WHO WILL CARE FOR BRENDON?

BRENDON Rong, 19, smiles as he swims at Bedok (swimming Pool (above)). The sessions are organized by the Bedok South day activity centre run by the St Andrew’s Autism Centre. Its sports secretary Sig Yin Lin, 27, believes water therapy helps children like Brendan who have auditory problems. He often covers his ears as ordinary sounds can seem very loud to him. The sound of water has a calming effect.

Brendon is part of the pre-vocational group that receives job training such as placing stickers onto egg trays (left, top). Guiding them is teacher-therapist Kelvin Ong, 44.

Other activities in morning and afternoon sessions include outings to hawker centres, the teaching of daily living skills, drawing – Brendon draws an army tank (left, centre) when asked to draw something that makes him happy – dance therapy (left, Nofem), and clearing a makeshift obstacle course (right).

About his future, his mother, Madam Pearl Ye, says: “We have explained to our daughter that she is his only sibling and that we hope she will care for him. While she is agreeable to doing this, we still wish for a residential home so that Brendon will not have to depend on his sister.”

Daily life a struggle with Asperger’s

Sufferers have hard
time fitting into
mainstream life

THEY look just like any other bunch of pals enjoying a restaurant meal together, until a metal cutlery container falls off the table and clatters to the floor.
The noise brings conversation to an abrupt halt and all eyes turn to the table in a state of stunned silence – eyes shut, fists clenched.

Ten seconds or so slowly tick by before the silence is broken by one of them asking the girl sitting closest to the fallen container if she is all right.

All these present have Asperger’s Syndrome, a mild form of autism, and met online last year via Young Planet, a United States-based autism website, which has almost 50,000 members worldwide including about a dozen Singaporeans.

After spending time chatting online and getting to know one another, they met for the first time at a Chinatown mall restaurant in November. And, since then, they have had another gathering, with a third in the pipeline.

The group is testimony to the fact that people with Asperger’s Syndrome are able to lead fairly normal lives – most attend mainstream schools and hold down regular jobs.

They are not easy to distinguish from everyday people because, although they have classic autism attributes such as communication, social and behavioural problems, they have them in a milder form.

But – as their get-together showed – they are particularly vulnerable to what is known as sensory overload.

Sensory stimuli such as light, sound and touch impact them more acutely than others. And, if there is too much sensory stimulus, their brains can go into overdrive.

Ronald (not his real name) has been diagnosed with a combination of Asperger’s and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. The 19-year-old, now enrolled in a local junior college, has slowly learnt to control his tendency to seek external stimulation but this was not always the case.

“When I was younger, I used to be very sensitive to these stimulators. I would freak out and have a meltdown if I was in a place that was too crowded or too loud,” he says.

“I could end up shouting and slapping my arms until someone restrained me because I had no control over my own body.”

It does not come as a shock to discover that, for many Asperger’s Syndrome sufferers, daily life is a struggle.

Edward (not his real name), 27, one of those at the gathering, admits to taking a long time to learn things that come natural

SAVANT SYNDROME

THE Hollywood hit Rain Man starring Dustin Hoffman as a mathematical genius with autism has a lot to answer for.

The movie has created the popular misconception that many people with autism are hyper-talented.

In reality, less than 10 per cent of those with Autism spectrum disorder have what is called the Savant Syndrome, says Dr Jill Taylor, St Andrew’s Autism Centre’s director of client services.

This syndrome refers to an exceptional skill or gift in a specific area such as mathematics.

This percentage of talented autistics is matched in the general population, but those with autism tend to have especially pronounced talents because they are often not capable of doing normal tasks like an ordinary person.

At St Andrew’s Day Activity Centre, there are two individuals with a particular knack for calendar calculations, says Dr Taylor.

William, second, they are able calculate the day of the week if they are given any date in history.

“They are not very useful because it’s not like they can find a job with it, but it’s still interesting because most people don’t have it,” admits Dr Taylor.