

About Oame

How our little champ taught us how to 'tune in' to his world

By Sindi, Oame's Grandmother



It began as it should, with excitement:

By 18 months of age, Oame was showing amazing word recognition capabilities. He could also read — story book after story book, nursery rhymes, etc. This part was plain sailing, a joy. So, when his communication was limited to one word or using his hands as tools to substitute for verbalisation, we assumed it was a milestone unfolding slowly.

We met the problem unveiling with initial denial, and then action:

Oame attended Montessori Play School as a toddler. Though a caring, child-friendly environment, it did not suit our little champ. Bit by bit, his coping mechanisms were tested and problems — to which we had been oblivious — were unveiled.

Increasingly, we received concerning feedback from the school.

- He does not communicate, and he prefers non-verbal forms of communication;
- He alienates himself from the group;
- He does not seem to know how to communicate with other children of the same age;
- He gets frustrated and weeps frequently;
- He has worked out the time when he should be fetched, and gets very upset if the pick-up runs late. He then disengages and wants to have nothing to do with the staff.

Though we were not convinced there was a fundamental problem — thinking how a child can be inappropriately assigned to predetermined categories — we sought expert evaluation. An Occupational Therapist mentioned 'Autism Spectrum.' Not knowing the term, all we heard was 'Autism.' Worried and confused, we turned to the Internet for more information. We became distraught: the descriptions did not match the profile of our young child.

A family member who is a psychologist briefly observed Oame and confirmed the possibility of Autism Spectrum Disorder. We engaged a Clinical Psychologist who, in turn, referred us to a Paediatrician Specialist in Neurology (for which the appointment wait time was three months). She also referred us to Jennifer Southgate for HANDLE® Therapy.

Meeting Jennifer and beginning HANDLE Therapy was an eye opener:

The assessment and feedback sessions with Jennifer were a valuable learning curve as she brilliantly, and in a reassuring manner, guided us through Autism Spectrum Disorder. Oame took to Jennifer like a fish to water, and looked forward to his HANDLE sessions. Jennifer empowered us with tools for appropriate interventions, along with exercises to reinforce therapy at home. Things began to fall into place. By the time that we met with the Neuro Paediatrician, we were mentally and emotionally settled, and better equipped to deal with the diagnosis. We learned that Oame presents with some Autism Spectrum behaviours, but does not exhibit all the signs of classical Autism. The prognosis, we were told, was favourable. The highlight of the Paediatrician's report was that Oame responded very well to HANDLE Therapy with Jennifer, and that he should continue with it.

Mindstretch Preschool set free Oame's inner champ:

When Jennifer mentioned her idea for starting a school, it made sense that our boy and his buddy, also on the Handle programme, would pioneer this journey. Thus, Mindstretch Preschool launched in January 2014. From the beginning, it was designed as a nurturing, therapeutic environment, while remaining keenly focused on learning outcomes, with the ultimate aim of facilitating 'inclusive education.'

We were confident that Oame would flourish, and he did:

- He moved from single words to stringing sentences;
- His social skills developed and he learned to play with other children, share and wait his turn. Unlike before, he could tolerate crowded places such as shopping malls;
- Though a child who likes routine, he learned to tolerate change;
- He advanced according to developmental guidelines and, through early intervention working with Jennifer and the Teachers at Mindstretch, he was ready for school at the appropriate age.

With Jennifer's assistance, we identified the relevant school at the end of Grade R. Oame's acceptance by, and transition to, Oakley House Preparatory School was the greatest achievement and a truly happy experience. He is currently in Grade 2. He loves his school, which is like an extension of Mindstretch.

All credit goes to Jennifer and the Mindstretch Team. Our family shall remain eternally indebted to Mindstretch for their winning formula. A heartfelt THANK YOU: you have revealed the champion in Oame.