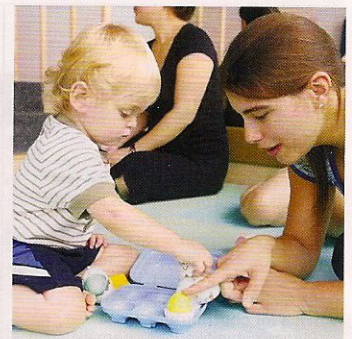


Kids & Education



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Learning through play
Occupational therapist
Yung Wang reflects on child
development at Olivia's Place



Children in need

In less than a year, Olivia's Place has gone from a support facility for kids with special needs to a dedicated paediatric therapy centre treating 200 children. Having just opened their new, expanded premises, the founders tell **Anna Leach** how they're fulfilling an unmet need

When Quynh and Nelson Chow found there was a severe lack of adequate therapy centres to treat their daughter Olivia, who has Down's Syndrome, they decided to open their own. Olivia's Place, a dedicated paediatric therapy centre, now treats 200 children, with another 100 on their waiting list. Demand has been so great that after opening on Julu Lu last September, they have already moved to new, larger premises on Yongjia Lu. 'Six months in, we found that we had outgrown the space already,' says Quynh. 'There's a huge need for these services in Shanghai.'

What they do

'Special needs' is not necessarily as specialised as you'd think. It covers not only children with Down's Syndrome, cerebral palsy and other conditions, but also children who need a little help talking, reading, writing and behaving appropriately at school. The clinic recommends that parents who are concerned about their child's development should first bring them for a comprehensive evaluation, where the child's speech and physical development will be assessed. If treatment is necessary, Olivia's Place offers physical,

occupational and speech therapy and educational psychology courses.

Speech therapy is particularly important in this city, says Quynh. 'In Shanghai's multi-lingual environment kids often start talking later, but if they are three years old and still don't have many words then you have cause for concern.'

Another common problem is bad behaviour, often caused by moving to a new country. The clinic's educational psychologist helps with behavioural problems by assessing the child at home and school. 'It's a combination of helping with parenting skills and modifying the kid's behaviour', says Quynh.

In addition to therapy, Olivia's Place offers learning support tutoring for children with dyslexia and regular talks for parents and children.

Why they're different

'We're not the first ones to bring therapy to Shanghai but we're doing it differently,' says Quynh who found that therapy programmes in the city

were either crowded with under-trained therapists or expensive despite their dubious practises. 'I took Olivia to one place and they were charging 1,600RMB/hour and I wasn't even allowed to sit in on the session,' she says.

Olivia's Place is different because the therapists are educated to masters level and have had years of training and experience. 'If you want to be a therapist in China, you simply do an extra year of training after becoming an MD,' says Quynh. By contrast, the head staff at Olivia's Place have all done four years of undergraduate study and three years at masters level in their fields. 'When you think about all the education my staff have compared to China-trained therapists, it's nuts.'

Olivia's Place is also one of the few places to offer holistic treatment for children – different therapists are guaranteed to talk to each other, share notes and provide regular feedback to parents. 'We were going to one place with Olivia

for speech and another place for physical therapy and they didn't communicate,' says Quynh. 'I just wanted one place where my daughter could go for everything and the therapists talk to each other.'

How you can help

Aware of the huge need for these services in Shanghai, Olivia's Place has set up a charitable foundation, enabling it to provide financial support to families who have difficulty meeting the costs of treatment. 'My husband and I started the foundation because I had friends whose kids needed therapy but their insurance wouldn't pay for it,' says Quynh.

People who can't afford treatment can apply to a review board made up of two paediatricians and a legal advisor who decide to offer subsidies on a case-by-case basis. 'We look at three criteria,' says Quynh. 'Chances for success, how committed the parents are to therapy and finally, their financial needs. The most important question we ask is, is this really going to benefit the child?'

Unfortunately, demand is so great that the amount initially raised (about 10,000USD) has already been spent. The Chows therefore plan to start a fundraising drive next month. Yet despite the lack of funds, they are still receiving applications for care, with the board promising to allocate money when it becomes available. In the meantime, the Chows continue to provide a crucial service for all the special needs children they can treat.

For more information on Olivia's Place and how to donate, visit www.oliviasplace.org. For details of courses and talks see Kids listings, page 63.