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UNLOCKING AUTISM

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When it comes to autism, early detection and intervention is the key. Get to know the groups dedicated to helping people with autism.

At 31 years old, the **National Autism Society of Malaysia (NASOM)** is Malaysia's oldest and largest body dedicated to autism, a complex developmental disability characterised by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviour, verbal and non-verbal communication, and more.

The national charitable organisation has 20 centres around the country – including one in Miri, Sarawak – that provides for those on the spectrum and their families.

"NASOM is the only organisation that delivers lifespan services for a person with autism," explains chairman Feilina Muhammad Feisol.



Autism Behavioral Centre (ABC) has 45 rooms at its early intervention centre in Bangsar so students can have the most effective learning.

Children below the age of eight make up the majority of NASOM's roll call, but programmes for teenagers and young adults, even adults up to 40 years old, are also delivered.

Feilina's own son, now 22, has been attending a centre since he was five.

"Naim was severely autistic – his attention span was seven seconds and he hardly spoke. But now, he is able to carry out vocational work like sewing and cooking and he can listen to instructions and make simple requests."

"People with autism are not disabled. They are differently abled. And I know that they have a place in society if we just work to unlock their full potential," she adds.

NASOM alone does not provide for individuals with autism in Malaysia; the work of smaller, private bodies goes into unlocking their potential too.

From parent company **Wisconsin Early Autism Project**, **Early Autism Project (EAP) Malaysia** uses the Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) approach, a type of therapy that focuses on increasing and improving specific behaviours through reinforcement.

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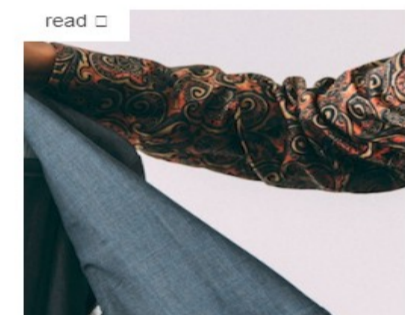
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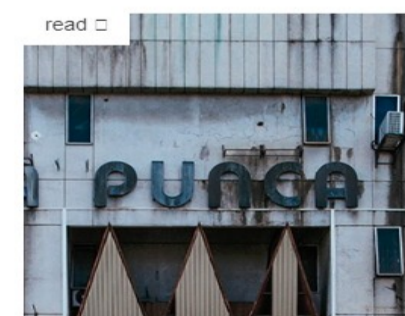
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Behavioural Analysis (ABA) approach, a type of therapy that focuses on increasing and improving specific behaviours through reinforcement.



EAP provides families with a team of therapists under its full therapy programme, offered at its early intervention centre in Bangsar or at your home, or a supervision programme where families hire their own therapists but EAP offers phone consultation.



Not only do EAP's therapists undergo comprehensive and intensive training, but families are trained too.

"Training the family is crucial because at the end of the day, the family is the primary caregiver. So it is necessary to empower the family," director Jochebed Isaacs explains.

To this end, EAP also develops a range of useful video resources for parents to refer to on their [YouTube channel](#).



EAP Malaysia's Jochebed Isaacs grew up in a household where she was encouraged to volunteer and care about others.



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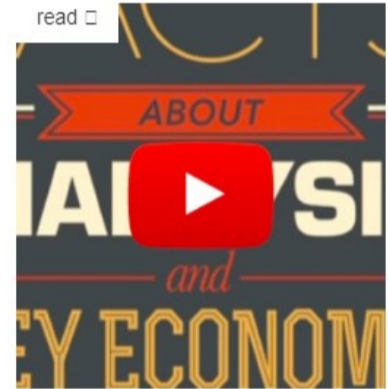
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Also using a highly individualised ABA approach is **Autism Behavioral Centre (ABC)**.

At its early intervention centre in Bangsar, each student gets a room to themselves that allows for more focused, effective learning due to fewer distractions.

Once a student has learnt a skill on their own, they undergo generalisation of that skill, first through peer play with the other children at the centre and then on a supervised school outing.



ABC founder Charlene Samuels studied psychology at HELP University before training as an ABA therapist.

“We don’t just teach the kids skills in isolation. We prepare them for the real world,” founder Charlene Samuels explains.

“We are not an alternative to school. We equip a child with the necessary skills to get into and through school. Because that is the final goal, successful re-socialisation.”

What’s important is to keep integrating the autistic into society. Enabling Academy (EA) was established with the aim of enabling more young people with autism towards gainful and sustainable employment.

The only one of its kind in Malaysia, the academy conducts a three-month employment transition programme at its centre in Damansara Jaya. Trainees are equipped with the relevant soft skills and practical job training that are essential for employability, before being placed in suitable white-collar roles at companies that embrace workplace diversity.



For more successful re-socialisation, students at ABC undergo generalisation of skills learnt.

Feilina, Isaacs and Samuels all believe that the existing statistics for autism in Malaysia are inadequate – there are no official statistics, even – and that there are many undiagnosed individuals in the country.

The diagnostic process too, which currently can take up to two years, needs improving.

But in their time in this line of work, they have seen improvements in the awareness and perception of autism among families and the public.

“The denial and stigma factors have gone down. I have families coming forward now when their child is as young as 21 months,” says Isaacs.

But Feilina does note that this trend is exclusive to urban areas.

“Unfortunately it’s not the same in less urban and non-urban areas, where there are still a lot of myths and misconceptions about autism. And because of this children get diagnosed late and miss out on early intervention.”



EAP wants their students, who range from three years old to 27, to have as normal a life as possible.

There is also the issue that in the wider societal context, places like schools and shopping malls are mostly still not autism-friendly.

Whatever it is, early detection and intervention is the key for children with autism to integrate with society.



“It is important to get an accurate diagnosis early. Intervention techniques are about rewiring the brain and this is easier to do the earlier it is done,” says Isaacs.

“The important thing is to give them the potential to grow. To have as normal a life as possible. At the end of the day, we can change a child’s future.”

Venues:

NASOM Pacific Place Commercial Center, Unit B-2-3, B-3-3, Jalan PJU 1A/4, Ara Damansara, 47301 Petaling Jaya (03 7832 1928/03 7832 5928/03 7831 7928)

Early Autism Project 30, Jalan Keruing, Taman Bandaraya, 59100 Kuala Lumpur (03 2094 0421/013 319 0301)

Autism Behavioral Centre Level 3, Bangunan Bangsaria, 45E, Jalan Maarof, Bangsar, 59100 Kuala Lumpur (03 2201 1107/03 2202 1107)

Enabling Academy Lot 53-61, Jalan SS 22/23, Damansara Jaya, 47400 Petaling Jaya (03 7710 8800)

By Luwita Hana Randhawa

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