

OPERATION SANTA CLAUS



Six-year-old Yan Yan is helped by Steve Chan, a Rainbow Project occupational therapist. Photo: Bruce Yan

A SIMPLE MESSAGE THAT MEANS THE WORLD TO MUM

Specialist help is enriching the lives of children like Yan Yan, helping them to break out of their isolation and communicate with loved ones

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Mrs Wong was overjoyed to hear her six-year-old son, Yan Yan, repeat after her: "I like you, mummy!"

It might seem like a minor achievement for kids his age, but it's a marked improvement for Yan Yan, who was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and developmental delay at the age of two and has autistic tendencies.

This means Yan Yan has trouble grasping and following a combination of instructions, and has difficulty communicating in the way that most children do. A year ago he could barely string two words together. His attention span lasted five minutes, and he would throw nightly tantrums.

Now, with the help of weekly therapy sessions, he is able to construct simple sentences and sleep soundly through the night.

"He's not the same as other six-year-olds, but seeing the progress he's made, it's really rewarding," says Mrs Wong, who has been taking her son for occupational and speech therapy at the Rainbow Project Learning Centre, a school that provides specialised education and therapy for autistic children.

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spectrum disorder since 2010, according to the child assessment service of the Department of Health.

Last year's figures show one in 683 children have autism in Hong Kong. By comparison, one in 68 children in the United States were diagnosed in 2010, according to the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.

Treatment options are few and pricey in the city, with a handful of private schools or centres catering only to autistic children's needs for specialised education at HK\$30,000 a month, and individual therapy costing up to HK\$800 per session.

It would be unaffordable for Mrs Wong, who comes from a low-income family. Rainbow

Project, Morgan Stanley's chosen core charity, was able to subsidise 33 low-income families with its underprivileged programme.

After it was suspended for a year due to lack of funding, it relaunched in 2013 with the help of Operation Santa Claus, the *South China Morning Post's* annual festive fundraising drive jointly held with RTHK.

The government offers subsidised preschool rehabilitation services, but the waiting list is at least two years - which is too long for autistic children who should seek treatment as early as possible, says Keith Lee, project director at Rainbow Project.

"Early intervention makes a world of a difference," says Lee, adding that the best window of opportunity to reduce the long-term impact of the condition would be between the ages of two-and-a-half and five.

Since the government implemented an integrated education policy more than a decade ago, mainstream schools also offer classes and training to children with special education needs, but Lee says sometimes children cannot cope.

"Integration is good for children with autism when they are ready - it's simply too overwhelming sometimes," he says. "The ultimate goal is to integrate them into a mainstream school, but if a child is not ready, it'll do them more harm than good."

For now, as Yan Yan's vocabulary increases day by day, Mrs Wong's hope is she will soon hear him say, "I like you, mummy!" on his own.