be more than willing to discuss with you ad nauseum any fact or trivia related thereto.), and the challenges in managing them.

His development seems a mixed bag of progress and setbacks. Recalling a recent incident, as he was getting into the car, he held up a full bottle of water and announced without prompting, "I have filled it up again, in case you are thinking I have not drunk my water at all." Wow, a little bit of Theory of Mind at work here! It may be rudimentary but nevertheless encouraging. Conversely, his agitation may well escalate if he is thwarted from say, watching a favourite programme on television, at which instance the whole household is made aware of his unhappiness. Not so encouraging indeed.

It is nearly impossible to imagine how life could have been if Sebastian had not come along. Admittedly I would wish that the future looks brighter for him. Still, I am quite sure there is much much more to the story of this boy named Sebastian.



Picture by Richard Schwaab