

Auntie Gina's School

By Kari Dunn Buron

In 1990, Teresina Sieunarine started the Autistic Society of Trinidad and Tobago (TT). Through the efforts of a handful of parents, the organization has provided training and support to hundreds of people throughout both islands. I, along with my friend and colleague, Joyce Santo, have been fortunate enough to have been a part of this effort.

Each year, during our spring break from teaching, Joyce and I have traveled to TT to give short classes including overviews of autism spectrum disorders, using visually structured teaching strategies, communication support, using proactive strategies to teach new behavioral skills, etc. Throughout these many years, we have made life long friends and witnessed a growing interest in special education throughout the country.

Last spring I retired from my public school teaching career which made it possible for me to spend an extended amount of time in TT and to travel to more remote areas of the



(Left to right starting in back), Junior, Jervan, Steve and Shaniese; (standing middle) Nicholas and Jamila; (front) Petal, Shewyn and Akeem

country. Gina Mohammed is a parent of an adult son with autism. She has been attending our workshops since my first visit 17 years ago. Gina lives in Point Fortin, a small community in the southern section of Trinidad. In 2005, Gina began to organize a school for her son and other young adults in the Point Fortin area. With the help of a supportive and giving community the school was formed using a small house and donated materials. Some of the school's benefactors include Pastor Irvin Celestine and Mr. Marlon Mills of the Ministry of H.E.L.P.S. church, Accommo-Atlantic LNG, Three Guineas

Trust UK, the Neal and Massy Foundation and the Autistic Society of Trinidad and Tobago. The desks were made and donated by a local shop owner and the staff was formed by volunteer parents and community members (Gina, Colleen, Marva, Edith and Audrey). All of the efforts paid off and eventually the school grew to provide service to nine students with autism.

In March of this year, I was able to spend time in Gina's school (officially named The Therapeutic & Life Skills Centre) to assist with the development of a functional curriculum. I started by observing the structure Gina and the others all ready had in place. The students arrived at school each morning and went directly to their desks. I decided to use that routine as a starting place and simply add some functional sequences. In this way, I was not disrupting what the students already knew and felt comfortable with, but rather expanded on it.

I started by creating a daily “check in” routine. This consisted of a chart with pictures of all the students and teachers posted at the entrance. The students were taught to take their picture off of the poster and carry it to a morning “check-in” area of the school where they matched their photo to their printed name on a “who’s here?” poster and put their lunch box on the designated lunch box shelf. Near the check-in poster I posted a large calendar with room on each day to write information about any special events.



Shewyn checking out the daily highlights

We decided to include such things as field trips, expected visitors, holidays, and family birthdays. The students were taught to check the calendar each morning when they arrived to see if there was anything special or different happening that day. People with autism depend on some level of predictability in their day to day activities. Using a calendar to officially “announce” changes or differences each day can significantly decrease student anxiety.

Another routine that the students were already doing was sitting at their desks completing matching tasks, using pictures of early words such as apple, dog, cat, etc. Again, using the routine they had already learned, I made the task more “functional” by taking pictures of signs and store fronts in the Point Fortin community. We made multiple copies of the photos, laminated them and created new matching tasks. The laminating supplies, as well as the Boardmaker CD by Mayer Johnson Company and a color printer, were all donated to the school by the Autistic Society of TT. Gina and I later expanded of the matching task by creating task using clothing, towels and washcloths. The task was to match the large black sock to the large black sock, or to match the washcloth to the washcloth and the bath towel to the bath towel.

As my time in Gina’s school continued, I couldn’t help but notice that every day after the students left, the teachers cleaned the school, washing dishes, cleaning the bathroom and sweeping the floor. These were everyday functional jobs. If we could teach the students how to perform these jobs, they would become more competent members of their household while increasing their meaningful and marketable skills. The teachers came up with 10 daily jobs that could be part of a curriculum designed to teach each task by breaking it into small, visual steps. We then made a large job chart and posted it in the classroom. We discussed a system where each student would be assigned to a different job every Monday. They would keep the job for the entire week, working on the job specific task analysis each day. Every Monday, the jobs would shift so that everyone had a chance to try each of the jobs.

Many children with autism have motor control issues. Over time, this can lead to problems with movement, balance and body posture. This problem can be compounded

by the fact that many individuals with autism do not play actively with peers or in organized sports. This lack of natural play can lead to far less physical activity by the student with autism. Because this seemed to be an issue for many of Gina's students, we instituted a completely new routine: The Power Walk. Every morning, before the day got too hot, everybody, teachers too, got up and walked around the block. Despite the initial whining from the teachers, this turned out to be the easiest routine to learn and the most enjoyable and possibly most beneficial to all. Our first walk brought curious looks from neighbors and community members. By the 3rd week of Power Walking, people were waving and smiling as we passed. There was no doubt in my mind that this simple activity would eventually lead to more community interest and acceptance.

Near the end of my first week in Point Fortin, one of the students had what we sometimes term as a "melt down". He was completely stressed out because someone else was sitting in his chair (people with autism tend to become anxious when things aren't as they should be). This student has very few words and is not able to use his words to effectively communicate when he is upset. His anxiety increased when an adult started to tell him that he needed to "calm down". His verbalizations got louder and his body language became more aggressive.

After watching this unfold, I decided to spend some time discussing autism and challenging behavior with Gina and the other teachers. To be an effective caregiver, it is important to understand how a person with autism might view the world.

For most people with autism, the world can be a very confusing and even scary place. There appears to be little understanding of why people do what they do, think the way they think or make the decisions they make. This leads individuals to find their own logic in this very confusing world. One way to help make life more comfortable for someone with autism is to create predictable routines such as the ones described previously. What caregivers need to understand is that the person with autism is going to strive to make their life comfortable as well. This can take on the appearance of rigid and inflexible behavior. In this case, the student had created a routine for himself. He sat in a specific chair to do a specific thing. When someone else sat in that chair, it caused so much stress that he could hardly bear it.

Given this information, we were able to create a plan that not only helped the student learn skills to calm himself, but also helped the teachers understand that this was not just "bad behavior". When a teacher or a parent understands the core cause of explosive behavior, they are much better equipped to create effective and fair solutions to the problem. In this case, the program included:

- ◆ daily practice using a relaxation sequence
- ◆ a 5-Point Scale visually illustrating the different levels of stress
- ◆ structured flexibility practice where the student would see "be flexible" on his personal visual schedule. He would then practice his relaxation sequence while his teacher sat in his seat. This was designed to build in the tolerance for the stressful event while teaching him how relaxation could be used to ease the

stressful feeling. The ticket here is that the whole process was taught in a structured, predictable and proactive way.

My experience in Auntie Gina's school was so incredible. For the first time in my long relationship with Trinidad and Tobago, I was able to work in a school for an extended period of time. I was able to use demonstration and modeling rather than only



My heroes: Edith, Colleen, Marva and Gina

presenting in a coursework capacity, away from the school and the community. Experiencing life in Point Fortin helped me to have greater insight into the every day obstacles faced by brave soles such as Gina. For example, the school does not have water every day. They fill their tanks on Monday and have to use that supply throughout the week. Gina Mohammed pays the rent on her tiny school house but that does not include air conditioning. The school day must end early due to the

extreme heat of the afternoon. There is no Kinko's or other convenient copy store to run to. One day I recommended we go buy some magazines that might address the special interests of the students. There were no magazines in the shops of Point Fortin.

Despite a few inconveniences, Auntie Gina's school thrives. The school offers a vital service to the students, their families and the community. Without the amazing and truly inspirational godness of the people of Point Fortin, this could not happen. I feel so fortunate to have been a part of such a valuable project.