

all together NOW

Is mainstream school in Hong Kong an option for children with a diagnosis on the autistic spectrum? *Angela Baura* finds out.



At the tender age of one, Sophia's son, Yannis, learned to read. He would read books for hours every day, mostly in silence. But there was no babbling, no words by 16 months, and no phrases at 24 months. At three years, Yannis was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, a development disability that can cause varying levels of social, communication and behavioural challenges.

Grappling with Yannis's diagnosis, Sophia was further perturbed by complaints from kindergarten teachers about his "emotional and behavioural problems". "We needed to find a school for him that would support his needs rather than label him a troublemaker," Sophia recalls.

Margaret, mother of Daren, encountered the same challenges: "While every parent has concerns about schooling for children in Hong Kong, having an autistic child raised added concerns that were fundamental to an academic environment, namely social skills and speech development. Without the ability to communicate effectively and follow appropriate classroom behaviour, my son would be even more challenged in comprehending classroom lessons."

When a child is diagnosed with autism, a clinical psychologist can suggest appropriate school programmes depending on the child's strengths and areas for

development. The psychologist may recommend a specialist school that provides direct, intensive education, or a mainstream school that offers an "inclusive programme".

Beacon Hill School, Small World Christian Kindergarten and The Harbour School all offer integrated programmes for children with autism. While the programmes are different in their execution, the ethos is the same: to provide an inclusive school community that accepts, respects and celebrates each child's strengths and differences.

Beacon Hill School

Yannis, now eight, attends Beacon Hill School in Kowloon Tong (www.beaconhill.edu.hk), a member of the English Schools Foundation (ESF) and the longest-serving school in Hong Kong to support children with special needs.

Having previously worked with schools for special education needs across Australia, principal John Brewster is a firm believer in inclusion at all levels throughout Beacon Hill School. The learning support programme currently accommodates 21 students with special needs from Years One to Six. Eighteen of these students have moderate to high-functioning autism and are therefore, with appropriate support, able to cope in a mainstream classroom.



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In each year, there is one target classroom – a mainstream classroom that caters to three or four students with special needs who, with the support of a special needs teacher or assistant, learn side by side with typically developing peers. At appropriate opportunities, the children are discreetly taught social communication skills, and are visited by a speech therapist and occupational therapist twice a week outside of the mainstream classroom. The school fees for all students, irrespective of their needs, are the same.

Belinda McLaughlin, head of special educational needs, says: “Inclusion benefits everybody. We have children with autism who are now thriving in specialist areas. This gives them the chance to shine amongst their peers. Our students learn compassion, tolerance and respect for each other on a daily basis, and our mainstream teachers constantly learn through the variety of children and specialist teachers.”

Sophia is pleased with Yannis’s progress at Beacon Hill School. “Yannis describes school as a ‘big, happy family,’” she says. “The teachers are all very warm and considerate. They devise appropriate, personalised strategies to help children with autism and communicate them to parents to ensure that we are implementing the same strategies at home. Yannis is more confident now and has made big improvements in overcoming his difficulties, thanks to this wonderful school.”

Small World Christian Kindergarten

Dean, aged four, joined Small World (www.swck.edu.hk) in the Mid-Levels last year. According to his mother Charm, the school’s loving and caring environment has

enabled Dean to interact well with typically developing children and follow a mainstream classroom routine.

The school caters to children aged two years and ten months to six years. Each mainstream classroom of 23 students includes one child with special needs who is supported by a learning support assistant.

One mainstream classroom, however, also offers LEAP (Learning Experiences: an Alternative Program for pre-schoolers and parents) – a best practice inclusive model that focuses on enhancing the skills of children with autism through interaction and play with typically developing peers. The class, which is taught by two teachers, is capped at 14 students and includes three children with exceptionally high-functioning autism. Guidance is provided by Dr Caleb Knight (www.childandfamilycentre.net), an educational psychologist who has provided services for hundreds of children on the autism spectrum.

Once a week, Dr Knight provides social skills training to all of the LEAP class students, which benefits children with autism and typically developing peers, too. The students with autism also spend two hours a week with a speech therapist. The fees for all of Small World’s students are the same.

Principal Tess Baguio believes that teachers are instrumental in the success of an inclusive programme. “Our teachers are very loving and accepting. Through their positive attitude, children learn to appreciate each other’s differences, which will benefit them when they go out into the wider world.” Expressing concerns about Hong Kong’s focus on high achievers and top grades, she adds: “These children are going to be citizens of the

world. It is the role of our whole society to give every child the opportunity to excel.”

The Children's Institute of Hong Kong Limited (TCI) in collaboration with The Harbour School (THS)

Daren, now eight, attends TCI in Kennedy Town (www.tcihk.org). The school for special education needs provides one-on-one applied behavioural analysis (ABA) programming for children with all levels of autism and integrates all of its students into THS's (www.theharbourschool.edu.hk) mainstream classrooms.

According to Dr Jeremy H Greenberg, director of TCI, students have their own personalised schedules of activities, some of which may occur in the TCI classroom, while others may occur in THS's mainstream classrooms. An ABA teacher accompanies and supports the student – one-to-one – wherever they go. Initially, it may be appropriate for TCI students to partake only in non-academic subjects; however, over time, they may be able to access all of the subjects in THS's curriculum. Dr Greenberg says, “When this occurs, the TCI teacher systematically fades out of the picture, all the while making careful observations of the student in the THS class to ensure continued success.”

When Daren started partial mainstream integration into THS, he was still socially awkward, mum Margaret recalls. TCI created a tailored programme to support Daren's social development, integration and classroom compliance. Within two months, Daren was following more social norms. “Daren is thriving in school. He is currently

on par academically with his peers, and considered a proficient reader in his class,” Margaret says, attributing his significant progress to TCI's commitment, communication with parents and overview of every child's development.

One size does not fit all

There is significant research to demonstrate the benefits of inclusion for typically developing children and children with autism when they receive their education together in an appropriate setting.

However, different children with autism can have very different symptoms, hence the name autism spectrum disorder. Some children may not benefit from mainstream education, and for these students, the Autism Partnership School (www.apschool.edu.hk) was established in 2007. Lisa, mother of nine-year-old Tim, explains that her son has developed social, behavioural, self-help and relationship skills at the school, which caters to students with all levels of autism from the ages of five to 18. Children are taught individualised curricula in class sizes of four to eight, with a one-to-two or one-to-one teacher to student ratio. The academic curriculum follows the local mainstream national curriculum.

Choosing the right school for a child with autism is a major concern for parents; however, as all four of these mothers attest, it is entirely possible to source excellent educational opportunities in Hong Kong that are professionally supported and that maximise each child's individual potential. 

