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A SIMPLE MESSAGE THAT MEANS THE ORLD TO M

Specialist help is enriching the lives of children like Yan Yan, helping them to break out of their isolation and communicate with loved ones SANTA CLAUS

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South China Morning Post 愛心聖誕大行動

spectrum disorder since 2010, ac-cording to the child assessment service of the Department of Health.

Health. Last year's figures show one in 683 children have autism in Hong Kong. By comparison, one in 68 children in the United States were diagnosed in 2010, accord-ing to the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. Treatment ontions are few.

Control and Prevention. Treatment options are few and pricey in the city, with a handful of private schools or cen-tres catering only to autistic chil-dren's needs for specialised edu-cation at HK\$30,000 a month, and indicated the action

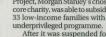
and individual therapy costing up to HK\$800 per session. It would be unaffordable for Mrs Wong, who comes from a low-income family. Rainbow

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Mrs Wong was overjoyed to hear her six-year-old son, Yan Yan, repeat after her: "I like you, mummy!"

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span lasted five minutes, and he would throw nightly tantrums. Now, with the help of weekly therapy sessions, he is able to construct simple sentences and sleep soundly through the night. "He's not the same as other six-year-olds, but seeing the pro-gress he's made, it's really re-warding," says Mrs Wong, who has been taking her son for occu-pational and speech therapy at the Rainbow Project Learning Centre, a school that provides Centre, a school that provides specialised education and thera-py for autistic children. At least 8,000 children have been diagnosed with autism



Project, Morgan Stanley's chosen core charity, was able to subsidise 33 low-income families with its underprivileged programme. After it was suspended for a year due to lack of funding, it re-jaunched in 2013 with the help of Operation Santa Claus, the South China Morning Post's annual fes-tive fundraising drive joindy held with RTHK. The government offers subsi-

with RTHK. The government offers subsi-dised preschool rehabilitation services, but the waiting list is at least two years – which is too long for autistic children who should

for attistic children who should seek treatment as early as possi-ble, says keith Lee, project direc-tor at Rainbow Project. "Early intervention makes a world of a difference," says Lee, adding that the best window of opportunity to reduce the life-long impact of the condition would be between the ages of two-and-a-half and five. Since the government imple-mented an integrated education policy more than a decade ago,

policy more than a decade ago, mainstream schools also offer

mainstream schools also offer classes and training to children with special education needs, but Lee says sometimes children annot cope. "Integration is good for chil-dren with autism when they are ready – it's simply too over-whelming sometimes," he says. "The ultimate goal is to integrate them into a mainstream school, but if a child is not ready, it'll do them more harm than good."

but n a child is hof ready, it il do them more harm than good." Fornow, as Yan Yan's vocabu-lary increases day by day, Mrs Wong's hope is she will soon hear him say, "I like you, mummy!" on his own.