DREAMERS AND DOERS

Inventive mother opens her own literacy centre

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STAFF REPORTER

Educators said her son would stay stuck in kindergarten, but Sue Co knew the boy could learn.

At first, her attempts to teach him were hit and miss, she says. She tried forcing him to read, to look at the page and spell out the letters c-a-r, but he kept turning his head away.

Eventually, she understood. His strength was auditory, not visual. When she spelled the letters aloud and sounded the words, he listened and made progress.

"Most children, not just autistic ones, have their own learning style," Co says. "To be an effective teacher, you have to know the style and use that knowledge to make up for their weaknesses.

"I want to send out the message that every child can learn to read and that literacy is a lifelong skill that everybody should have."

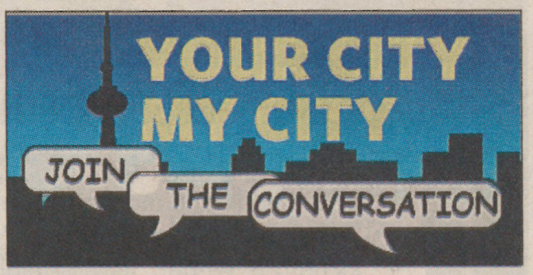
Co is a former information technology consultant who, out of compassion and desperation, opened a literacy school for autistic children and young adults.

To her engineering degree she added a bachelor of education and persuaded her sister, SiuMan Wong, to move from London, England, to run the business end.

Together, they landed space in a new Richmond Hill mall for more than 20 pupils. They painted it in muted colours to soothe hypervisual children and installed LED lighting to calm hyper-auditory ones bothered by the buzz of fluorescent tubes.

Finally, early last year, they inaugurated OpenMind Alliance Inc., with a focus on literacy as a powerful, lifelong communications tool for people with autism. Autism is a neural development disorder characterized by impaired social communication abilities.

Sue Co founded OpenMind Alliance, a literacy program in Richmond Hill.



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"Once they learn to read, they can read to learn," Co says of her students.

Facing up to the idea that your child is autistic is the first challenge, Co says. When her son was 3 and not talking, not even responding when she entered the room, she told herself he was just late and would catch up.

"I was in denial," she says. "Who wants to say, 'My son has this thing and it's not curable?' "

For people of Chinese origin, the admission can be especially hard, she says, because childhood disability is traditionally taken as a sign of revenge for wicked ancestors.

When Co and her husband first sought help, they got the runaround, she also says. They hit a Catch-22: No school would take the boy because he couldn't learn and he couldn't learn because no school would take him.

Co says she is glad she persisted. She spent hours a day teaching her son and got him into school. He learned to read and she learned to teach.

He is 16 now. When he gets nervous or overwhelmed, he retreats into his own world, but printed text still reaches him.

"This summer he went to camp, his first time away from home for more than 24 hours," his mother says. "He would not accept that he was not coming home at the end of the day, so I wrote him a story.

"I told him why he was going, when each thing would happen, the whole schedule, and once he taped this information to the wall he could understand.

"If he couldn't read," she says, "I would not be able to convey to him this story."

Do you know a Dreamer and Doer? Email: vlu@thestar.ca