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New programme to help caregivers manage autistic children



Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim, Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Social and Family Development and Education, speaking at the launch of the Family Empowerment Programme at Rainbow Centre on March 26, 2018. ST PHOTO: KHALID BABA

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SINGAPORE - For Madam Jorah Mahmud, managing her teenage son's behaviour is a daily challenge.

Ansari, 18, has autism and frequently displays aggressive behaviour. Madam Jorah, 53, is afraid of taking him out of the house as he can unpredictably attack people around him. He once even bit her on the eye, she said.

"As a mother, I know he doesn't understand, and that he is frustrated at not being able to express himself," said the single mother who works as a bus warden at Rainbow Centre, a volunteer organisation, and a canteen helper at a primary school. She is a mother of two, and her elder daughter Siti Zaharah, 19, helps to take care of Ansari.

Ansari often throws things at home, sometimes injuring himself in the process. He has even smashed a glass window.

Another parent, Mr Moses Poon, 50, faces similar difficulties with his 16-year-old son Joe. Due to Joe's hyperactivity, Mr Poon has to keep a close watch on him.

"It requires a lot of energy and stamina," Mr Poon said. The single father quit his job six years ago to become a full-time caregiver to Joe. He also sold their flat and moved to a smaller unit.

The two families are among seven who are beneficiaries of Rainbow Centre's new initiative, the Family Empowerment Programme (FEP), which aims to help parents better manage their autistic children's challenging behaviour.

Rainbow Centre helps individuals with developmental disabilities through services such as education and training programmes.

The FEP team is made up of three specialists - a speech language therapist, an occupational therapist and a psychologist. They visit families to understand their lifestyle outside of school and to coach parents on how to interpret and respond to their children's behaviour in real-time situations.

The programme consists of 10 sessions over six to eight weeks, and the duration of each session depends on the needs of the family.

It targets autistic children and youth aged 19 months to 18 years old.

Now at its pilot stage, the programme charges as low as \$50 for all 10 sessions, based on means-testing. It gives priority to children enrolled in other services at Rainbow Centre.

This is the first of Rainbow Centre's programmes to have specialists regularly visit the homes of families to provide specialised help. It is highly targeted and tailored to the needs of each family and child.

The centre plans to help 75 families by the end of this year.

At the launch of the programme on Monday (March 26), Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim, Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Social and Family Development and Education, said: "As we forge ahead to make Singapore a more caring and inclusive society, the Government, voluntary welfare organisations like Rainbow Centre, and

the wider community will have to come together to play our part in supporting caregivers of children with developmental needs."

The programme is funded by Koo's Giving Charitable Foundation, an organisation based in Hong Kong that has helped 250 families there. The foundation has donated more than \$400,000 to the Family Empowerment Programme.

Madam Jorah said: "I am grateful for the support I am receiving. I hope that through this programme, Ansari can become more disciplined in the home environment, and calmer like he is in school."

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