

Dear Parents:

We are organizing a seminar entitled **Mediated Self-Talk for Language Development** on the 25th of March to the 26th of March.

Below is an article about our work that appeared in the Star on the 9th of February 2011. Attached with this email is the brochure and testimonials from parents.

Please do contact us for more details and please do forward this email to any of your friends that are interested.

Thank you.

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The Right Input

Parents are urged to create a rich linguistic environment through monologues, to encourage a special needs child to acquire speech.

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By **PANG HIN YUE**

FANS of sports and movies have something in common. They display similar intensity as the players and actors even though they are mere spectators. The brain cells that are responsible for the range of gestures and emotions expressed are called mirror neurons and they have created quite a buzz among researchers.

They believe mirror neurons could well be the key to understanding and overcoming developmental delays. So much so that the *New York Times* declares: "The discovery (of mirror neurons) is shaking up numerous scientific disciplines, shifting the understanding of culture, empathy, philosophy, language, imitation, autism and psychotherapy."

At the forefront expounding the theory is neuroscientist Marco Iacoboni. In his book *Mirroring People*, he says mirror neurons are "smart cells in our brain that allow us to understand others."

Technological advancement has enabled Iacoboni and his counterparts to conduct non-intrusive imaging of brain activities and establish the connectivity in language, emotions and behaviour vis-à-vis the firing of mirror neurons.

Weighing nearly 2kg with a fat content of 60%, the brain is as complex as it is fascinating. For the professionals and caregivers working with special needs children, the discovery of mirror neurons in Italy a decade ago and their links to language acquisition, empathy and social behaviour offers them a fresh way to reach out to those who have deficits in these areas.

In fact, researchers believe that autism is the result of impaired mirror neurons. So the solution, they figure, is to repair the neurons by creating opportunities for them to be activated and enhanced.

Eminent psychologist Dr Reuven Feuerstein in his book *Soliloquy And Beyond*, which he co-authored with Prof Dr Louis Falik and Krisztina Bohacs, says the breakthrough in the study of mirror neurons validates the belief that he has held over the past 60 years. "The brain is modifiable when given the right mediation," he says.

Whether it is due to genetics or brain injury, persons with disabilities can still realise their full potential when given the right input to rewire the brain. He calls his approach "mediated learning-experiencing".

Supporting the assertion that there is a direct, reciprocal relationship between the active (and motor) expression of language and neural development, he notes that mediation entails providing language models for the developing learner. In doing so, "we activate neural circuits in the brain that in turn further activate other cortical functions."

Thus, he purposes Mediated Soliloquy (MSL) which would have the great English poet and writer, William Shakespeare smiling. The function of soliloquy or monologue or self-talk in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for instance, is for the main character to speak his thoughts aloud for the benefit of the audience.

Drawing on the art of soliloquy and merging it with the findings in neurosciences and his own experiences in training families with learning issues, MSL is probably best described as a marriage between "behavioural sciences and neurophysiology."

"The purpose is to mediate language awareness, acquisition and development. Parents verbalise within the hearing of the child but without expectation that the child will or should respond. The verbalisation is designed to be overheard but not responded," he explains. In short, MSL is a precursor to a child acquiring language.

To Feuerstein and colleagues, talking to oneself is a natural aspect of thinking and is thus accessible for both adult and child. Stressing that MSL is adult language in form and structure, they say it exposes the child to speech in a very intentional manner directed initially towards language stimulation.

"Soliloquy in MSL presents the learner with language models, incorporating elements of articulation, semantics, syntax and pragmatic meaning," they note. All of which with the purpose of helping the child overcome deficits, stimulate growth and bring the learner

into a more normal social environment.

So instead of despairing that their child has yet to utter his first word or is inattentive with poor eye contact, parents are urged to create a “rich linguistic environment” by way of having monologues.

These soliloquies, however, are by no means random, meaningless rumblings. They are to be based on intentionality, reciprocity, transcendence (generalisation) and mediation of meanings.

Nevertheless, MSL, the writers remind, is not a recipe book to be applied in a cookie cutter manner but a road map which is followed in accordance with preferred routes, conditions of desired experience and the like.

“Mediation creates a need – implicitly at first – to participate in the communication, to feel a need for engagement at the receptive level,” they say. It is for this very reason that Wendy Goh, a mother of three, sought help from Feuerstein-certified therapists Foo Siang Mun and K.C. Soo.

Although her daughter Amanda Goon, 11, and her son Joshua, seven, are smart children with good grades, she noticed that they seemed to be struggling internally.

“They appeared to be unable to articulate their thoughts aloud. Added to that, Joshua had problems with memory retention. All of which had affected them behaviourally,” she explains.

But as Wendy learns how to mediate, shaping and modelling language with meanings, both her kids are better at expressing themselves.

“Previously, the house was pretty quiet as everyone just went about doing his or her own thing. But these days, I am pleased to hear chatter and see better interaction among the siblings,” she says.

Wendy is happy that her youngest daughter, Cassandra, six, has made great strides in language and social interaction.

Cassandra, who has Down syndrome, had little speech and used to crawl under the table to hide when Wendy first brought her to see Foo and Soo six months ago. She had been undergoing speech therapy elsewhere but there was no progress. Under Foo and Soo’s guidance, Cassandra is turning into a spunky girl, ever willing to engage in games and breaking out in spontaneous speech.

“Just the other day, Cassandra told her brother: ‘No, no, no, no TV. Eat lunch first. Naughty Josh!’” recalls Wendy. That is truly music to her ears because Cassandra used to struggle to even utter single syllables.

For Foo and Soo, nothing is more gratifying than to see children under their care making significant progress. After more than five years as a therapist, Soo, a science graduate, continues to challenge himself to read and apply what he learns about the brain to help his students.

“We create the demands (for the students) to learn, with the goal that they will transcend the skills they gain to other activities that require similar cognitive skills,” he explains.

To do so, the students must acquire language. “Language is the key to a child’s development,” he says. Only then are they modifiable, flexible and can adjust accordingly to the environment, he adds.

To achieve their goals, Soo and Foo have become rather creative in finding solutions to help their students enhance their audio and visual processing. Visor and blinkers are used to help students limit their visual range in order to stay on task. Aquarium hose is used, as what Foo calls, a “whisper phone” to reduce ambient noise so that the students are able to focus on what is being said to them.

Foo, who holds a masters in environmental sciences and has been a therapist for the past nine years, says she has no regrets trading her previous job in management consultancy to work with persons with learning difficulties. The tangible progress made by her students using the Feuerstein approach has more than made up for the perks she had enjoyed working in a multinational corporation.

In his famous soliloquy, Hamlet says: “To be or not to be.” For Soo and Foo, the choice is obvious.

> *Professor Dr Louis Falik, a member of the Feuerstein Institute and the co-author of **Soliloquy And Beyond**, will be conducting a two-day seminar (March 25-26) on **Mediated Self-Talk For Language Development** at Tropicana Golf and Country Resort, Petaling Jaya, Selango, Malaysia. Dr Falik, a seasoned clinical psychologist and Emeritus Professor of Counselling from San Francisco State University, is also available to conduct individual clinical assessments. For those who register before Feb 21, the fee for a single participant is RM790 and for a group of three, RM730 per person. For details, contact Foo (019-3222 952 / foosiangmun@gmail.com) or Soo (017-8868 295 / kcssoo2000@gmail.com).*