



A little  
kindness  
goes a  
long way

Mr Tony Ong and Ms Jonnansical Boo have learnt to navigate going out as a family by letting their son, 12-year-old son Colin – who is sensitive to sunlight, heat and noise – know what to expect. ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

## April is World Autism Month and schools, employers and public agencies can help by taking a more proactive role in supporting autistic individuals through different life stages



**Amelia Teng**  
Education Correspondent

When he was younger, Colin loved to press lift buttons and see them light up. So his mother, Ms Jonnansical Boo, taught him that he had to ask the people in the lift if he could do the pressing for them.

"But if adults ignored him or went ahead to press the button, it would lead to a meltdown and a lot of crying," she says.

Such incidents happened from time to time when she was out with her son, who has moderate autism.

Now 12, he does not cry as much, but may throw temper tantrums when he experiences sensory overload or sudden changes in plans, says Ms Boo, 45, who runs a com-

pany that specialises in science workshops.

"Sushi is his favourite food, so if we tell him we are going to have sushi and end up eating somewhere else, he will pull a long face and we will never hear the end of it," she adds.

From stomping in public to talking very loudly on the train, Colin and Ms Boo have had their fair share of stares from bystanders.

"Perhaps they think this child is ill-behaved... but I just hope for more patience and understanding from people," says Ms Boo.

Routine situations that seem straightforward for most, like taking public transport and eating out, can be challenging to navigate for those on the autism spectrum, be it children or adults, experts tell *The Straits Times*.

Dr Sim Zi Lin, a psychologist from Autism Resource Centre, says: "They tend to process information and interact with the environment quite differently than neurotypical people."

"So the world they experience can be really confusing or very unpredictable, since much of our environment... is constructed by the majority who are neurotypical."

The needs of different individuals with autism also differs, she adds.

A little kindness from the community and awareness of their struggles can go a long way, say experts and caregivers of people with autism.

### SENSORY OVERLOAD

Dr Sim says: "It's quite common for people on the spectrum to find noisy or crowded environments challenging."

"They have sensory sensitivities. So this means that their body responds to sensory inputs in ways that are quite different from neurotypical (people)."

"They can be over- or under-reactive to visual inputs and sounds, textures, touch, pain and so on. Some may feel very uncomfortable or distressed in certain environments," she adds.

Workplaces can also be another source of stress, as individuals face more challenges in adjusting to working alongside other people, says Ms Tan Sze Wee, executive director of Rainbow Centre, a social service agency that serves persons with disabilities.

"A lot of us are in open offices now. So that means having to manage a lot of social interactions and noise around them. They have to get used to people coming into their space or initiating a conversation by just turning around."

Ms Wendy Chin, 59, whose 22-year-old son Andrew has autism on the moderate to severe end of the spectrum, carries headphones that block out noise and high-pitched sounds when they are out.

"When there's too much noise, like a baby crying or kids screaming, he would request the headphones," she says. "People chattering at a

foodcourt is white noise to us, but can be quite challenging for him."

Ms Boo says her son is sensitive to sunlight and heat, as well as noise. "We used to avoid crowded places like malls when he was younger. Now, we ask him if he's okay with going to places that are crowded. We prepare him for what is ahead."

If the location also offers his favourite foods, he might be more willing to go, she adds.

### DEALING WITH CHANGE

Another difficulty people with autism have is handling change, especially when it is unexpected, say experts.

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**MS JONNANSICAL BOO**, on getting stares from bystanders when her son Colin, who has moderate autism, stomps in public or talks very loudly on the train

Change can be stressful for them as they prefer familiar and predictable routines.

For example, they may insist on sitting at certain preferred spots on the bus or train even if they are taken by someone else, says Mr Sarayanan Mariappa, head of programmes (services for adults) at Autism Association (Singapore).

"In our daily lives, there are often going to be unexpected or unforeseen situations, like forgetting to bring your wallet or ez-link card, or getting lost," says Dr Sim.

"We've even had clients or students who go to a familiar place like the coffee shop or school canteen, but the food that they want to eat is sold out for the day."

In such situations, they may show signs of distress such as pacing, rocking or repetitive questioning.

Ms Tan says changes in a particular route when driving or moving from one place to another can also be anxiety-inducing for some people with autism.

"We've seen that happen when our school buses change routes and that can cause meltdowns. Thankfully, this doesn't happen often. But when it does, we try to inform the parents as soon as we can, so they can prepare the children."

"It's about communicating changes to the children as soon as possible so they understand and can anticipate the changes," she adds.

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## Autism awareness month

# 'His behaviour is not contagious'

FROM C1

### HURDLES IN COMMUNICATION

In addition, people with autism struggle to discern emotions from "non-verbal information like facial expression, tone of voice, body language", says Dr Sim.

This could make social situations harder for them to understand or lead to communication breakdowns and misunderstandings.

For example, people with autism typically understand language in a literal sense, says Dr Sim. "They think that what we say is literally what we mean whereas neuro-typicals tend not to mean what they say... like figurative language or sarcasm."

For people on the spectrum with higher support needs, experts recommend going at a slower pace and remaining calm, and to avoid plying them with information or questions.

Mr Sarayanan says: "You can't blabber on like how you talk to your neurotypical friend. Rather,



you need to speak slower, choose your words and not be too loud."

Allow them more processing time as well, which means waiting for their reaction, he adds.

It is best to approach them from the front because of their need for predictability, says Dr Sim.

Some with autism may communicate better with visual aids or pictures. Dr Sim says: "Instead of talking to them, you can try writing or typing on your phone."

### SOCIAL CHALLENGES

Social cues may not come naturally to individuals with autism, say experts. For instance, they may not be aware of the social etiquette of queueing and may jump ahead, says Mr Sarayanan.

Ms Tan says they may not understand that not every situation is appropriate for initiating conversations, especially with strangers.

"They may just go up to a person

at the hawker centre or on public transport because he or she seems friendly and they want to be his or her friend," she adds.

In addition, they may not be able to control how loud they speak, says Ms Boo.

"When Colin was younger and interested in trains, we would take the new train lines from end to end. He would be talking a lot and very loudly and passengers would stare," she says. "I just told them

that he was very excited."

She adds: "He doesn't understand and know how to control his emotions. Often, he wants to be in control of conversations and topics. If not, he will lose interest or get into a quarrel."

Mr Sia Sin Wei, 35, who has mild autism, says that attending large social events where he knows few people was particularly challenging for him. "Getting started and settling into new communities was

a major challenge for me as I tend to be slow to warm up to new social situations."

He adds that individuals with autism must also find a balance between feeling comfortable and expanding their comfort zone as dealing with people is essential in society.

"It may be easier to socialise based on shared interests," he says, while developing healthy personal coping skills at the same time.

### CALLS FOR MORE EMPATHY

It starts with greater awareness of autism and what the condition entails, say experts and parents of individuals with autism, who also hope for less judgment and more patience from the public.

Mr Sia, a science laboratory assistant in Pathlight School, says: "It would be nice if people treated us with patience and with the willingness to not take our quirks personally. We do have something to offer the community, so people miss out by not looking out for and embracing us."

Ms Chin, who works in the real estate industry, says: "We have come a long way in terms of awareness in Singapore, but you'll still get the occasional person who does not understand or empathise."

"I hope people will have more compassion and try to understand things that are 'alien' to them, instead of assuming or presuming things."

Her son sometimes grunts or dashes several metres from a spot before returning to it, as part of self-stimulating behaviour or to calm and regulate himself.

"It doesn't happen so frequently now but in the past, parents would pull their children away from him while he was walking and singing. I point out to them that his behaviour is not contagious," says Ms Chin. "When we were younger and

learning to cope, it hurt a lot – all the pointing fingers and whispers around us when we went out."

At one point, when her son was about 10, she made a card with a brief description of his condition to hand to strangers. "I wanted the public to be aware that there are children around them who are different. I didn't want to be giving excuses and apologising for his behaviour," she adds.

Dr Sim suggests learning to take the perspective of a person with autism.

"If you come across a person on the spectrum who is flapping his arms or rocking back and forth, just looking like they're in distress... don't be quick to jump to conclusions or judge," she says.

"Try to think why this person is acting that way. Is it because the environment is very noisy or is it because of a communication issue, like the person wants to tell the waiter something, but he's not able to get his attention?"

Ms Tan recommends putting in effort to get to know individuals with autism better.

"Putting the person first – that means the personality, likes, dislikes and interests – helps us to know him or her a little bit deeper, and I do believe that that's the same with all children."

Help kids understand that their peers with autism view the world differently from them and may communicate differently, she adds.

Says Dr Sim: "What we need is a mindset shift and to move towards this idea that it's simply just a different way of being in the world."

"It's a different way of thinking, acting, communicating and interacting with the world. It's not wrong, weird or odd but really everyone interacts differently, and autism is just another way that we are different from one another."

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Ms Wendy Chin (right) with her son Andrew and helper Virginia Faura. He has autism on the moderate to severe end of the spectrum. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM