

# Help for kids with low vision

Children with visual impairment and their families can find support at the charity, iC2 PrepHouse

●●● BY ABIGAIL CHIA

**N**ATASHA, 10, IS SMALL for her age, has multiple health problems and low vision. But she is quietly determined, eager to learn and loves to read, which she used to do with a strong headlight – the kind used for night fishing. But it was slow and a strain, as she could only see a few words at a time.

She could not keep pace at a regular school, but it was too slow for her at the special school she moved to. When she came to iC2 PrepHouse – a charity support centre for children with visual impairment, her mother did not know what Natasha could do, but the teachers there did. They monitored how she accessed text and found that braille would be the best. It opened up a whole new world for her. Today, home-schooled and happy, she is learning and loving it.



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MDM LEE LAY HONG, CO-FOUNDER OF IC2 PREPHOUSE

Ryan, eight, came in unable to count or recognise the alphabet. At iC2 PrepHouse, they found that he had difficulty with visual discrimination. He faltered if shapes were cluttered, but had no problem if they were spaced out. He needed visual efficiency training. Now, six months later, he is reading.

Sarah, six, entirely lost her sight due to eye cancer when she was one year old. At the centre she learnt braille, is making steady progress on the braille note-taker and has learnt how to use her conceptual understanding. Now, more optimistic and happy, her mother hopes she can go to a mainstream primary school, then secondary school, and even university.

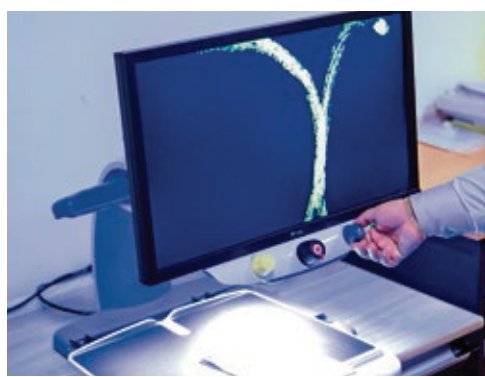
These children represent some of the early successes at iC2 Prep-

House which was set up by a team of medical and educational professionals. They include Dr Audrey Looi, an ophthalmologist, Singapore National Eye Centre; Dr Ang Beng Ti, a neurosurgeon and Associate Professor, Singapore General Hospital; Dr Lynette Shek, a paediatrician, Associate Professor, National University Hospital; Dr Wong Meng Ee, National Institute of Education; and Mdm Lee Lay Hong, vision teacher. The team was joined later by Ms Jennifer Chia, Director, TSMP Law Corporation.

Personal experience sparked the birth of this charity. Mdm Lee has two children with low vision and Dr Looi, a son. Both found a severe dearth of services to support children with low vision and their families.

To help her children, Mdm Lee pursued a Master's in Australia in the assessment and instruction of visually impaired children. Coming back, she realised that others could also use her knowledge too. "I knew there were others struggling and looking for help like I did, so I thought of providing this service, since no one else was."

But her role as an ad hoc teacher for children with low vision was sometimes misunderstood by parents and teachers who did not see it as a professional service, and despite the low



⤴ (Top) Mdm Lee Lay Hong co-founded iC2 PrepHouse for children with low vision; the range of assistive technologies at the charity to teach visually impaired children includes braille note-takers (middle) and CCTVs to magnify print or objects (bottom).

fees charged, felt her support should be provided free!

Almost a decade later, Dr Looi found Mdm Lee's help crucial in helping her son cope with his disability and to continue his studies in mainstream schools. Her instruction and advice was the only professional resource that Dr Looi was able to find after combing the island for support services.

Over time, both realised that to offer more help, they would need to set up a charity. This would mean boosting professional capacity, and fundraising to offer this professional help at the lowest possible cost. So, they brought a team together.

Today, iC2 PrepHouse, housed in Jurong Point, has already served more than 60 families, while a slightly lower number are currently attending sessions there.

Its main aim is to help children with low vision understand concepts and the basic building blocks that they will need in regular schools. Children who are completely visually impaired are also assisted to use braille technology to learn and become more independent. Parents sit in on lessons to get a better understanding, and are shown how to help and teach them at home.

The centre's other Principal Trainer is Ms Mary McPherson from New Zealand, a specialist in teaching visually impaired children. She uses a range of assistive technologies to teach, including braille typewriters, tactile readers and note-takers, CCTVs to magnify print or objects, and a screen reader software that converts text on a computer screen into speech or a braille display.

Ms McPherson said: "Using this technology we teach them how to access information on the computer, and they've got to remember, as everything is done by keystrokes." This way, they learn to perform specific functions on the computer and develop skills for school and work. Her advice to parents is to start working with them as young as possible.

Ms Jamuna Rani, Executive Director, said to keep fees low, they have to work hard at fundraising, and more specialist teachers and volunteers are needed. Currently there are two trainee teachers due for post-graduate studies through Flinders University in Australia, as well as intensive training on the job in Adelaide. Those interested to help can email [info@ic2.com.sg](mailto:info@ic2.com.sg).



⤴ Ms Mary McPherson, Principal Trainer, uses a braille note-taker to teach a visually impaired child.

PHOTOS: ALVIN LIM