

# PARENTING A SPECIAL CHILD



According to Dr. Fiona Yip, a parents' devotion makes a great Difference for children with special education needs.

BY DR. FIONA YIP



There has been a 34.1% increase in the number of students with SEN studying in public sector mainstream schools in Hong Kong between the years 2013 and 2018.

SEN includes the needs of students with various types of disabilities including but not limited to Autism Spectrum Disorder, Speech and Language Impairment, Intellectual Disability and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder.

## Challenges for Parents

Parents of children with SENs are facing much more challenges in parenting. They need to do a lot of research in effective treatments and resources. Also, they need to be actively involved in innumerable appointments with medical providers, therapists, advocates, and school personnel. Furthermore, they are involved in advocating for appropriate school interventions, accommodations, and/or placements for their child. This is especially challenging since there are insufficient SEN services in the public sector and parents also forced to bear the heavy financial burden of paying for many treatments and interventions.

The burden for parents of kids with SENs is extremely great. Studies have found that mothers of adolescents and adults with autism have very high levels of stress hormones comparable to that of soldiers in combat. On the other hand, children with SENs spend most of their time with parents or primary care takers. Therefore, the children's strengths could be more



effectively developed in their developmental stage if their parents or care takers are trained with the necessary skills to teach or coach the child on a daily bases. From this point of view, providing support services for helping parents to cope with their emotional and physical demands of caring for an individual with a disability is crucial. Furthermore, equipping them with skills for teaching and coaching their child as part of the treatments for improving the child's capability and ability are desirable.

#### Differences Made

A lot of examples show that with parents' devotion in training them, SEN children could make a lot of progresses, especially when the training starts in their early childhood and for those children with mild to moderate level in the disorder. For example, a mother attended classes together with her son with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Her son had great difficulty in speech, writing and expressing his emotions. Her unconditional love and acceptance enabled her son to express his thankful feelings in writing and with his unclear speech. Another mother used pictures to aid her little son to understand others people's feelings and body languages. Also, another mother enables her son with specific learning disability (writing) to gain sense of achievement by writing down the stories created by her son. She says, "Son, you have produced a story book! You are gorgeous!" The struggles of such children demand parents to

provide unconditional love, acceptance and support.

#### Professional Coaching Needed

In the journey of supporting their children with SENs, parents need professional advice in many areas. For example, teach them how to assess and monitor the changes in the child's everyday functioning like personal care such as changing cloth and brushing teeth; and help parents to understand their child's feelings and behaviors. Providing training for parents in managing the child's behavior and addressing the child's problems can also go a long way. Moreover, they also need guidance on how to implement the treatment plan with their child and how to work on their own personal issues related to parenting such children. With the limited resources for treatments, building a collaborative alliance with parents to treat children with SEN may be the most cost-effective way for providing the best solution. As a long term solution, empowering parents will prove to be infinitely more effective than simply letting parents rely on the institutions and structures provided by the government.

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