WHO WILL CARE FOR GAVIN?

GAVIN Heng (right), 25, who has autism, interacts with Ms Mak Mei Quan (centre), 38, who has an intellectual disability but not autism, as they wait outside a supermarket after buying groceries for a cooking lesson. With them is Mr Chan Bor Siong, 23, who also has autism. They all attend The Christian Outreach to the Handicapped (COH) day activity centre, where staff say they have seen real benefits from integrating those with different disabilities.

Ms Rosalind Ho, 58, a COH programme staff member with six years of experience in special needs care, has seen the positive impact, especially in the area of accepting change. She cites an example of a cancelled swimming session where some clients with autism got worked up because their routine was disrupted. Ms Ho pointed to those with other disabilities, saying: “You’re not the only ones not going, there are also your friends... and they are willing to do other things.”

Now they are open to their surroundings more,” says Ms Ho. “Not so inward-looking.”

The charity runs two day activity centres for people with different intellectual disabilities aged from 16 to 55. Out of the 88 clients served at its centres in Toa Payoh and Tampines, 24 have autism.

Located in a void deck within the Toa Payoh estate, the centre has programmes that focus on teaching clients skills for living independently and for living in a community.

About Gavin’s future, his mother Madam Yu Yueh Shia, 60, says:

“Old people have old folk’s home, but right now, there’s nothing to see people with autism into old age. I hope that there will be an organisation that can house him, where he can learn and play. On weekends, his two younger brothers can take him out.”

Trying to find help is not easy

FROM PAGE D7

son’s face, such as an earring, and focus on that. It took years of practice before I finally learnt to look a person in the eye.”

While skills such as these can be picked up over time, being thrown into new situations such as moving from primary to secondary school can often leave them traumatised.

“I had a hard time adjusting after I left secondary school and went to polytechnic. I could not get used to the new routines that were very different from my previous school,” says 24-year-old Timmy (not his real name).

“It was also very difficult for me to make friends because I did not know how to start conversations or find a common topic with my new classmates.”

The predicament of male Asperger’s Syndrome sufferers can be particularly harrowing given that they often have to do national service if their condition is not deemed severe.

“I foresaw myself needing some counselling or help with assimilation when I go into the army next year,” says Jack (not his real name), 18.

Now in his second year in junior college, he understandably worries about his impending enlistment, acknowledging that it will be a rough environment for him and one where he expects he may be “terribly traumatised”.

While his teachers have always known about his condition and have helped him cope at school, Jack is concerned that NS might be an altogether different ball game.

But, for those in such situations, trying to find help is not easy.

Most counsellors specialising in autism deal mainly with children, so Jack’s only option is to approach general psychologists who deal with a range of mental disorders. He would like to have a counsellor or therapist who specialises in autism, so they could “understand us better”.

The downsides for not being able to get the right sort of help when on the cusp of entering a new environment can be disastrous.

“New environments, especially one as unforgiving as national service, can put them at risk of being bullied,” says Dr Jill Taylor, director of client services at St Andrew’s Autism Centre.

“And, if they are unable to get the necessary help to guide them through, this could lead to depression or even suicide.”

Unlike those with autism who may not fully understand their condition, those with Asperger’s usually have a sense of self-awareness that can put them at a higher risk of problems like depression.

“They are usually part of mainstream society and for them it feels like they are almost able to be ‘normal’ and fit in, yet at the same time they still have problems that hold them back,” says Dr Taylor, who has a PhD in adult autism.

“And while they are aware of what is wrong, without help, they do not know how to fix it.”

Most experts agree that Singapore lacks services geared towards those with a milder form of autism.

“There are pockets of good expertise, but it is not broad enough at the moment,” says Dr Taylor. “There is more commitment from the Government to special needs in recent years, but I think it will take a while for us to get to an ideal situation.”

Meanwhile, Ronald and others rely on friends they met online for support.

Standing at City Hall MRT station waiting for his friends to arrive, he cuts an awkward figure with his feet pointing in different directions and his arms sticking out at awkward angles.

Edmund, who is standing beside him, carefully moves Ronald’s arms and gently tells him to turn his feet in and relax his arms.

Ronald narrows his eyes in concentration as he tries to follow the instructions he knows he has to obey if he is to be fully accepted into everyday life.