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The Children's Institute: A One-of-a-kind Special Education

Category: [Academics](#) Michael Yu



My family and I relocated to Hong Kong in search of a comprehensive special education for my six-year-old son's needs. My son, Timmy, is suspected of having sensory processing disorder (SPD), a neurological condition that hinders his learning ability because he doesn't manage sensory inputs the way most people can. He therefore requires care and attention that "regular" schools can't provide.

Although he received good education and therapy in the Philippines, we thought we could give him a better chance at overcoming his condition if we could place him in a learning environment that was tailored to his needs. We considered a few special needs schools and finally settled on The Children's Institute, a special needs school in Kennedy Town.

We were lucky to place him quickly. When we relocated, there was an available slot at TCI and as the school had a rolling admissions policy, we decided to go for it. As most parents know, school slots – whether in a regular or special education needs school – are extremely limited. But apart from their rolling admissions policy, a number of other factors convinced us TCI was the best fit for Timmy.

Teaching Style

TCI uses Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), a scientific method that promotes behavioral change by using positive reinforcement. The ABA system breaks down tasks into smaller chunks for children to learn how to cope with complex tasks. For example, we think nothing of washing our hands. But the act actually consists of a whole series of tasks: turning the water on, wetting the hands, applying soap, rubbing hands, rinsing, turning the water off, and drying the hands. For a special needs child, learning may be difficult if it's not taken step-by-step. To encourage proper behavior, whenever a child executes tasks correctly, he or she is rewarded with physical rewards such as hugs or high fives and even treats like earning extra time to play.

TCI's director Dr. Jeremy Greenberg explained that each student's needs are assessed individually rather than following a one-size-fits-all template. "We need to make decisions regarding a child's education based on what we see, not on what we think," he said.

The students spend their days in one-to-one instruction with ABA-trained teachers who cater to each child's special needs and learning styles. Their individual education plans are created by behavior analysts who are either working towards or are already certified by the [Behavior Analyst Certification Board](#).

Before Timmy started at TCI a little more than a year ago, it took him a long time to finish a meal because he'd store food in his mouth without swallowing. Through a series of exercises, he is now able to eat at a relatively quicker pace. It's a painfully slow process, but the improvement we've seen in a year's time is encouraging.

"In some cases, progress isn't quite as much as what parents would hope for. However, progress is never linear, even with typically

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developing kids," reassured Greenberg. "[It's] like the Hang Seng index – sometimes it's up, sometimes it's down, but if you step back and look, it's steadily moving up."

Inclusion Program

TCI has a partnership with the Harbour School, a "regular" international school. A student who is deemed ready is gradually integrated into Harbour School classes, something that has already been achieved several times. Greenberg stresses that TCI promotes inclusion, so their students are not referred as TCI students, but rather as "Harbour School kids with TCI services".

TCI's culture of inclusion began with the school's founders, who themselves are parents of special needs children. "The founders of this school were ahead of their time. The culture of our organization is inclusive and it has been from Day One," Greenberg said.

It's also one of the major reasons we thought TCI would be a good fit. The school's unique roots seemed like a progression that made sense and we hope Timmy can seamlessly progress from learning basic social skills at TCI to learning with other children at Harbour School. Our wish is for Timmy to learn enough to become independent and self-sufficient.

Other special needs schools have similarly successful inclusion programs, such as the ESF-affiliated [Jockey Club Sarah Roe School](#). JCSRS has an inclusion program with partner schools like Kowloon Junior, Beacon Hill Peak, KGV and West Island Schools.

Not for Everyone

ABA as a teaching method has its share of critics who argue that ABA is only effective when a significant amount of time has been invested, something some families do not have the luxury to do. And if not implemented properly, ABA may inadvertently cause "robotic behavior" in children. You can find a more detailed list of pros and cons from this article on [healthcentral.com](#).

Another major hurdle is the cost of TCI services. At more than HK\$30,000 per month, TCI's tuition is significantly higher than other regular and special needs schools. With one-to-one education by trained teachers, the price is understandable but still out of reach for many families.

TCI is also not equipped to treat children with physical limitations such as visual or hearing impairment. The teachers are not trained and the facilities were not built to address these types of special needs. Such needs can be addressed by other schools in Hong Kong, such as the Ebenezer School and Home for the Visually Impaired.

In the end, every special needs case is different. Parents, doctors, and therapists need to work together to determine what the best fit is for the child. You can find more information on special needs education in Hong Kong from [GeoSchools](#).

What's Next?

Relocation is stressful enough on its own. Having to relocate with special needs children, who oftentimes do not take well to abrupt and significant change, can magnify that stress. But after a little more than a year, we are satisfied with the support TCI gave Timmy. His vocabulary has increased, he is more aware of what is going on around him, and he has shown improvement in his self-awareness and independence.

There are definitely other good special needs schools but the right mix of location, support structure, and timing made TCI the ideal choice for our family.

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About the Author



Michael Yu

There is the helicopter parent, the negligent parent, and then there's Michael Yu. A doting father one minute, who transforms into Homer Simpson the next. His writing on parenting reflects themes ranging from the humorous to the heartwarming. Whichever the case, though, he always aims to entertain parents of all ages.

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