

Parents help teen cope with autism

They would act out scenarios to teach her how to respond in social situations

Felicia Choo

Growing up, Ms Anastasia Sabrina Zuraimi knew she was not like “normal” children.

She did not start speaking until she was 4½ years old, and had difficulty making eye contact with people and socialising with her peers.

Born prematurely at 27 weeks and weighing just 900g, Ms Anastasia has autism – a condition that affects social interaction and communication, and is characterised by repetitive behaviour. This lifelong condition ranges from mild to severe, and has no known cause or cure.

“To develop that social sensitivity is very difficult, but I learnt the most from my parents because they are very open,” said the third-year student at Millennia Institute, which has a three-year programme leading to the A levels.

Ms Anastasia, 18, and her mother, Dr Elly Sabrina Ismail, 47, will be giving a talk on Saturday at the Family Fair for Autism, targeted at families and people with autism.

Organised by the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, which is a partnership between Nanyang Technological University and Imperial College London, the event ties in with World Autism Awareness Day today.

One in 150 children here has autism, a statistic higher than the World Health Organisation’s global average figure of one in 160.

Dr Elly, a general practitioner, said caring for her daughter, whose autism was discovered when she was 2½ years old, is a work in progress. To help Ms Anastasia be-



come more communicative and to improve her social skills, Dr Elly and her husband, who is also a GP, spent around \$10,000 a month on speech, occupational therapy and educational programmes, as well as music and sports classes.

Other than the music lessons, these programmes ceased when Ms Anastasia was in Secondary 2 and had made vast improvements.

Her parents also help her by acting

out situations with her, for example, how to respond appropriately when a person falls down. “We all think social skills come naturally... but we have to break it down as if it’s a maths problem (for her),” said Dr Elly.

In the past, Ms Anastasia, who admitted she “didn’t have a filter”, would have told the injured person to go to the hospital, but now she would ask if they are okay.

She has a 17-year-old brother who

is not autistic.

In Singapore, organisations such as the Autism Association run programmes to coach autistic people and help them source services, while the Autism Resource Centre has placed and supported nearly 200 autistic adults in jobs since 2012.

With caring for autistic people often extending from childhood to adulthood, caregivers should be mindful of their own health and cel-

brate the small victories, said Ms Teo Ginnyueh, a principal medical social worker at the Department of Developmental Psychiatry (Adult Neurodevelopmental Service) at the Institute of Mental Health.

“Success will be different for every individual, it can range from learning to indicate the need to go to the toilet to passing the O levels. Whatever it may be, celebrating it gives the caregiver and individual a

QUIRKY

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MS ANASTASIA SABRINA ZURAIMI

Ms Anastasia Sabrina Zuraimi and her mother, Dr Elly Sabrina Ismail, will be giving a talk this Saturday at the Family Fair for Autism.

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sense of achievement,” she said.

Ms Anastasia is not letting her condition hold her back. She hopes to study literature at university and become a lawyer. “Autism doesn’t define me... I have no control over it, so why should I be ashamed of it? It’s not an illness... People with autism – they’re just like you and me, but they’re much more quirky.”

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