A pre-school set up to promote inclusion, where children with special needs learn alongside other children, has become oversubscribed just three months after it opened in January.

Likely the first full-fledged inclusive pre-school in Singapore, Kindle Garden offers 75 places, of which up to 30 per cent are for children with special needs.

Fifty-five places have been taken up, with the 20 remaining places set aside for next year’s K1 children so this year’s K1 children have places next year.

The centre, run by voluntary welfare group Awwa and funded by the Lien Foundation, already has a waiting list of 100 special needs children and 25 other children.

Awwa chief executive Tim Oei said he was initially concerned that there would be low enrolment. He said: “When we put up the banner, the community walked in. We took great pains to say that there are kids with special needs. But that was not a hindrance (to parents).”

To them, it’s like – so? And some felt – better still, it is different.”

Mr Izaan Tari Sheiki, 32, an executive director in a bank, enrolled his three-year-old child in the Lengkok Bahru centre as it is near his home. “I was wondering if the curriculum would cater just to children with special needs, but I liked the idea of personalised care,” he said. “I also notice my daughter being helpful to others. Kids need to be taught when they’re young, to accept differences among people.”

Awwa director J. R. Karthikeyan said lesson plans at the pre-school are personalised for different learning needs. While children “experience the same lesson”, the learning goals that each child is expected to meet would differ.

The facilities at Kindle Garden are also designed such that children with special needs can learn alongside other kids. For instance, there is a toy car big enough for a child on a wheelchair to enter and play in it with able-bodied friends.

Waiting list for inclusive pre-school

At Kindle Garden, children with special needs learn alongside other kids

Priscilla Goy

CAITLIN SOLEIL LUCAS GIRL WITH MYSTERY ILLNESS DIES B2

iPHONE SE NO SNAKING QUEUES FOR NEW MODEL B8

NUMBER OF WOMEN IN GEYLANG SERAI TRAINED TO BE FIRST RESPONDERS B3

While children “experience the same lesson” at the pre-school run by Awwa and funded by the Lien Foundation, the learning goals that each child is expected to meet differ. Kindle Garden has a speech therapist, occupational therapist and early intervention teacher among its staff of 12. ST PHOTO: CHEW SENG KIM

Lien Foundation, chief executive Lee Poh Wah said: “Early childhood education at its very best is inclusive education – because of its focus on individual needs and developmentally appropriate practices.”

“If you look closer, inclusive education is synonymous with quality education.”

Currently, 14 other pre-schools take in children with special needs under the Integrated Child Care Programme – but only those with mild to moderate disabilities. These centres do not offer therapy and each has up to 10 special needs kids.

In comparison, Kindle Garden admits children with mild to severe special needs, including those with autism. It has three therapists, each with a different area of expertise. The centre is run by an education consultant among its staff of 12. It recently had to drop full-day child care before 6.30pm – the industry median is 5.30pm as of January.

Children with moderate to severe special needs benefit from the Early Intervention Programme for Infants and Children (Eipic), but “I hope our inclusive approach can also be adopted by all”, said Ms Poh Wah.

Ms Poh Wah said: “Some parents do not go to pre-school due to the severity of their needs or lack of suitable pre-schools.”

Khloe Gan, three, who has Down syndrome, used to go to an Eipic centre before going to Kindle Garden. Her mother, manager Chan Bi Yi, 34, used to pay about $700 a month, but Khloe spent just six hours a week at the Eipic centre. She now pays a subsidised $748 for full-day childcare at Kindle Garden.

“I was concerned if the centre could handle her, but there are therapists around, so it’s okay,” she said.

Meanwhile, from now until April 14, the Lien Foundation is inviting people to give their views on how to make Singapore more inclusive for children with special needs. They can do so at http://bit.do/Inclusivegoyshiyi@sph.com.sg