

## Innovative approaches for coping with autism

Tuesday, July 17, 2012

RECOGNISING the limited resources available for children diagnosed with autism, the Jamaica Autism Support Association (JASA) hosts an annual workshop for parents, teachers, caregivers and 'shadows'.

This year's workshop, which focused on innovative approaches, was held at the Genesis Academy in collaboration with the Digicel Foundation on July 6th and 7th.



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JASA started as a parent group and became a registered NGO in 2007.

"Since we started JASA, one of my visions was to have a two-day workshop where one day would focus on techniques for parents and the other for teachers," noted Kathy Chang, Co-Founder.

"For the past five years we were only able to manage a one-day workshop, but now that the Digicel Foundation has come on board we were finally able to host a two-day event," expressed Chang.

Several professionals, including psychologists and occupational therapists presented on the following: recognising autism spectrum disorder in the classroom; using everyday moments to teach new skills; how to approach sexuality issues; toilet training; coping with meltdowns; and incidental teaching techniques in the classroom and at home.

Dr Amanda Keating, licensed psychologist at the University of South Florida gave the keynote address. She discussed the importance of school-wide positive behaviour support and the importance of using everyday moments to teach new skills.

"Although there has been improvement, especially with the work of JASA, Jamaica still has a poverty of interventions,

skilled practitioners, and evidence-based treatment that show improvement in the lives of those living with autism" commented Dr Keating.

With the absence of adequate support for those diagnosed with autism, Dr Keating notes, "It's difficult to transfer the information learned in a textbook to real life. This is why it is important to talk with professionals who are familiar with the Jamaican context who can assist in applying the textbook knowledge to the situation here in Jamaica" she continued.

"If it's a case where you do not have a caregiver to leave your child with, bring them along, we all know what you are going through and we know what is expected of a child with autism," said Rosemarie Locke, a parent who has a son with autism, and who is encouraging others to attend the workshop.

The presentations on Friday, July 6 were geared towards informing teachers on how to better meet the learning needs of children with autism. Saturday's programme focused on material that would be particularly useful for parents.

In addition to supporting the Coping With Autism Workshop, the Digicel Foundation also partnered with JASA in their Surfing for Autism event along with its awareness-building activities during World Autism Awareness Month in April of this year. Surfing for Autism is a family fun day for persons living with autism that is held at Cable Hut Beach in Bull Bay. Genesis Academy, where the workshop was held, is also a past beneficiary of the Digicel Foundation

"We have a very special place in our hearts, not just for children with autism, but for the entire community with special needs," remarked Samantha Chantrelle, executive director of the Digicel Foundation, "This is why the Digicel Foundation is committed to building three special needs schools by 2014."