

A recent survey by the Lien Foundation showed that 46 per cent of parents had trouble enrolling their children with special needs in pre-schools. **NURUL ASYIKIN YUSOFF** (asyikiny@sph.com.sg) speaks to parents of special needs children in mainstream schools on the challenges they face

Special needs need special deeds

At 15 months old, he could do everything a child his age could — except talk.

Worried, his parents took him to a polyclinic for a check-up.

After being referred to KK Women's and Children's Hospital, he was diagnosed with receptive and expressive language delay, which meant his speech and motor skills were slower than normal.

Abdul Hadi Abdul Rani, now eight, had to attend speech and occupational therapy sessions for two years. Though his speech is clearer now, he still has problems expressing himself.

In Kindergarten 1, Abdul Hadi's teachers told his mother, Madam Suharni Ahmad, 49, that her son had trouble focusing and staying still.

But after rounds of tests and assessments, his diagnosis was still unclear.

NO DISORDER

He had hyperactive behaviour and his development was significantly slower than that of his peers. But he did not have a disorder.

Speaking to The New Paper from their home in Tampines, Madam Suharni, a housewife, said: "We were told that Hadi falls somewhere in between."

On their doctors' and counsellors' advice, she and her husband, Mr Abdul Rani Abdul Sani, 52, decided to defer Hadi's Primary 1 enrolment into a mainstream school for a year.

She said: "We were told he's behind for his age. He couldn't understand simple questions and had trouble following instructions."

"So we thought it would be for the best to hold him back a year and let him catch up first."

Hadi only started Primary 1 this year.

Madam Suharni commended the school for being accommodating and

understanding of Hadi's condition.

Before the school term started, an officer from the school met Hadi's parents to discuss his development so that the school could provide adequate learning support.

He is in the Learning Support Programme and Learning Support for Maths, two specialised programmes to help Primary 1 students with weaker literacy and numeracy skills.

On her part, Madam Suharni helps the teachers manage her son by sharing with them tips she has learnt from his therapy sessions, such as using visual cues instead of verbal ones.

"Every day when Hadi leaves for school, I'm worried about his behaviour because I know he tends to make noise and disturb his friends in class, so I try to help his teachers manage him as much as I can."

Hadi attends up to 12 hours of extra lessons and therapy sessions a week to help his development.

The couple, who have two other daughters, spend between \$1,500 and \$1,800 a month on these classes.

Another parent, Madam Sally Quek, 39, sent her daughter to a mainstream school, but later withdrew her from it.

But she was full of praise for the school, which her daughter Jarene Hong, now nine, attended in Primary 1.

Jarene has moebius syndrome, a rare condition that affects her face and throat muscles. Her condition means she is unable to swallow and has to be fed through a tube in her stomach. Her speech is also affected and she has a tendency to drool.

Madam Quek had to shadow Jarene at school for six months in order to care for her.

"The staff were very supportive and kind," the housewife told TNP.

"We had a meeting before school

“Every day when Hadi leaves for school, I'm worried about his behaviour because I know he tends to make noise and disturb his friends in class, so I try to help his teachers manage him as much as I can.”
— Abdul Hadi Abdul Rani's mother, Madam Suharni Ahmad.



SPECIAL ATTENTION: (Top and above) Madam Suharni Ahmad delayed enrolling her son, Abdul Hadi Abdul Rani, in Primary 1 by one year so that he could catch up. TNP PHOTOS: PHYLLICIA WANG

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN OTHER COUNTRIES

AUSTRALIA

The Disability Standards for Education ensures that students with disabilities are provided the same opportunities as other students. It applies to both government and non-government education providers across all levels.

UNITED KINGDOM

Under the Equality Act, schools and other relevant authorities must provide young people with special education needs (SEN) information and advice on matters relating to their SEN, as well as matters relating to health and social care.

UNITED STATES

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), mainstream government-run schools in the US are required to provide support for children with SEN. Each student with SEN gets an Individualized Education Program (IEP), which details their learning needs and how their progress will be measured.



SWITCH: Madam Sally Quek enrolled daughter Jarene Hong into a mainstream school but later changed schools. PHOTO COURTESY OF SALLY QUEK

We're not trained to deal with them: Teacher

Looking after children with special education needs (SEN) in a mainstream school is no easy job, said a pre-school teacher who declined to be named.

The teacher told The New Paper that she is often at a loss when a child with SEN has a meltdown because she is not professionally trained to deal with them.

She said: "They might get agitated when there's a change in their routines, so they'll throw a tantrum or sit in a corner alone."

An assistant teacher will have to calm the child down and coax them into joining the class, she said.

FEARS

In a recent survey by the Lien Foundation, seven in 10 Singaporeans support the idea of inclusive education.

However, only 53 per cent of parents polled are comfortable having their children sitting next to a child with SEN in the classroom.

Madam Sharon Yeap, 52, a mother of three, said: "Initially, I was hoping there would not be any children with SEN in my daughter's class because I know they can be disruptive."

But after a year of volunteering at school events and noticing how her daughter has become more accommodating and patient, the housewife is now more receptive to the idea of inclusive education.

"I asked myself, 'What if other kids ostracised my special needs child?'"

She added that while she understands that children with SEN could be disruptive in class, it would not be a big issue if there was a teacher trained to handle them.

Madam Liana Aron, 33, a housewife and a mother of two, believes it depends on the child's capabilities.

She said: "If they have no intellectual disability, I don't see why they shouldn't be in mainstream schools."

Experts said that although children with SEN could benefit from studying in mainstream schools, there were certain drawbacks to inclusive education.

Dr Penny Tok, a psychologist from Dr Penny Tok Psychology Practice, said being among peers could give children with SEN exposure to a real-world setting.

But while she is pro-inclusion, she said the current setting in mainstream schools might not be suitable for all children with special needs.

Mr Izad Ghaliid, a psychology studies lecturer from Temasek Polytechnic, added: "It will also be challenging for the mainstream school teachers to design and deliver lessons to suit the needs for both SEN and mainstream students."

"The child with SEN might not be able to receive the most effective and tailored lesson in a mainstream school simply because the teacher has 30 other students to work with."

MP: DO MORE FOR KIDS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

In Parliament last Monday, Bukit Batok Member of Parliament Murali Pillai said in his adjournment motion that more should be done to promote better understanding of special needs children and the challenges they faced.

Mr Murali suggested training people to identify those with intellectual disabilities, and implementing a code of conduct that people could refer to when interacting with special needs children.

Minister for Social and Family Development Tan Chuan-Jin agreed that it was essential for the community to accept people with disabilities.

He noted that recent public education efforts, such as the See The True Me campaign by the National Council of Social Service, were positive steps to help raise awareness.

Mr Tan added that the next Enabling Masterplan — a five-year plan to chart the development of policies and services for people with disabilities — hoped to address some of the challenges and concerns of people with disabilities and their caregivers.

started, to discuss what it was going to be like."

Madam Quek said that initially, the other children were afraid of Jarene.

But after the form teacher, who had been observing Madam Quek's interactions with her daughter, explained Jarene's condition to them, they became more sympathetic and understanding.

In the end, Madam Quek had to withdraw Jarene from the school after they requested that she hire a shadow teacher for her daughter, which she could not afford.

A shadow teacher works directly with a special education needs (SEN) child to provide support for the child's learning and development.

According to Madam Quek, hiring a shadow teacher for Jarene would have cost between \$2,500 and \$5,000 a month.

She added that while parents of SEN children in mainstream schools should have realistic expectations, she believes that more can be done to help these children succeed in a mainstream learning environment, in terms of staff and infrastructure.

Madam Quek said: "Jarene goes to a cerebral palsy school now, but she misses interacting with the real world."