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## 2 kindergartens and 5 schools in 7 years

Finally, autistic boy finds one he can fit into

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**R**EMOVE your son from my class, and I'll be able to take in four other children.

That was what one kindergarten teacher once told Madam Koh Joh Ting. The remark hurt her deeply.

At the time, Madam Koh, 39, a freelance writer, didn't know her son, Sean Bay, was autistic. He was only 5.

He is now 11 and has been to two kindergartens and five primary schools in seven years.

Everywhere, certain triggers would send him into shouting fits as he struggled to maintain eye contact, and he would dash out of crowded rooms.

It was only this year, when he started attending the Pathlight School for autistic children, that he showed some improvement.

He is among 31 students from the school whose drawings, poems and essays have been compiled in a book called Beautiful Minds that will be sold to raise funds. (See report below.)

Madam Koh noticed something different about her first-born when he was 2.

She said: "As a toddler, he used to sit in front of the television all day long. Or he would spend the whole day doodling on his white board."

Madam Koh thought he would outgrow his seemingly obsessive behaviour. But when he entered kindergarten, things got worse.

"He would dash out of the classroom while the teacher was in the middle of a lesson. Sometimes, he would throw tantrums and get into a screaming fit.

"He also had a bad habit of grabbing people's spectacles."

Disciplining him was hard.

Whenever he was scolded or hit by his parents, Sean would hit himself.

"He would slap himself and say, 'Sean's a bad boy.'"

Six months later, the teacher told Madam Koh that they could no longer keep Sean in the school.

Said Madam Koh: "It hurt when the teacher told me very bluntly that if I take my son home, she would be able to take in four more children into the class."

When Sean was 6, Madam Koh found another kindergarten that would accept him. But after a while, the same problems arose.

And the school would allow him to attend class for only half a day.



◆ Madam Koh and her son, Sean. In the foreground is a page of his contribution to a book of works by autistic children.

Picture: KUA CHEE SIONG

When Sean was 7, he entered a mainstream primary school.

But within three months, he was advised to leave.

"Once during a music class, Sean suddenly stood up, ran towards some chairs and hid under them," said Madam Koh.

His teachers advised her to take Sean to a doctor.

**That was when Madam Koh confirmed Sean was autistic. "Sean is my first child and the family's first grandchild. I couldn't stop thinking why this had to happen to my boy," she said.**

Sean then entered a school for children with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities.

Within a year, there were problems again and Madam Koh transferred him to a school for the visually handicapped, which also admitted a small group of autistic children.

Then it was back to a special school for children with mild intellectual disabilities.

Said Madam Koh: "Apart from behavioural problems, the curriculum also didn't suit Sean. He was coming home with As all the time."

"The schools catered to kids with an IQ of up to 70. But Sean has an IQ of between 70 and 100."

Early this year, he joined the Pathlight School, which caters to kids aged 6 to 16 who have autism but can cope with the mainstream curriculum.

Sean is now in Primary 3. He can make some eye contact and has stopped running out of classrooms.

Said Madam Koh, who also has a 17-month-old daughter: "I waited a long while before I dared to have another child. But at some point, you have to cope with whatever life has dealt you and move on."

## Book to raise funds for new building

I LIKE to watch all the Harry Potter movies, Sean wrote in the book Beautiful Minds. He also drew detailed pictures of places he likes to go to.

Some 1,000 copies of the 60-page book will be sold by the Pathlight School at \$15 each.

The proceeds will go towards the \$4 million the school needs for a new building.

Since the school was started in 2004, it has been operating out of the site of the

now defunct Chong Li Primary School in Ang Mo Kio.

The new building will also be in Ang Mo Kio, next to Townsville Primary School. Pathlight is due to move in January 2009.

The book, launched yesterday, is the work of 31 students aged 7 to 17.

Said Ms Denise Phua, the school's acting principal and member of parliament for Jalan Besar GRC: "We wanted this project to showcase the

talents of our children, to let the world know that our children are not disabled."

The book launch, held at Starbucks cafe at The Cathay, was accompanied by an exhibition of artwork by 30 autistic children aged 6 to 16.

The exhibition will be on till 8 Oct.

The book is available at the Autism Resource Centre at the Pathlight School.

For more information, please call the school at 6459 9951.