

ItChangedMyLife

# Providing inclusive learning space for all kids

Childcare centre principal sees inclusion as a mission, after her own experience as a parent



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Little Khloe Gan is merrily ambling towards the childcare centre's play area when Madam Lena Koh stops the tyke in her tracks.

"Khloe, have you finished your snack? Can you put your bowl in the pail, please?" coos the principal of Kindie Garden.

The child dutifully does as told, earning a beaming smile from Madam Koh. "Good girl," she says.

And Khloe - a three-year-old with Down syndrome - merrily goes off to join her friends, most of whom are typically developing children.

Madam Koh has good reason to be pleased. A year ago, when Khloe came to Kindie Garden - Singapore's first inclusive childcare centre located at the Enabling Village in Lengkok Bahru - she could not even walk.

"She had low muscle tone, so she moved around on her bum," the principal says.

But with help from the childcare centre's resident occupational therapist, the little girl can now even run.

Run by voluntary welfare group Awwa and funded by the Lien Foundation, Kindie Garden is a dream come true for Madam Koh, who has spent nearly three decades in early childhood education (ECE).

The mother of two boys, aged 13 and 17, has a soft spot for children with special needs. Her younger son Dexter is autistic and she understands only too well the challenges parents with special needs children have to grapple with, especially when it comes to education.

"A lot of heartbreak can be prevented if only we try. Inclusion works and while the journey is not easy, the results make it worth fighting for," she says.

Petite but feisty, she is the elder of two sisters, and grew up in a one-room flat in Kim Keat.

Her father was a carpenter who had to stop working after suffering a heart attack in his early 50s. Her mother was a stall assistant and dishwasher.

To supplement the family income, the former student of Chong Boon Primary and Mayflower Secondary started working during school holidays from the age of 12.

She washed dishes and served drinks at canteens in shipyards and other industrial areas, waited on tables in Japanese restaurants and worked as a sales assistant in department stores.

"I think working from such an early age taught me resilience and made me street-smart," she says.

Her foray into ECE was accidental. Given her family circumstances, she knew that further studies were out of the question. Her plan was to join the army after her O levels.



Madam Lena Koh with her husband, Mr How Chin Choy, and their sons, Max and Dexter. She understands the challenges parents with special needs children face, as Dexter was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. PHOTO: LENA KOH

"I thought it would be interesting and different. I wanted to join the National Police Cadet Corps while I was in school but they rejected me because I was too short," she says.

Her father, however, nipped that idea in the bud.

"He said, 'Even the boys find national service tough and you want to join the army? No.'"

He told her to stay put at the kindergarten where she had found a job as an assistant teacher while waiting for her O-level results.

"I was so disappointed. I was just an assistant then and my job was to wash little bums. I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life," she says.

Fortunately, it did not turn out so dire. Teaching tiny tots, she found, was rewarding. She stayed at Twinkle Child Care for 10 years, during which time she obtained her certificate as well as her diploma in pre-school teaching.

She left only after she got married to an electrician-turned-engineer when she was 28 and had her first son.

Her next stop was at Kinderland, where she was made principal after eight months.

By then, she had come across her fair share of children with special needs. "I remember this boy who would eat raw macaroni and chew paper clips. I had little knowledge of special needs then. I couldn't even get his attention," she recalls.

Her life changed when she had Dexter in 2004.

There were indications that he was different from other children.

"He didn't speak and would carry his milk bottle all over the place. I didn't think anything was wrong because my elder son also had speech delay and didn't speak until he was four," she says.

She admits she was in denial until she enrolled him in a nursery.

"The teacher could get all his classmates to sit down but not him. He would be in a corner, lining up his toys in a straight line. She could not get him to join in activities, she

couldn't cope," she says.

Madam Koh took Dexter out of the kindergarten and sent him for an assessment at a hospital.

The results shook her. Her son was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Among other things, the assessment report indicated that he had "speech abnormality", showed "social impairment" and lacked "imagination".

ASD is a lifelong neurodevelopmental disorder and is characterised, in varying degrees, by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication and repetitive behaviour.

She and her husband decided to seek a second opinion from a specialist who was more reassuring. She said Dexter was high functioning and had an IQ of 107. According to the IQ scale - developed from a system devised by psychologist Alfred Binet in 1904 - a score of between 90 and 110 indicates average or normal intelligence.

Madam Koh recalls: "She said, 'You've got to work with your son. It's not that bad.'"

She did just that.

"I worked with him every night at home. I taught him the alphabet. Within two weeks, he mastered it. I next worked on numbers and he got it within two weeks, too. That was a real achievement for me," she says, adding that Dexter started speaking at six.

He started Primary 1 in a neighbourhood school when he was seven, after getting the go-ahead from his psychologist.

Madam Koh informed the school about Dexter's condition. Although some teachers were supportive, it has not been an easy journey.

"Some teachers were not receptive towards children with learning needs. They tended to complain more about his condition instead of giving me constructive or helpful feedback in helping him to cope in class.

"They don't know how to handle him. They take things away from

him which just makes him act up," she says.

Like many "PSLE mums" who have children taking the Primary School Leaving Examination this year, the diminutive woman says she is frazzled.

Dexter, whose elder brother Max is now in Ngee Ann Polytechnic, is less anxious.

Madam Koh says: "He will tell me, 'Don't worry, Mum, I will try harder.'"

"And when I ask, 'What happens if you fail?', his reply is, 'Then I will be a YouTuber and make lots of money reviewing toys.'"

"I just hope he will pass his PSLE. At least with that, he can go to the ITE and pick up a skill."

While her situation made her empathetic to the parents of special needs children in the childcare centres she worked in, it also frustrated her. "There were kids with special needs but I couldn't help their parents by getting educational therapists because it was just too expensive," she says with a sigh.

Three years ago, she was called up for an interview by Awwa after she sent out her resume.

"When I met them, they told me about this inclusive daycare centre they wanted to run. I was thinking to myself: Wow, if this is really true, then there will be hope for so many parents."

Not long after, she came on board

as principal of Kindie Garden, funded by the Lien Foundation, which has been pushing the envelope in the areas of eldercare and early childhood education.

Initial fears that the concept - to provide all children, with or without special needs, a "values-based, inclusive and non-discriminatory learning environment" - may not go down well with parents evaporated. About 30 per cent of the children have special needs.

"Even before we opened, parents started walking in from the neighbourhood. The first parent I talked to was a Mrs Chia. I told her about the programme and that about 30 per cent of the children are those with special needs. She said, 'That's fine. It's good.' She enrolled her child. It was the same with the second parent, too. That gave me a big booster."

Kindie Garden opened in January last year with 20 children. By the third month, it was oversubscribed with a waiting list.

"Yesterday, a couple with a nine-month-old child walked in to find out what we're all about. We have pregnant mothers queuing up for vacancies, too," she says, adding that Kindie Garden now has more than 80 children.

In addition to children with Down syndrome and autistic children, it also has young ones who have speech, visual or mobility issues.

Madam Koh started out with five teaching staff members but now has 14, including an occupational therapist, an associate psychologist and an early interventionist.

The journey, she says, has been exhilarating. Because it is such a novel concept, she and her team often have to figure out their own solutions to problems. But the work is extremely rewarding.

"A couple of kids could not walk when they came in. Our therapist would come in with Kaye Walkers and work with them," she says, referring to the wheeled walking aids.

"It's so good to see the kids gain confidence and outgrow their walkers," adds Madam Koh, who is now studying for her advanced diploma in early intervention at Ngee Ann Polytechnic.

Inclusion has become her mission. "When you see a visually impaired person with a walking stick in the MRT station, what do you do? Most will tend to walk away. But have you thought about offering your arm?"

"This is what inclusion is all about. It's about accepting him into your life. He may not even need your help but it's good for him to know that you are here and you will help if he needs it.

"It's empathy, not sympathy. It's inclusion."

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Madam Lena Koh is the principal of Kindie Garden, Singapore's first inclusive childcare centre located at the Enabling Village in Lengkok Bahru. About 30 per cent of the children have special needs.

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VIDEO: How Lena Koh became the principal of Singapore's first inclusive kindergarten  
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