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A Much-needed Helping Hand: Nurture Pods Pte Ltd

Nurture Pods Pte Ltd provides a range of comprehensive intervention services for children with special learning needs. Aimed at helping children between the ages of three and 12 years of age, its programmes cater to different abilities and levels of functioning, and are delivered in three settings – home, school and the Centre for Child Development and Early Intervention.

The home intervention programmes are based on the principles of applied behavioural analysis (ABA) that has extensive research evidence in helping children with special needs develop important skills. It is an

intensive, one-to-one intervention that provides each child with individualised attention, with the potential to accelerate learning as well as promote the rapid development of skills. Nurture Pods is proud to be the first in Asia Pacific, including Singapore, to have its ABA programme vetted by the Geneva Centre for Autism – a recognised international leader in the development and delivery of clinical intervention services and training.

In a private setting, Nurture Pods is also the first organisation in Singapore to be endorsed by Dr Gary Mesibov in the TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication-handicapped Children) programme. Professor Mesibov is a world-renowned expert in autism.

Nurture Pods' school support programmes assist children with mild special needs to assimilate into the mainstream education environment, and feature the benefits of inclusive education. The Centre for Child Development and Early Intervention, which is managed by Nurture Pods, provides both an individual and group learning environment, and aims to help children with special needs achieve independence, become an all-rounded individual and develop essential skills to lead a good quality of life. It also provides academic learning and helps special needs children access the national school curriculum.

The intervention techniques used are evidence-based and internationally regarded as being the best practices in the field for efficacy. Intervention programmes at Nurture Pods are highly individualised to meet the needs of all the children under its care, and work towards developing them in the areas of behaviour management, cognition, social, language and communication, motor skills and coordination. Nurture Pods' dedicated team is well-versed in the best practices for children with special needs. The centre also counts on the support of renowned international consultants who continually help to ensure that the intervention programmes are effective and aligned with the latest research.

Get 'em early

A photo at a bus-stop panel shows a group of people of varying ages, genders and attires – and a challenge to identify the person suffering from mental illness. A community campaign on TV urges the public to give ex-offenders a second chance at life. In recent years, Singapore has marked the World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD) publicly and visibly; for example, 2012 saw several Singapore landmarks such as Ion Orchard, Singapore Flyer and Sheares Bridge bathed in iridescent blue light when darkness fell, as part of WAAD's "Light it up Blue" project on April 2. Concerts, group walks, fund-raisers and other activities also marked WAAD. It seems that slowly but surely, Singapore is casting off its conservative

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practice to keep under wraps the unusual, unfamiliar or unpleasant, and displaying a more open and accepting approach as it moves ahead as one people to strive for the common good.

Despite efforts by the United Nations (UN) to raise awareness of autism since 2007, when the UN General Assembly passed the Resolution to create WAAD, not all countries, or stakeholders including parents, are quick to jump on the bandwagon. This despite the fact that “the rate of autism in all regions of the world is high and it has a tremendous impact on children, their families, communities and societies,” highlighted UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in his 2012 speech to mark WAAD. Globally, autism, which also encompasses autism spectrum disorder (ASD), is estimated to affect one in every 167 people. In Singapore, the figure is estimated to affect 30,000 people and growing, as medical professionals, teachers and parents become more aware of the behaviours associated with autism.

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that manifests itself during the first three years of life. Research shows that “early interventions can help persons with autistic conditions to achieve significant gains in their abilities,” said Mr Ban.¹ In 2010, Singapore’s Ministry of Health had released clinical practice guidelines on Autism Spectrum Disorders in Pre-school Children, stating that “Early identification provides opportunity for early referral and intervention, so that the child with ASD may have improved functioning in later life.”²

“Custom-designed” to fit

For a person to be given a diagnosis of autism, he must present a triad of clinical characteristics – social impairment, communication impairment, and impairment in flexibility of thinking – as well as other typically-associated behaviours. Because autism shows up differently in each person, treatments and therapies should ideally be tailored for him at a particular stage of development, and constantly adjusted to keep pace with further developmental changes. Given that many children with autism are enrolled in a national programme which features group learning, an individualised programme is not always available.

In addition to participating in national programmes, some parents are turning to private therapists to provide one-to-one sessions with their children, while others have extended the one-to-one sessions by having the therapists “shadow” their children to get a first-hand view of their behaviour in different contexts. The close monitoring and first-hand observation provides timely and accurate feedback for the therapist, thus helping in the planning and adjusting of the treatment to optimise learning the child’s learning.

As with all consumers, the parents who engage private therapists expect to see positive returns on their investments – in this case, evidence of enhanced development in their children. Recent research from a project by the UOB-SMU Alliance Enterprise Institute (AEI) shows that the parents also expect regular progress reports as well as advice on how to reinforce the learning when the children are at home.

A nurturing hand

When Nurture Pods’ founders Alex Liao and Soh Yong Hao approached the UOB-SMU AEI to participate in its flagship SME Consulting Programme, they were looking for “useful strategies on how to market our company... how to make more people know about Nurture Pods’ quality and unique propositions,” said Mr Liao. They liked the “good ideas” that the student-consulting team provided, but had hoped for “more powerful ideas to reach out to more clients in a faster time”.

One of the benefits of the Consulting Programme is the use of methodological and scientific approaches to address business issues. In this case, “the statistics generated was a big help,” shared Mr Liao. “They allowed us to identify the parents’ key concerns for early intervention in Singapore. However, more

¹ United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s speech on World Autism Awareness Day, 2012

² [www.moh.gov.sg/content/dam/moh_web/HPP/Doctors/cpg_medical/current/2010/ASD%20CPG\(Card\).pdf](http://www.moh.gov.sg/content/dam/moh_web/HPP/Doctors/cpg_medical/current/2010/ASD%20CPG(Card).pdf)

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information about our competitors' pricing was not provided." Nonetheless, "my expectations are generally met," he said.

For the three student-consultants, the project provided an opportunity to "understand how theory matches up with practice and what the challenges facing a business are". Translating their marketing knowledge and research methodology knowhow to practical usage, they found the experience "rewarding and fulfilling". Even though they had faced challenges in getting the interviewees and survey respondents, they were able to tap on their personal networks to obtain the data, and "put forward feasible solutions" for the SME client.

They credited Project Advisor Chua Swee Kiat as being "integral to our success". In particular, they appreciated his "vast experience" and "unique perspectives" as he helped them clarify complex issues and challenged their recommendations so that they could come up with a stronger proposal.

According to Mr Chua, there was "additional learning" for the student-consultants due to Nurture Pods' business of providing educational services to children with special needs. "It was necessary to respect certain sensitivities that might be felt by the SME, its clients and the wider community of parents of special needs children." He complimented the team for recognising this requirement at the onset, and for adapting their approach accordingly. "This considered approach ultimately benefited the SME as it yielded viable and practical solutions that importantly took into account the sensitive nature of the SME's business."

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