

**Autism Article in
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Understanding Autism

It's increasingly prevalent in Singapore but do we really understand autism? In the run-up to Autism Awareness Day on 2 April, **June Wan** writes about the disorder that can affect even a genius.

A diagnosis of autism is not a death sentence. In fact, some people believe that children with autism process things at genius level. But what exactly is autism? The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke in the United States defines it as "the most common condition in a group of developmental disorders known as autism spectrum disorders".

People with autism may appear to be unsociable, have communication problems and limited activities and interests, Liz Barratt of the Educational Support & Behaviour Consultancy shares.

The British-born therapist has been treating children

with special needs in Singapore for over a decade and estimates that nine out of 10 cases she sees fall within the autism spectrum. It can affect

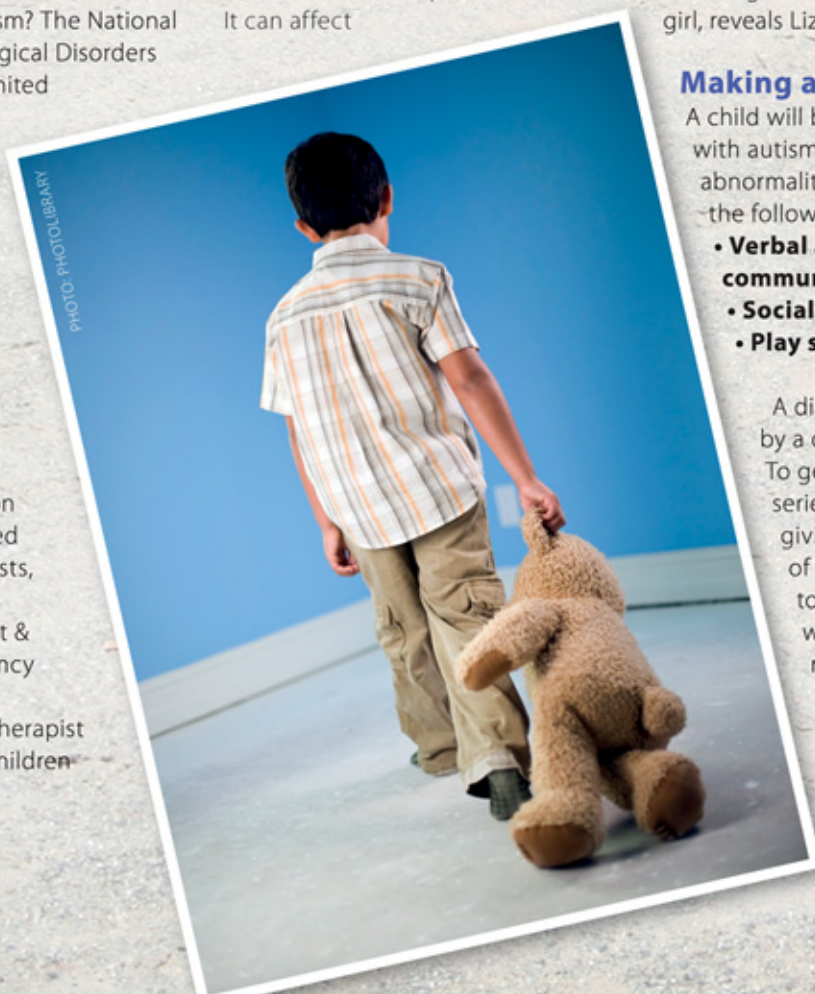
three to six out of every 1,000 children, and boys are more likely to have it than girls. The ratio is said to be as high as four boys to every one girl, reveals Liz.

Making a Diagnosis

A child will be diagnosed with autism if she displays abnormalities in a combination of the following three behaviours:

- **Verbal and non-verbal communication**
- **Social interaction**
- **Play skills**

A diagnosis has to be done by a qualified professional. To get a diagnosis, a series of tests are run by giving the child a range of toys and activities to see how they react, whether they are able to respond appropriately to the adult playing with them and an assessment of the



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language they use during each activity, Liz describes.

Children with autism tend to be extremely solitary in their play. They do not appreciate interventions by adults or other children and will often play with toys in an obsessive, repetitive and rigid manner. They also tend to have very few friends due to their inability to communicate and play well and understand social relationships, she explains.

Early or Late?

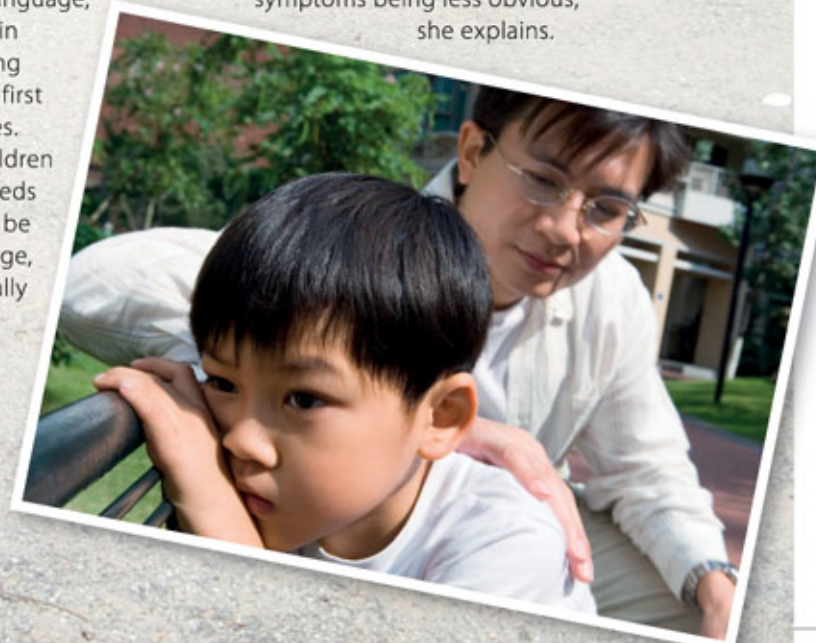
For some children, it is clear from birth that something is definitely not right. Children with severe autism may show signs very early on by their aloofness; a reluctance to be comforted or carried, and the inability or refusal to look at Mummy or the person caring for them. Instead, they prefer to stare endlessly into space.

Most children are diagnosed with autism when they are between three and four years of age, although many parents can often tell something is

not quite right before this. But it is hard to make a firm diagnosis when they are younger as autism primarily affects speech and language, and children are still in the process of learning language during the first few years of their lives.

"Additionally, all children learn at different speeds and while some may be quick to learn language, others may be naturally slower," Liz adds. Hence children on the mild end of the autistic spectrum

may be diagnosed much later. Some go undiagnosed until their teens or even adulthood. This is due to their symptoms being less obvious, she explains.





Spreading Awareness

When Mrs Claire Tan's daughter was diagnosed with autism, she quit her career as a legal eagle to take care of her child. The 36-year-old mother of one even took a course on how to teach a child with autism so that she would be better able to develop her daughter's potential. Mrs Tan is not alone. More parents in Singapore are aware of autism these days.

"This is possibly due to the increase

in general awareness of autism spectrum disorders, which has led to more children being diagnosed," reckons Liz, who taught a special needs class at Dover Court International School for two years when she first moved to Singapore in 1997.

Autism awareness has also increased in the heartlands. PCF HQ set up the Special Educational Needs (SEN) team in December 2004 as principals and teachers requested additional help and resources for such children enrolled in their centres.

How does PCF support children with autism? If a child is observed by teachers and Family Care Workers (FCW) to show possible signs of autistic behaviour, the school will initiate meetings at the kindergarten with the parents. There, the principal, form teacher, parent and FCW meet to share information about the child's behaviour and development at home

and at school. "We would then discuss with parents their concerns before giving recommendations or referrals for next steps. We would also look into interim adjustments or accommodations needed to help the child in school," explains Patricia Koh, a FCW with PCF HQ.

Currently, the SEN team knows of about 150 out of 47,000 students who are diagnosed with autism. *

Getting Help

Get a polyclinic referral to any of the following clinics:

KK DEPARTMENT OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT, KK Women's and Children's Hospital (Tel: 6294-4050 or log on to www.kkh.com.sg for more information)

THE CHILD DEVELOPMENT UNIT AT THE CHILDREN'S MEDICAL INSTITUTE, National University Hospital (Tel: 6665-2530 or log on to www.nuh.com.sg/kids/index.htm)

CHILD GUIDANCE CLINIC, Institute of Mental Health (Tel: 6435-3878 or log on to www.imh.com.sg)

Alternatively, you can consult clinical psychologists, educational psychologists or developmental paediatricians in private practice.