



Elliott's Corner: A Welcoming Space for Special Needs Kids in Beijing

By Lisa Gay

Elliott's Corner (EC) is a dedicated therapy centre for special needs kids in Beijing, with occupational, physical and speech therapists on hand. Tianjin Plus recently sat down with Assistant General Manager Jill Zhang to talk about running a Western-style therapy centre in Beijing.



How did Elliott's Corner begin?

It actually started as Olivia's Place in Shanghai. One family had a girl born with Down's Syndrome, and it was so hard for them to find specialised services in China—there really wasn't a therapy service like ours at the time.

There are many therapists in Beijing and Shanghai, but they all work alone. They don't have a multidisciplinary team and can never continually learn or improve their skills. That's one of the reasons why Elliott's Corner was able to attract therapists in Beijing, they had questions and nobody to ask.

Another reason for opening a centre in Beijing was to provide therapy for local kids. We have a bigger mission to provide and change the way therapy is done in China. To help spread the word, we needed to expand.

Do you mostly work with expat children?

About 70-80% of our children are expat kids, but we are getting more and more interest from the local community. Because Beijing is the capital of China, there are lots of local organisations for kids with disabilities headquartered here. We wanted to reach out to them.

How do your therapists work with local organisations?

We usually contact the local organisation asking them if they have any specific needs or any problems they need help with. We also do pro bono work at orphanages and maternity hospitals. This is because many of our therapists came to Beijing to help local Chinese kids, otherwise they would have just stayed at home!

What training and qualifications do your therapists hold?

All of our therapists on staff have overseas license. We have a few PhDs.

Actually, therapy as a qualification doesn't exist in China, so all of our therapists come from abroad and are licensed in their home country. Between them, they probably speak about ten languages. Our bigger mission is to obtain some sort of local accreditation, so we're working with Chinese universities to develop speech, occupational and physical therapy programs.

What are the cultural challenges of providing Western-style therapy in China?

Well, a lot of local parents do not accept their child's disability. That's why you rarely see kids with disabilities out on the streets, you never see a child in a wheelchair in Beijing. They often keep their kids at home.

What we've been trying to do is let these parents know that therapy can bring out the potential in their child and that the very last thing you want to do is hide these children away.

How do these cultural issues affect their approach to therapy?

Parents often misunderstand the purpose of therapy. Many will ask me a question like, "How long until my child will be cured?" Parents need to understand that their child doesn't have a disease, and they don't need to be cured. We really have to drive this point home to the families.

We often find that a lot of Chinese parents and even grandparents are in denial. They'll say, "But my child looks so normal! I can't believe he has autism". If the kid looks fine on the outside, it's so hard for them to grasp that there may be a problem. A lot of parents will delay therapy because of this. They keep hoping that the child will "catch up."

You've been providing therapeutic care for children for three years now. Have you seen any positive changes amongst the local community?

The local mindset is slowly changing. For instance, with communication and social challenges, they just want the child to be able to speak. But the bigger picture is that the child needs to be able to communicate, often by using pictures. That's how you reduce the frustration [of speaking]. Many parents are beginning to understand this. They are beginning to understand that therapy is a long road.

There's also a big movement on the web for parents of special needs kids, and they are always online sharing their experiences and that's really an excellent outlet. We've had Q&A sessions on the web for parents of children with disabilities. Some are not ready to come out in the open, but we do give them advice.

Any big projects coming up?

We're really hoping to set up different centres in other cities throughout China and reach more local children. We've had a handful of kids from Tianjin coming to Elliott's every week, so we're planning to expand here as well. The plan is to work with international schools in Tianjin from the next school year onwards, which is something we frequently do in Beijing.

Elliott's Corner Pediatric Therapy Centre 胡宝小屋

Address: Unit 19-05, Building 2, Kandu International, No. 10, North East 4th Ring Road, Chaoyang District, Beijing

北京朝阳区东四环北路10号瞰都国际2号楼19-05室

Email: jiz@oliviasplace.org **Tel:** +86 10 6461 6283

