

S'poreans don't walk the talk in special needs support

BY JANICE TAI

SINGAPOREANS support the idea of inclusion but do not walk the talk, a survey has found.

While most people believe that children with and without disabilities can study together, only half of parents polled were comfortable with having a special needs child sitting next to their own child in class.

Also, only one in 10 Singaporeans are confident of interacting with special needs children.

These were some of the findings of a survey – released yesterday at a press conference – which asked more than 1,000 people for their experience of inclusion in daily life and early education. The survey was com-

missioned by local philanthropic house Lien Foundation.

The findings suggest that Singaporeans are tolerant rather than accepting towards special needs people, said Ng Tze Yong, programme manager at Lien Foundation.

“Singaporeans embrace the idea of inclusion, but there is a gap between what we think and what we do,” said Mr Ng.

“Building handicapped ramps, parking lots and toilets is the easy part. We now need to move beyond that to dismantle the obstacles in our minds and the barriers in our hearts,” he added.

Inclusion means ensuring that everyone, including those with disabilities, is given the opportunity to realise his potential in the same environment.

Asked about the current level of acceptance and degree of social interaction between the public and special needs children, more than half of the respondents said that Singaporeans were willing to share public spaces with such children but not to interact with them.

Only eight per cent of those polled felt that Singaporeans were willing to go the extra mile to make a special needs child feel welcome.

Yet, nearly half of them believe that new laws are needed to promote the rights of such children.

For instance, eight in ten of them believe that it should be compulsory for such children to go to school. They are now exempted from the Compulso-

ry Education Act.

One possible reason why special needs children, such as those with learning and behavioural difficulties or physical disabilities, are not accepted fully in society is the lack of interaction between the public and such children.

For over a third of the respondents, such children are not part of their social circle. Only a quarter of parents surveyed reported that their children are friends with them.

However, the survey also found that Singaporeans' uncertainty about interacting with special needs children falls when the frequency of interactions rises.

Given this correlation, clinical psychologist and researcher Kenneth Poon said there should be more opportunities for interac-

tion so that friendships and shared interests can form.

Tang Hui Nee, assistant director and head of community services at KK Women's and Children's Hospital, said it would help if there was more public education and exposure.

Three in four of the respondents said being informed in advance about the special needs of a child will help them be more understanding when disruptive behaviour happens.

To better understand the needs and challenges of the special needs community, a separate survey of 750 parents of children with special needs is being done and the findings will be released next month.

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