

IT IS POSSIBLE TO SKILL CHILDREN WITH DOWN SYNDROME

By Aloysious Kasoma

In December 2010, Rosemary Nambooze gave birth to her son while pursuing her master's degree at the University of Antwerp in Belgium. What should have been a joyful milestone quickly turned into uncertainty and grief when doctors informed her that the baby had Down syndrome — a condition she had never heard about.

"I had no clue about the condition. For a moment, I thought it was Dutch that possibly meant a disease that can heal anytime, but alas, I was wrong," she recalls.

As doctors explained the condition and its possible complications, including heart problems and hearing impairment, Nambooze struggled to process the reality. The diagnosis forced her to question her faith and future. Despite longing to return home after completing her studies, she chose to remain in Belgium so her child could access specialised medical care.

Nambooze says raising a child with special needs requires patience, resilience and continuous support. Many parents face anxiety, isolation and exhaustion as they juggle therapy appointments, family responsibilities and work.

"Raising a child with

AUTISM STATISTICS

Experts say autism spectrum disorder affects communication, social interaction and behaviour, but manifests differently in each child. In Uganda, it is estimated to affect about 88 people per 10,000. Although there is no cure for autism or Down syndrome, early intervention, therapy and education can significantly improve quality of life.

disability can feel like running a marathon where the finish line keeps moving," Nambooze says. "Many parents feel isolated because society does not always understand what they go through."

When she returned to Uganda in 2012, Nambooze discovered that many children with neurological disorders such as Down syndrome and autism were hidden from society and treated as a burden.

Determined to change this narrative, she began advocating for awareness and acceptance. Together with her husband, she founded Angels Centre for Children with Special Needs to support children living with such conditions.

The centre, located in Kakiri, Wakiso district, rehabilitates children with special needs from as young as six months to adulthood, focusing on building social, communication

and survival skills.

Over the past 13 years, the centre has handled more than 400 children, equipping them with life skills to live meaningful and productive lives.

Parents like Margret Ngabo understand this journey well. Ngabo, a mother of a 22-year-old autistic son, recalls the moment she realised something was different.

"When my son was two years old, I realised he wasn't talking like other children. I took him to a doctor and that's when I learnt he had autism. It was difficult to accept, but it was the beginning of a long journey to find the right support," she says.

Ngabo's experience reflects that of many parents who face stigma, misinformation and rejection. She recalls being turned away by mainstream schools that did not understand autism.

"People don't understand

autism. When I took my son to a mainstream school, they chased him away because they didn't know how to handle him," Ngabo says.

"Society needs awareness so that the mindset can change. We need acceptance and inclusion."

SKILLING

Nambooze says children with Down syndrome and autism can lead fulfilling lives if supported early. She believes they deserve equal access to education, training and opportunities like any other child. Through structured programmes and social interaction, the centre helps

BREAK BARRIERS...

Nalubega says creative activities such as drawing and craft-making improve concentration and communication.

children build confidence and independence.

"People with Down syndrome can live meaningful lives. Each person has unique talents and personalities. They have dreams and deserve opportunities," Nambooze says.

Her own son, Abryl Ebenezer Nuwagaba, who inspired the creation of the centre, is now a student at Kampala International School and an upcoming artiste who enjoys music, dance and drama. His progress, Nambooze says, is proof that early intervention and social exposure can transform lives.

At the Angels Centre, social and survival skills are prioritised. Children are taught how to communicate, interact with others and perform basic tasks independently.

Speech and language therapist Derrick Kalema says engagement in different activities is critical.

"The most important thing is to keep them engaged. Some children can express themselves, but need patience and support to be understood," Kalema says.

Carers also play a vital role. Resty Nalubega, a carer at the centre, says structured learning helps children build confidence and focus. She says creative activities such as drawing and craft-making improve concentration and communication.

"In class, we focus on early learning, helping them settle and concentrate. They practise shading, drawing and making crafts, which helps them express themselves and develop essential life skills," Nalubega says.

Recently, the Grant Thornton Foundation injected sh600m into the centre, to boost its capacity to support more children. The announcement was made by Sharon Babirye, the foundation's associate.

PHOTO BY ALOYSIOUS KASOMA



Nambooze (centre) with one of the children with Down syndrome at Angels Centre for Children with Special Needs. She says raising a child with special needs requires resilience