

He smiles when being scolded

Gloria Chan meets a seven-year-old boy who can't tell changes in the tone of voice



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Seven-year-old Cedric Gan (above) was inattentive in class and backward in his work. His Primary 1 teacher couldn't understand why he smiled even when she scolded him. She told his mother – and it dawned on Mrs Gan that her son was the same way at home.

Only after Cedric was diagnosed with Auditory Processing Disorder (APD), did she find out that it was because he couldn't differentiate changes in tones of voice and couldn't tell that they were angry.

"Patients with APD have normal hearing but they can't process the information they hear in the same way as others because their ears and brains don't fully coordinate," said Dr Lynne Lim, director of the Centre for Hearing Intervention & Language Development (Child) at the National University Hospital (NUH).

Their IQ is usually normal and they seldom have speech problems.

According to Mrs Gan, however, her son was slow to start talking. When he was five years old, he started speech therapy at KK Women's And Children's Hospital. His speech improved when he went to Primary 1 last year, but it was his odd responses which struck his teacher.

An MOE psychologist referred Cedric to NUH, which started an APD clinic four years ago for adults and children. According to Dr Lim, APD has only recently gained more recognition.

Today, 10 children are referred to the clinic every week for suspected APD, of whom half of them are diagnosed with the condition. About twice as many boys as girls have it.

Cedric was examined by Ms Jenny Loo, a paediatric audiologist, who put him through a full battery of tests. This included letting him listen to tones, words and sentences presented in different listening conditions. "Failure in at least two of these

processes confirms the diagnosis of APD," says Ms Loo.

After Ms Loo confirmed he had APD, Ms Joyce Lew, a speech language therapist, took over. Cedric now attends fortnightly sessions with her.

He is taught ways to overcome his problem, which is that he is easily distracted and has trouble listening if there is other noise.

To overcome this, he is learning to ignore background noise and improve his listening skills – what is known as "speech-in-noise" training. During some of their sessions, she leaves the radio on deliberately while she works with him.

To help him make out the different tones and pitches in sounds, she suggested that he learn to play a musical instrument. He has since started on the violin.

His schoolteacher was also told of his condition. To help him, he is seated in the front of the class, and away from the windows and doors so that he is not distracted by outside noise. His teacher also tries not to have him sit under the fan so he doesn't hear the distracting sound.

This all helps. But learning Chinese is a still struggle because he cannot make out the four different tones. He has also fallen behind in the other subjects because of his slowness in keeping up with what is being said.

So as an additional help, Cedric is in a learning support programme in school, which aims to help him and other slower learners catch up with the rest of the class.

As with any medical condition, early intervention is crucial for a better outcome for the child. If APD is diagnosed early, children can be taught management skills to help them cope better in school.

"Younger brains are more responsive to treatment and better outcomes from therapy can be expected," says Ms Lew.

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