

Fulfilling a vision

Charlene Samuel is well on the way to realising her dream of bringing applied behavioural analysis therapy within the reach of middle-income families



TRAINING GROUND

by SHEILA SINGAM

In my line of work, I often come across employers and managers who lament about the younger generation, claiming that they do not have the same level of commitment and responsibility as older people in the workforce. Often based on a lack of understanding of the fundamental value-system that drives Generation Y, as the working youngsters born after the mid-1980s are dubbed, this is not necessarily true.

This was never more apparent to me than when I met 26-year-old Charlene Marie Samuel, founder of Autism Consultancy, which, as its name implies, offers tools and techniques to help children with autism and their families to cope with the challenges of the condition. What's unique about Charlene is that her services are tailored for families that are not able to afford the expensive therapy fees that most centres demand. In addition, she doesn't just stop at providing therapy for children with autism; she also has a programme to train parents and caregivers on how to give the most to their autistic charges.

Autism Consultancy uses the applied behavioural analysis (ABA) approach to therapy for autistic children.

"ABA is a holistic approach that works on the children's social skills, language, speech, movement and motor skills. Its success comes from the intensity and frequency of the therapy – the more repetition there is, the more the development of the child," she explains.

The attractive and friendly ABA therapist has more than six years of experience in the field, having first encountered it as an undergraduate at HELP University while pursuing a degree in psychology. After a four-year stint working freelance with a large, well-known autism centre in the Klang Valley, she decided to branch out on her own two years ago.

A brave decision from one so young, but Charlene insists it was a natural progression to her career. "It wasn't an overnight decision, but it was something that I had wanted to do for some time. And I don't know if it was brave – I had been operating freelance anyway and wasn't earning a regular salary so I was used to not getting a consistent pay cheque at the end of the month!" she shares with disarming honesty.

What's commendable about her consultancy is that while the established names in the business demand anything between RM6,000 and RM10,000 per month from each family for intensive, customised ABA therapy, Charlene offers programmes that are tailored according to how much the family can afford.

"It's ironic that autism is commonly known as the rich man's disease because the fees usually charged are so



CHARLENE MARIE SAMUEL

high. I wanted to bring therapy within the means of as many families as possible in the middle and lower income groups, especially when I discovered that some families had gone to the extent of mortgaging their homes to pay for therapy. That was the deciding factor," she explains.

To fulfil her mission of bringing ABA therapy within the reach of families, Charlene offers the parents two options.

"One option is to work within their affordability. If their budget is RM1,000, for example, we will tailor the programme for them. Another option is for us to train the parents to be their children's therapists for the same fee. This empowers them to be involved in the development of their children while reducing dependency on a team of therapists, which is the major expense in therapy," she reveals.

In her therapy model, each child and his family are assigned a few therapists under the guidance of a consultant to ensure the child gains the ability to interact with different people.

"It helps the child build compliance with different people as well as develop his or her social skills," she explains.

"Many children go untreated simply because treatment is just too expensive. Even with our fee structure, very

few families are able to go for the recommended 30 hours a week but that's okay – even 10 hours is better than nothing, as long as therapy is consistent," she says, adding that training parents is one way to ensure this.

Autism Consultancy's approach to instilling independence in its young clients is to give them life skills in a fun, yet structured environment. "For example, we teach them to go to the shop to buy things, count the right amount of money and to pay. We take these things for granted, but for an autistic child, it's a huge step forward because many of them live in their own world, disconnected from ours," Charlene says.

The passion in her voice is clearly evident as she speaks about her work. She finds great fulfilment in even the little achievements of her clients. "I had a call from a couple who were thrilled that they could take their child out to a restaurant and enjoy a meal together just like any other family. In the past, they couldn't do that, but after therapy and a lot of good work put in by the parents into the child's development, the child learnt to sit quietly while waiting for the food. Normal families will never know what an accomplishment it is for the family of an autistic child," she adds.

Charlene's quiet maturity underscores the big plans she has for Autism Consultancy. "I want to make individual ABA therapy accessible to more families and children in the spectrum of autism. I would love to work with corporations willing to sponsor the therapy for a child whose family cannot afford it," she says.

She is also on the way to fulfilling her dream of establishing an early intervention centre in Cheras.

"I am about to reach another milestone. Never in a million years when I started off as an ABA therapist did I dream this would be a reality. I have always kept to my intention and dream to make quality ABA therapy accessible to everyone, by offering it at an affordable cost, and this centre will keep to that," she says with perceptible excitement.

Clearly, it is not what generation you are born in that determines what drives you, but the dreams you hold in your heart. Perhaps Gen Y just marches to the beat of its own drum and the rest of us need to learn to appreciate the rhythm.

■ **Sheila Singam is the founder of The Human Equation, a company dedicated to bringing the best out of people through training, coaching and facilitation.**