



# in utter consummation

**What happens when you deal with children who have disabilities and you finally have one of your own? Speech therapist VASU GOVINDASAMY talks about managing his expectations.**

**T**he moment I set my cloudy eyes on my baby, I knew that he is a real gift from God. Suddenly, it did not matter that Sia Lee and I plunged into parenthood prematurely when our boy, Micah, arrived eight weeks early with very little notice. However, our 32-week-old baby had to be kept in the hospital's intensive care unit for observation.

Consciously and perhaps unfortunately, I had two hats on that day: one was as father of a premature baby who had obvious signs of breathing difficulty, and the other was as a health professional in communication disorders. Many times, I felt I was in a worse predicament than my wife. I was inconsolably anxious.

Having been trained as a medical speech-language pathologist working with children of various disabilities, I was constantly looking out for normal neonatal behavioural patterns.

I know my training and knowledge helped – I intervened when doctors wanted to administer gentamycin (an ototoxic drug) prescribed commonly for premature babies. I knew his oral feeding would be delayed if I hadn't pushed for the nasogastric tube to be removed in 24 hours. And I checked on his supplemental oxygen supply to ensure safe levels constantly.

My wife and I implemented touch and stroke therapy and I was sure it kept his body warm, decreased his dependency on the supplemental oxygen and soothed his breathing to a healthy rhythm. All the while, I kept reminding myself what I usually tell caregivers in my parent-centred clinic: "If you don't get on top of these, who would?"

It wasn't long before Micah became stronger. Still, I could not stop comparing notes with the children I saw in my speech therapy clinic. I do work quite hard at making sure he reaches all his milestones. I have already introduced him to alveolar sounds (such as [d] for Daddy) which make up 46 per cent of adult speech. I even blow a raspberry over his tummy and below his lower lip every morning. Of course, Micah just smiles at all the exaggerated lip and mouth movements and probably thinks what a dorky father he has.

However, after a few months of these rituals and stimulations,

Micah is now at the 75th percentile in physical growth and at 90th percentile in speech and language skills.

Just recently, Micah held his bottle with his frail hands and drank the last few ounces with some support from me. It was a Kodak moment and one of my proudest. Even then, I have to admit I just wouldn't be satisfied until I see him holding on to his bottle all by himself.

Such is the drawback of being a professional who sets high expectations for his clients and firmly believes that all children should maximise their potential regardless of their endowment. Micah is no exception. Like the parents I have worked with, I have also wished hard that these initial months would quickly turn into years and Micah would grow up fast to be a less dependent healthy toddler.

My professional suggestion to fathers and fathers-to-be is to keep abreast of what is available out there and read as much as you can before the baby arrives. However, bear in mind that nothing or no-one can adequately prepare you for fatherhood.

I used to give lots of handouts on childrearing to new parents, thinking they may find the answers to their questions. Now, I know that no book, course, second-hand experience, doctor, and speech therapist for that matter, can adequately prepare you for that. What you can do is to have an open, well-trained mind, and a willing heart to love and learn about you and your child.

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