

# THE STAR ACADEMY

*Teaching our extra-ordinary kids the ordinary things...*



## From across the continent

### ABA therapy in Ghana through Star Academy, Joburg

Having one older son, I was quietly concerned when, my second son, Osei, did not have ANY words, had poor eye contact and demonstrated some stereotypy and twirling aged 15 months. I had a normal birth and a totally trouble-free pregnancy and Osei was a very happy, smiley child. With the exception of severe eczema from the age of 3 months, he had developed totally normally. Living in Ghana, where there are no child development specialists, I went on marathon searches on the internet and repeatedly, all the signs pointed to my son being autistic. What to do? Where to go? Who to tell?

**Local resources in Ghana:** Local autism resources (psychologists, speech therapists, OT) in my home country were thin on the ground. With no more than a handful of practicing specialists in these disciplines combined across the

whole country, I extended my search for specialist intervention onto the continent. "A.B.A. Star Academy. Ilana Gerschlowitz. They can help me" were my immediate thoughts reading through the Star Academy website and I immediately made contact, followed quickly by a visit to Johannesburg. In my first meeting with Ilana, I made it clear that I was not going to move my family to Johannesburg but that I was appealing to her to help me find creative ways of building A.B.A resources and therapy in Ghana using local capacity with Star Academy providing support. I knew that my son was not the only child in Ghana in need of autism intervention and that I would no doubt find many Ghanaian parents, wondering in fear and hopelessness, as I originally did, about that they could do to heal their autistic child.

## Director's Column



Dear All

After a long year the summer break is finally here and everyone is looking forward to a vacation and family time. To our therapists: I am humbled everyday by your dedication, passion and commitment to our kids. We thank you for a fantastic year and we look forward to a fresh and energetic start in 2014!

To our Parents: You are not alone on this journey. It's never easy when a child has a challenge or delay. Celebrate the progress, recharge your batteries and look forward to much more progress in 2014!

To our CARD Supervisors and Cheryl Jackson: Thank you for your invaluable contribution this year and for enduring many hours on the aeroplane from the USA to come to SA. We thank you for your enduring commitment. Merry Christmas and a happy new year!

Ilana

### **Star Academy's Intervention:**

Within a month of meeting Ilana, she dispatched *Carmen Du Plooy* (ABA therapist, Star Academy Joburg) to Ghana for a 2-week initial A.B.A training for 3 therapists (2 local graduate psychology students and my sister Simone, who had volunteered to help and be trained in A.B.A). Osei was 2 years and 3 months when we started his A.B.A therapy in November 2012, chalking up a hectic 30-32 hours a week at his young age. "Thank God we have started something", my husband and I kept saying to ourselves. Our relief was always peppered by comments from the nay-sayers or "well-meaning" family members and friends who insisted that "Boys talk later than girls, he will be fine" and "Gosh, aren't you over-reacting?".

*Akil Seema* (ABA Supervisor, Star Academy, Joburg) followed up to Ghana 2 months after Carmen in January 2013 to further develop Osei's ABA program. That very month, January 2013, after 3 months of ABA therapy, when my son's uttered his first two words aged 2 years and 5 months ('car' and 'biscuit'), I could have thrown a party! Trust me, I was past excited, bordering on ecstatic. I phoned, emailed and told anyone and everyone! My initial reservations/ apprehensions about the program intensity were put to rest. From then on his progress came in progressively; it was as if a whole new world had been opened to him. His daily tantrums decreased drastically per our own observations and from his therapists ABA graphs. He would now often smile at Mum and Dad and even hug his therapists whenever they arrived.

### **Potty-training:**

When Osei started intensive potty-training with Akil Seema's support at 2 years and 8 months, we didn't know what to expect, after hearing stories of autistic children who had taken months or years, to get the hang of it. After just one month of constantly watching DVD's of Little Einstein's and Bob-the-Builder on the loo, at the end of April 2013, he was off diapers, initially in the day-time and after a further 2 months, we had dry-nights too.

### **PROMPT therapy:**

By July 2013, aged 3, Osei had graduated from Pictorial Exchange Communication (PEC) cards to fully verbal requesting in his ABA program. How delighted were we to see the back of those PECS and Flash cards! Osei now had words, thanks in no small part to PROMPT therapy from *Cheryl Jackson* (SLP) and *Jenna White* (Star Academy Johannesburg), both of whom visited Ghana in 2013 to enrich Osei's program to enable him communicate functionally as he can today. This September 2013, was a high point, when Osei started regular nursery 3 times a week accompanied by his beloved therapist for classroom facilitation, and he absolutely loves it. He is able to sit with the other children through classes and has learned so much from his school environment to enhance what he does in ABA (letters, numbers, hums or recites nursery rhymes, playground play). Swimming twice a week has also been a great help with his sensory issues in the absence of any local Occupational therapists. He is constantly thrilled to play spelling games on his iPad.

### **Diet and Supplements:**

We recently started a bio-medical intervention of diet (Gluten and Casein free and specific carbohydrate) and a wide range of supplements in consultation with *Peta Cohen* of Total Life Center, New Jersey. Osei's severe eczema virtually vanished within 2 weeks of starting the supplements and my first thoughts were that these supplements can only be benefiting healing his guts and his brain.

I've made the journey sound rosy, but it has been far from trial-free; from finding Osei the right ABA therapists locally, to handling Osei tantrums, especially his frustrations with speech, to dealing with the horrendous stigma and misunderstanding of autism in my home country Ghana. It's an on-going process and Osei's progress is undeniably GREAT. Hearing my son say 'Mummy' or "Daddy", regularly seek me, his father, brother or others out to sit and play with him, seeing him ride a bike or scooter, seeing his total delight and enthusiasm as he picks up his back-pack, puts on his shoes and says "bye-bye" to go to nursery in the mornings definitely makes A.B.A worth-it, EVERYTIME and EVERY PENNY.



Dzifa Amegashie  
*The Author is a Ghanaian mother  
of two boys, Osei and Yeiko.  
She lives with her husband,  
David, in Accra, Ghana.*



## Our new centre

The Star Academy is proud to announce the opening of our new Academy in Athol Street, Waverley. We wish all our staff and students every success.

## Spotlight on...



My name is Robyn Dunville. I have been working at the Star Academy for 2 years. I started out as a Junior Therapist and after a few months, I did my training and became a Lead Therapist.

I absolutely love my job and I consider myself blessed in that I get to work with amazing children every day. There are no words to describe the feeling of pride in knowing that you can make a difference to the kids you work with.

Next year I will be going to Durban as a centre manager. This was not an easy decision as I will miss the staff and children to no end. However I am very excited for this new adventure and I hope that my presence there will help motivate other therapists. I will, in addition to be centre manager, take on some cases as lead therapist. I look forward to working with new children and families.

Thank you to everyone in Johannesburg for everything you have taught me in the past 2 year and especially to Martin and Ilana for this opportunity. You two have been and will remain an inspiration to everyone you come in contact with.

See you all in 2015



# The tattoo corner

## JENNA

*I always wanted a tattoo but I never thought I would get one because there was nothing I felt strongly enough about to have it engraved into my skin for the rest of my life.... until I worked at Star Academy. I got my tattoo in November 2012 and I knew that I would never regret it. The puzzle piece is an incredibly powerful symbol to me, representing both the mystery of Autism and the idea that the more the people who love these children pull together, the more likely we are to solve the puzzle.*

*Now, every time someone notices my tattoo, I am granted an opportunity to spread awareness!*



## KERRY

*Working at the Star Academy has really changed my life. These kids are all so amazing and so special, often so misunderstood but when given the chance will exceed your every expectation. They work so hard each and every day to achieve the smallest accomplishment and its really made me appreciate the milestones so often taken for granted. Every day is filled with so much love and joy for all our kids - and no one day is ever the same. This tattoo will always remind me to appreciate the small things, to never take anything for granted and to always keep patience, love and understanding in my heart. It's for my kids who make every day so special. For my kids who showed me how much you can accomplish when given the right tools and who always remind you how much the small things matter... So much love in heart for The Star Academy...*



## REINETTE

*The reason I chose to get this, is the same reason I get up every morning. When you work with these special kids, it becomes a way of life and is no longer a job anymore. My puzzle piece reminds me that Autism is a constant in your- face- battle.*

*It isn't just going to disappear overnight or get changed if you don't constantly work on it. It reminds me how hard our parents work and strive to improve the lives of their children. It's my reminder, to look at the child and not at the disease, to never give up, to seize every opportunity of learning and to celebrate every victory no matter how small!*



## BIANCA

*Autism is more than just a word to me. It has become my life. Working towards unlocking the doors to our kid's development and learning is a task I am honoured to be a part of. Each and every child I have worked with at the Star Academy has taught me so much about life. The way in which they show strength, courage, patience and perseverance in overcoming obstacles they face is beyond admirable. They remind me each day that the sky is the limit. I find myself blessed to be working with our kids and their families.*

*I have met parents and guardians who I look up to in so many ways.*

*The extent of their Strength courage and commitment they*

*bring to the table everyday are qualities that I am yet to find elsewhere. My puzzle piece tattoo represents our amazing kids, their extra ordinary families and my commitment to help solve the Autism puzzle, one piece at a time.*





# The Year End Function

The Great Gatsby" – was the theme for the year end function and all the therapists got together as a team to celebrate our achievements for the year "2013". The night was full of Gatsby glam as therapists arrived in their 20s outfits and in true 20s style. You could feel the drama in the air. The therapists were divided into groups with each group representing a 20s icon. As the night wore on a murder took place. The rest of the groups had to play detective and solve the mystery.

We ended the evening with an awards ceremony. Congratulations to the following therapists:

Lead Therapist of the Year (Joburg): Bianca Cassingena

Lead Therapist of the Year (Pretoria): Trisha Van Riel

Junior Therapist of the year (Joburg): Sharene Van Dalen

Junior Therapist of the Year (Pretoria): Kirsten Nel

Therapist recognised for exemplary performance (Joburg): Sharene Van Dalen

Therapist recognised for exemplary performance (Pretoria): Michelle De Nysschen

Thank you so much to Jacky Vicente and Kerry-Lee Saunders for arranging a spectacular evening





### **USEFUL TIPS ON CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS:**

1. Always follow through with request or instructions; never make empty threats or promises.
2. Consequences for behaviour should be immediate, but what one does before the behaviour I.e. Prompting the child to request for desired items, is always more important.
- 3 .Constantly telling your child to be quiet - is not likely to make them calm down quicker. At times, you may need to wait them out until such time where the challenging behaviour stops.
4. Always look for positive behaviours that can be reinforced as opposed to waiting for challenging behaviour to occur.
5. Behaviour is always determined by a function. It can be for access to a desired object or activity, to escape an activity, as an automatic, self-stimulatory behaviour or for attention. It is important to remember that any form of attention (whether positive or scolding) is attention and as such, could be reinforcing, either way for a child.

### **10 Tips for Better Sleep**

1. Establish a bedtime routine. The stability of a bedtime routine can be calming to a child with ASD. Start the routine 15 to 30 minutes before bedtime.
2. Limit the use of electronics (iPads and videogames) a few hours before bedtime.
3. Provide a comfortable sleep setting - the bedroom should be quiet, a moderate temperature and dark. Children with ASD may be more aware of external stimuli such as noises that other children may be able to filter out.
4. Set a bedtime and stick to it 7 days a week. This should fit in with your own bedtime routine to help maintain consistency
5. Teach your child to fall asleep alone. If your child cannot fall asleep alone, they will have a difficult time falling asleep without your help when waking during the night.
6. Melatonin - this natural supplement has shown promise in aiding sleep in small studies.
7. Food - try avoiding giving your child heavy meals or large snacks later at night, however, lighter snacks such as crackers may help your child fall asleep.
8. Physical activity - exercise during the day helps children sleep better at night, but should be kept for earlier in the day, as hard exercise 2-3 hours before bed may make it harder to fall asleep.
9. Keep a sleep diary - this may help you become more aware of environmental situations or patterns that may be contributing to the problem inadvertently.
10. If sleep problems persist, make an appointment with your child's doctor so that any physical conditions or drug interactions can be ruled out.



**All Staff**

**We may not know your names but it does not mean you are less important. You have touched, helped and nurtured many children. May God bless you with increasing patience and will to continue with your work.**

**May you all have a Merry Christmas and a prosperous New Year. Thank you**

**Love: Godwin, Violet and family**

**Happy holidays to all our**

**Little stars, staff and parents**

**Have a wonderful break.**

**See you all in the New Year!!!**

