



◆ MP Denise Phua at the Pathlight School, where she's the school board supervisor.

REPORTS AND PICTURE  
Megha Gupta  
meggupta@sph.com.sg

MP Denise Phua, who wants to debunk myths about autistic kids, says of them:

## NOT ALL ARE LIKE RAIN MAN

SOME think all people with autism have special talents, like Dustin Hoffman's character in the movie *Rain Man*, who has an excellent memory.

Well, they're wrong.

It's a myth, said Member of Parliament Denise Phua. And it's just one of the many myths the 48-year-old wants to debunk.

Only one in 10 people who suffer from autism spectrum disorder may have special talents, said Ms Phua, who is also the school board supervisor of the autism schools, Pathlight School and the Singapore Autism School (SAS).

And those with autism need not be anti-social.

They are often keen to make friends, but their disability makes it difficult for them to do so.

### HARMFUL

Speaking to *The New Paper* on Wednesday, the inaugural World Autism Awareness Day, Ms Phua, whose 12-year-old son is autistic, said: "People with autism do not wish to avoid social contact and can lead successful lives with the appropriate education."

She added that the wrong perception can be "harmful" as it may prevent "timely intervention and treatment".

Said Dr Lam Chee Meng, 48, a psychologist at the Pathlight School: "There's much ground to be covered when it comes to autism awareness."

"People often have a narrow view based on what they watch on TV."

Ms Phua added: "What we need is a strategic plan that systematically addresses the needs of people with autism."

This would involve looking after the "pivotal needs" of people with autism, which includes identifying them early and involving the key stakeholders like the families, caregivers and professionals.

Ms Phua said she is happy with the progress made in the last five years.

"There has been a stark increase in the emphasis and financial resources devoted to special education in the last few years."

**On Wednesday, Teochew philanthropic group Ngee Ann Kongsi put \$2 million into Pathlight School's building fund.**

**The school will have a new \$33m home on Ang Mo Kio Avenue 10 by next March.**

The Ministry of Education put up \$26m, and Pathlight raised the rest.

However, Ms Phua feels it will take time for Singapore to develop more resources for people with autism.

"It takes time to train teachers and

therapists. It takes three to five years for a rookie teacher to become proficient," she said.

"So it will take time for the (resource) pool to become bigger and for the services to increase, and get faster, better and cheaper."

While there are still waiting lists for children to enrol in autism schools, she said the situation is "much better than before".

Apart from Pathlight and SAS, St Andrew's Autism Centre also focuses exclusively on autism.

According to the Autism Resource Centre (Singapore) website, there is an estimated 24,000 people with autism in Singapore, of which 5,472 are below 19.

Each year, there are about 216 new cases of children diagnosed with autism here. As the mother of a child with autism and an MP who speaks up for those with special needs, Ms Phua has one wish.

**"I want as many people with autism as possible to work and pay income tax rather than receive assistance from the government and charity bodies."**

## They're keen to make friends

MYTH: People with autism have special talents or "savant skills".

FACT: Only 10 per cent of people with autism may have special talents like the Dustin Hoffman's character (below) in *Rain Man*. Most have "splinter skills" – areas of high performance that are not consistent with other skill levels.



MYTH: People with autism want to avoid social contact.

FACT: They are often keen to make friends, but find it difficult to do so because of their disability.

MYTH: People with autism can't lead successful lives.

FACT: With appropriate education, many children with autism grow up to be successful contributors to society.

MYTH: Bad parenting causes autism.

FACT: Though causes of autism are not known, it is known that parental behaviour does not cause autism.

MYTH: Autism can be cured.

FACT: It's not a disease, so there is no cure. But it can be managed in an autism-friendly environment with good results.

MYTH: Children with autism cannot communicate.

FACT: Many can develop good functional language, and others can develop some type of communication skills like sign language or the use of pictures.

MYTH: Children with autism cannot show affection.

FACT: While sensory stimulation is processed differently in some children with autism, they can and do give affection. But it may require a parent's patience to accept and give love on the child's terms.

Source: Autism Resource Centre (Singapore)