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A simple high five or a hug is how this occupational therapist measures her success

She shares how she builds trust and helps students with disabilities reach their potential through everyday interactions



In Rainbow Centre's occupational therapy room, Ms Lim Yu Jie helps students improve their ability in daily tasks through play-based activities. PHOTO: CAROLINE CHIA

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The air at the Housing Board playground was filled with the laughter of kids having fun.

But from the corner of her eye, then eight-year-old Lim Yu Jie noticed a little girl quietly in her wheelchair with her older sister. No one else paid any attention to her.

“I think when I first saw her, I was quite scared,” admits Ms Lim, now 27. “I was very young, and it was my first time interacting with a person with disabilities.”

She didn’t know what disabilities her neighbour had, but remembers that she couldn’t speak. “I really wanted to try to bring her into our play group but I didn’t know what to do,” she says.

She was also afraid of accidentally hurting her neighbour. So she started small – greeting the girl whenever she saw her around the estate.

“She didn’t respond to me, but it was okay. I kept doing it because I wanted her to feel welcome.”

Power of patience

This is the same approach she uses today to build rapport with students with disabilities under her care as an assistant senior occupational therapist at Rainbow Centre, where she has been working for close to four years.

Rainbow Centre is a social service agency that provides a range of services for persons with disabilities, including three special education schools that serve 908 students. Ms Lim currently oversees about 70 students in the senior cohort, aged 15 to 18.

Her students typically have moderate to severe disabilities, with difficulty communicating verbally and socialising.

Gaining their trust can take about six months of near-daily interactions – just five minutes of popping into their classrooms to say hi, or greeting them when their parents drop them off at Rainbow Centre Margaret Drive School in the morning.



Success for occupational therapist Lim Yu Jie comes in simple forms, like a hug from younger students or a high five from older ones. PHOTO: CAROLINE CHIA

She also tries to learn more about their preferences and interests through their families, teachers, and even external partners like the students' private therapists or medical teams.

"These day-to-day small efforts eventually lead to the rapport and connection built with them," she explains. Without trust, even the best-planned strategies may not be effective.

Success comes in simple forms – like when younger students give her a hug, or older ones return her high five. "Or when I call their name, and they notice me and smile," shares Ms Lim.

"Those are the joyful moments because I feel like I've managed to make them feel comfortable with me," she says. "That's when my work can really start, and I can try to push them to their potential."

As an occupational therapist, Ms Lim's role includes helping students improve their ability in daily tasks like eating, to enhancing classroom focus and social skills.

“We say that as occupational therapists we do everything,” she laughs. “Why? Because the foundation of it is functional needs – that means anything that could be meaningful to someone in their day-to-day routines.”

Passion and purpose

With such wide-ranging responsibilities, Ms Lim relies on close collaboration with her team of allied health professionals from Rainbow Centre, including psychologists, physiotherapists, and speech language therapists.

Each morning, they gather to ensure every student gets the support they need.

“We assess and divide our time carefully,” she explains, to make sure no student is left unsupported. For complex cases, Ms Lim holds joint sessions with her colleagues to provide more comprehensive care.

She’s no stranger to this collaborative spirit, having experienced it firsthand during a six-month internship at the centre while pursuing her diploma in childhood psychology at Ngee Ann Polytechnic.

As an intern in the early intervention unit at Rainbow Centre, she worked alongside and learned from therapists, teachers and external partners.

The experience led her to take up a Rainbow Centre study award, pursuing occupational therapy at Singapore Institute of Technology with a three-year bond at the centre.

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Her work demands constant adaptation. “There’s no one-size-fits-all solution, because the situation working with students and their families is so dynamic; it’s like problem-solving every day,” she says.

“Even for the strategies we roll out, things can change. So what can we do next, how can we review and try to refine it?”

“It’s exciting but also nerve-racking at times.”

Mentorship provides crucial support, and has shaped her growth. “My co-workers are always ready to help, and each of us – no matter our position – are tagged to a mentor so we can continue developing as professionals.”

Does she ever think about that eight-year-old girl at the playground, armed now with years of experience?

“Once I started having more knowledge of neurodivergent individuals and what atypical development looks like, I really started to feel a sense of regret (that she could not have been more helpful with her childhood neighbour),” she admits.

But regret is also a catalyst for change.

While Singapore has made strides in disability awareness, Ms Lim sees familiar hesitation in public spaces. “People know that someone may have disabilities and require more support, but you can tell from their body language that they don’t know what to do.”

It’s why she believes in the power of small but purposeful actions, such as helping families learn how to better support their children. To Ms Lim, each interaction with her students, each tiny breakthrough, is another step towards the inclusive society she envisions.

“I don’t necessarily have to be in the advocacy team to bring about more awareness,” she says. “There’s so much I can do just being in the social service sector.”

Making progress together

When 11-year-old Aryan first started schooling at Rainbow Centre four years ago, he struggled with communicating and participating in class.

He was diagnosed with speech delay when he was three years old, his mother Rashinah Umat, 54, shares.

Today, Aryan “understands and even tells us what he wants”, says the homemaker. He is also learning to better manage his emotions.

The transformation was partly due to the close collaboration between his occupational therapist Lim Yu Jie, his teacher Raja Rajeshwari and his parents.

Through careful observation and teamwork, they discovered that sensory regulation was key to helping Aryan manage his emotions. A body sock, pressure massage, or simply sipping cold water can help calm him down.

“Ever since (Ms Lim and Ms Rajeshwari helped us) understand Aryan’s progress and needs, we noticed a lot of improvements from him,” says Mdm Rashinah.

They coached the family through teleconsultations and in-person sessions, ensuring support at home and at school.

Supporting families

This collaborative approach is crucial, says Ms Rajeshwari, as children with disabilities often have a mix of academic, social, emotional and physical needs that require more than one type of intervention.

“Parents or caregivers are integral members of the team,” she says, “because they provide important context about the child’s behaviour, preferences, and needs in different settings.”

Open communication ensures that the strategies learnt in school are reinforced at home, helping families feel more confident in supporting their child, adds Ms Rajeshwari, 42.

The true test came during the family’s umrah, or minor pilgrimage, to Mecca in 2023.

“We were extremely worried and anxious,” recalls Mdm Rashinah. Would the plane’s engine noise, having to sit for over 10 hours, and potential turbulence overwhelm him?

The strategies they had practised proved invaluable. “Thankfully, it worked and we were very happy and emotional,” she says, as Aryan remained in a calm state on the journey to and from Mecca.

He now initiates these coping strategies himself too. “That’s the highest level of regulation – self-regulation,” Ms Lim says with pride.

For his parents, the progress means everything.

“There’s nothing more (joyful than seeing) Aryan’s happiness and excitement on his face learning new, adventurous things in school,” says Mdm Rashinah, “and for him to grow up as an independent boy.”

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