

LIFE&TIMES **FAMILY**

Reaching in so they reach out

Compassion, patience and dedication are just some of the qualities required to work with autistic children, discovers **Aneeta Sundararaj**

MANOMANEY Muniandy, better known as Mano, has a quick smile and grace about her but remains somewhat reserved and cautious with her words. All this changes when she describes her job as a coordinator at the National Autism Society of Malaysia (Nasom), Titiwangsa and the work she does with the autistic children at the centre.

Everyone at Nasom is busy with the Sunshine September campaign by the Suria KLCC Group to raise funds for Nasom.

Describing her job as a "calling", Mano admits that she wasn't always happy doing it. Nevertheless, there was always something right about heeding the call. Elaborating, this 45-year-old mother of two says: "I've always loved to teach. I am also a Sunday School teacher. But with these children, I see it as something spiritual and I've been helping children with difficulties for 22 years now. I started after Form 5. At the time, it was more to pass the time than anything else. Then, I joined a school where there were children with special needs and became a teacher's aid. This was a multi-disciplinary school — the children weren't only autistic, there were also children with Down syndrome and a lot of others with learning difficulties."

One of the first children Mano had to deal with was a little girl with Down syndrome, named Clara*. Mano didn't know how to handle her in the beginning. "Suddenly, Clara would spit in my face, pinch me and pull my hair. I was like many other people. I wanted to cane her because I was frustrated and didn't understand her. I came to a point where I wanted to give up, I didn't want to continue."

Then, one day, Mano realised that punishing this child wasn't the right thing to do. "I decided that I had to change. These children are innocent and they cannot communicate properly. So, I forced myself to be patient with them. They have so much love in them. You can cane them and they will still come back to you. They will love you no matter what."

Another teacher, Parimalar Devi V. Raman says, today, there are courses and teaching methods to



Part of Parimalar's job as a 'teacher aide' is to accompany the autistic child when they go to mainstream school.

help them manage children with difficulties. When she started her career close to 20 years ago, there were no ready manuals for them.

Still, since then, both women have taken advantage of the many courses that are now available for teachers to gain the requisite training to better manage autistic children.

LOVE AND EFFORT

Today, as a "teacher's aide", Malar accompanies these children when they go to mainstream school. She explains: "We don't interfere with the classes. We sit at the back and when the lesson is over, we will see if the child needs extra help."

Many times, the tasks these children (and their parents) struggle with don't necessarily have to do with their school work. "We make a plan for a year and break it down into small tasks," explains Mano. "The kind of things we help the children with can be simple things such as walking, talking, going to the toilet or even eating."

Take toilet-training, for example. Many of the children will come to Nasom wearing diapers. In an effort to make sure that they learn to use the toilet, the teachers will observe the child and take note of how often the child goes to the toilet to urinate.

"We will start by taking the child to the toilet maybe every five minutes. We will teach them how to control themselves. Slowly, we will increase the time they have to control from 10 minutes to 20 minutes and so on. Sometimes, they go to the toilet and do nothing. But will urinate the moment we take them back.



Manomaney Muniandy sees her job as a 'calling'.

It takes time."

However, none of these efforts will work if the parents are not on board. "If the parents are not interested in helping the child, I won't bother. I am wasting my time toilet training the child," says Malar. "Many times, the parents will say keep the diapers on because they don't have the time to toilet train the child at home. They are too busy and this way is easier. But, if I do the work here and the child is not trained at home, what's the use?"

There are times, however, when the parent sees the transformation in the child and comes on board with what the staff at Nasom are trying to do. A case in point is the story of Jason*.

"He couldn't speak. Upset, his father stayed away from his son," says

Mano. "The mother brought him to us. He was a good-looking boy. Jason never spoke and we tried giving him speech therapy. For months we tried and, yet, he never said a word. He would just watch us. Even when we were eating breakfast. Then, one day, many months later, just like that, he said: 'I want roti canai.'"

Still emotional from narrating this story, Mano adds: "I was so happy to hear him speak that I started to cry. From that time, he started to speak more and more. Soon, Jason's father started to take part in his life and play his role. I really thank God for that."

With some children, the problem isn't just emotional. Malar adds that sometimes these children have sensory problems. She explains: "By this, we mean that they can't feel things.

INTERVENTION PROGRAMME CENTRES

PREVIOUSLY known as Purple Day, this year Suria KLCC, Alamanda and Mesra Mall aim to raise more than RM500,000 in the annual Sunshine September campaign.

The money will be used to set up two intensive intervention programme centres for people with autism in Kajang and Kerteh.

What: Sunshine September campaign

Where: Suria KLCC in Kuala Lumpur, Alamanda in Putrajaya and Mesra Mall in Kerteh, Terengganu.

When: Until Tuesday

They will bite their hand but since they can't feel pain, they continue to do it. Or they are not scared and will run across the road."

For those who want to become teachers of these special children, Mano says that what is required is more than compassion and dedication. She adds: "I see it as a service that I'm doing. This is not something that everyone can do. It's not easy. But I always tell people, come and try. Yes, you need lots of patience but the rewards are amazing."

What are these wonderful rewards?

With a big smile on her face, Mano looks me in the eye and says: "A hug and their love."

*Names have been changed to protect the identities of the children.