

He can't see well, but he can do well

Charity helps young people with visual impairment prepare for life



Dr Audrey Looi (from left), with her son James Ang, principal trainer Mary McPherson and teacher Lee Lay Hong at iC2 Prephouse, which helps young people and children who are visually impaired. ST PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI

At this year's PSLE science paper, James Ang, 12, was still busy writing away on his script when his other schoolmates had put down their pens.

The Anglo-Chinese School (Junior) pupil was given extra time to finish because he was diagnosed three years ago with Stargardt's macular dystrophy, a rare and incurable condition that limits his vision.

"I know I could answer the questions, just that I had to be careful with my time. And I finished it with five minutes left," said James, who scored 245 in the PSLE and hopes to go to ACS Independent.

He has iC2 PrepHouse to thank for his results. The charity, set up in October last year, helps young people with visual impairment prepare for life.

When he was diagnosed with the condition, his parents – both doctors – discovered that there were few groups here for young people like James.

"We even thought about moving abroad," said his mother Audrey Looi, 43, who is an ophthalmologist at the Singapore National Eye Centre.

But Dr Looi and her husband Ang Beng Ti, a neurosurgeon who works at the National Neuroscience Institute decided to do something for young people like their son. They helped set up iC2 PrepHouse, which has since worked with about 30 children and young people.

The centre – located in Jurong Point Shopping Centre – has two teachers who are trained in Braille instruction, and specialise in working with those who are visually impaired. Each session is conducted one-on-one with a teacher and costs \$45. Subsidies are available for needy families.

While official data is unavailable, it is believed that there are over 80 students who are visually impaired enrolled in mainstream primary and secondary schools, as well as junior colleges here.

Early intervention is important to expose children to new everyday activities as they learn the most in their first five years, said iC2 principal trainer, Mary McPherson, 54.

"Some parents will exempt their children from everything. They're afraid that the kids will get hurt... but at some point, they've got to learn these skills," said the New Zealander, who has seven years' experience working with the visually impaired.

The Ministry of Education has designated four secondary schools – Ahmad Ibrahim, Bedok South, Clementi Woods and Dunman – which have the facilities and trained teachers to support learning for visually impaired students.

But Madam Lee Lay Hong, who also teaches at iC2 and has two children – aged 16 and 8 – who are visually-impaired, hopes more can be done.

"My daughter wasn't allowed to go for adventure camp or even into the science lab. The teachers were afraid that she would get hurt, but she wanted to try. It was important to her."

- Lee Jian Xuan (jianxuan@sph.com.sg)