

Wanted: Legal boost for rights of special needs kids

Most parents of such children polled also want better pre-school education for them

Priscilla Goy

Most parents of children with special needs want new laws to promote the rights of their children, and better pre-school education for them, a survey has found.

The survey polled 835 parents with special needs children aged nine and below and was commissioned by the Lien Foundation, a philanthropic house.

Findings released yesterday showed that close to three-quarters of parents polled agreed that new laws are necessary.

The poll also asked parents about challenges faced in raising their special needs children, and how the public acts towards them (see chart on key findings). Of parents with children in pre-schools, fewer than half felt their children had adequate support from the pre-schools – be it from teachers, the curriculum or facilities available (see chart).

Close to half of the parents of pre-schoolers also said it was difficult to enrol their children in

pre-school, usually because there were pre-schools that were unwilling to admit the child, or because of inexperienced teachers.

On a broader level, 77 per cent of the respondents supported the idea of inclusive education, an approach that caters to both children with and without special needs.

The Lien Foundation said laws could help promote inclusiveness and suggested that the Compulsory Education Act, which makes primary school education a must, be extended to special needs children.

It said in a statement: "This would set a baseline of access to education for these children and ensure a commitment to their education needs."

Its chief executive Lee Poh Wah said Singapore is an exception among places that came up tops in education rankings, such as Hong Kong and South Korea, "because unlike them, we have yet to introduce laws to support inclusion in education".

Lien Foundation programme manager Ng Tze Yong added that the committee behind the 2012-2016 Enabling Masterplan – which

guides the development of policies and services for people with disabilities – had recommended that children with special needs be included under the Act by 2016. But no update on this was given in a progress report released in April, he said.

Parents of children with special needs, while noting that it could be more inconvenient for their children to attend mainstream schools, said they wanted their children to socialise with their typically-developing peers.

Ms Sally Kwek, 39, founding editor of an online parenting magazine, moved her nine-year-old daughter out from a primary school – after staff asked that she hire a shadow teacher to help the child cope, which was too expensive to do so – to a special education school.

"She has friends, but she's less exposed to what life will be like when she grows up in the real world. That in itself is also a disability," she said.

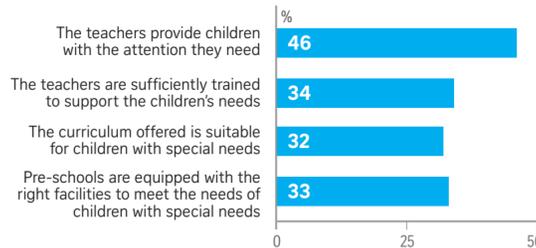
Children with and without special needs stand to benefit from more inclusive education, she added. The former would better understand what is socially acceptable; the latter would learn how to respond to people with disabilities.

Weight-management coach Lawrence Ng, 44, who has a son with au-

Views of parents of pre-schoolers with special needs

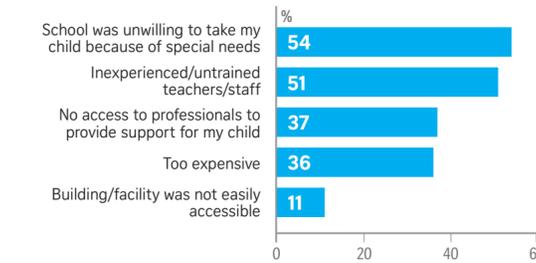
Inadequate support from pre-schools

Parents of special needs children who went to pre-school: 380*



Challenges faced when enrolling children in pre-schools

Parents who had difficulty enrolling their special needs children in pre-school: 193*



*Number of people who answered the survey questions. Percentage figures refer to percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with statements given.

Source: LIEN FOUNDATION STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

tism, hopes teaching can be differentiated to suit children's varied learning styles.

For Mr Izaan Tari Sheikh, 32, an executive director in a bank, his able-bodied daughter learns alongside special needs children in a

pre-school. He said: "I have not seen the teachers showing any less attention to my child than to those with special needs. She also seems to show more concern for others."

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KEY FINDINGS

• 28 per cent regard Singapore as inclusive

• About half felt their key service needs were being met – in transportation (58%), medical and dental (55%) and childcare (54%)

• 43 per cent wanted more financial help from the Government, and close to 60 per cent of those with a monthly household income of \$7,000 to \$9,900 felt this way

• Four in 10 think their special needs children spend too little time in the community outside school; among these, 31 per cent said it is difficult to spend time in public spaces as they feel judged by others

• Around one in three have heard adults directing insensitive remarks at their special needs children

• Almost half said their special needs children do not have friends without disabilities

• 61 per cent said they or their spouses are the primary caregivers; among this group, two in five quit their jobs to take care of the child

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