



**Special needs
kids •**
Acceptance by
parents a key
step in future of
child | B3



Research suggests that early intervention is crucial for the cognitive, communicative, social and emotional development of a child with special educational needs as it can minimise further developmental delays. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

Early acceptance a crucial step in raising special needs children

Intervention at the right time can make a significant difference for the future of the child and family.

Intan Azura Mokhtar

It is always easier said than done.

Accepting that your child has special needs can present emotional challenges. But it remains a crucial step in prioritising the child's well-being – which requires early intervention and tailored educational support.

As a parent of a son with high-functioning autism, I was initially grappling with his diagnosis when he was three. It was a formidable personal journey, where I had to consistently remind myself that this journey was not about me; it was about my child.

What was important was that I could find ways to help my child and maximise his learning and personal development.

At the end of the day, when my husband and I are no longer around, we want to be sure that our son can live independently as best as he can, and that he will have the skills to navigate in society.

Again, easier said than done. Parenting a child with special needs is rather challenging. There may be feelings of disbelief, guilt, anger and uncertainty all rolled into one. Questions about how to best care for, nurture, and support their atypical child further compounded these feelings.

This emotional vortex sets parents and families on a tumultuous journey marked by frustration, stress, trauma and, at times, grief.

IMPORTANCE OF EARLY INTERVENTION

In Singapore, there are around 35,500 students with reported special educational needs as at December 2022. Around four-fifths of these students are enrolled in mainstream schools under the Ministry of Education (MOE).

The special educational needs identified in these schools are

autism, learning disorders such as dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and sensory or physical disabilities. The remaining 20 per cent of students with special educational needs are in special education schools.

Research suggests that early intervention is crucial for the child's cognitive, communicative, social and emotional development as it can minimise further developmental delays.

Neural circuits that form the foundation for learning and information processing, as well as habits and behaviours, are most flexible and adaptable in the first three years of a child's life.

Early intervention strategies for a child with special needs help to optimise the development of these neural circuits and the child's communication skills.

But there are parents who may delay the diagnosis. Some who struggle to accept the diagnosis may defer getting early intervention assistance for their child.

These parents need to know that there is help from the non-profit and voluntary welfare sector, the social service agencies, the Government, mainstream schools and even their own neighbourhood – a relatively good system and network are in place that can help them parent and support their child with special needs.

For instance, the Early Intervention Programme for Infants and Children (Epic) is a centre-based programme for children up to six years old.

This includes training new parents and caregivers of children with special needs up to two years old so that they can carry out the relevant intervention strategies at home; therapy and educational intervention services at a dedicated Epic centre to complement the child's pre-school education from when they are two to six years old; and developmental support for children with special needs who are in the pre-schools but who may be able to cope with less intervention between the ages of two and six years old.

Parents of children with special needs who are enrolled in MOE-funded special education

(Sped) schools can also apply for the Sped Financial Assistance Scheme to help pay for Sped school fees, subject to means testing and household income level.

There is also the Home Caregiving Grant (HCG) administered by the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC), where the monthly quantum of between \$250 and \$400 is meant to defray some of the daily expenses involved in taking care of children with moderate to severe special needs at home.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

During my term as an MP for Ang Mo Kio GRC, I had a constituent and grassroots volunteer (let us call her Mrs M) whose elder child developed cerebral palsy after a severe bout of fever and infection when he was one to two

years old. I can only imagine how difficult it was for the parents to accept that their eldest child would have to live with a disability for the rest of his life despite being born without any.

Mrs M was single-minded in ensuring that her son could be independent as far as possible and could receive all the help he could get for his social, cognitive, and communicative development.

In addition to leveraging all available intervention and support measures within the social services network, Mrs M actively engaged with the local support network, exemplifying her relentless commitment to her son's well-being.

What is this local support network?

It is made up of the long-time neighbours and friends living within the immediate vicinity of Mrs M and her family.

As the boy grew older and could travel about on his own, and while Mrs M went out for part-time work, the neighbours kept a lookout for him. They made sure that he was crossing the roads safely, or that he did not go hungry while Mrs M was still at work.

Other than cognitive, communicative, developmental, and financial support and provision, parents of children with special needs also require this social support. While this may come from the immediate or extended families, significant social support from community groups is equally helpful, if not necessary.

For me, the local support network that I will always remain grateful for is the mainstream primary school that my son was enrolled in.

Being a relatively new school in the neighbourhood, it set pupil development as one of its main priorities, rather than academic attainment or achievements alone. The teachers were trained in helping children with developmental and special needs.

As a result, my son had the best care and attention during his six years in primary school – the teachers who taught him in one year communicated his developments and milestones to the teachers who took over the following year. This was important as I knew my son could receive the support he needed from year to year.

In addition, the teachers ensured that my son's classmates were aware of his condition and that he had buddies assigned from among his classmates to help him when needed, especially in staying focused on his work and helping him be included in class activities.

Although my son was still a victim of bullying in primary school, the incidents were isolated, and addressed promptly and fairly, and my husband and I were kept informed at every stage of what our son went through in school.

The teachers were also

magnanimous in their encouragement and in motivating our son, which helped develop his confidence and self-esteem.

Despite the help that is around, I know there are parents who might be simply worried about what would happen to their children with special needs long after they are gone.

There are some measures in place to address these concerns. For example, the parents can set aside their Central Provident Fund (CPF) savings for the long-term care of their children under the CPF Special Needs Savings Scheme. This will help ensure that should their children with special needs not be able to financially support themselves fully, the parents' CPF savings are there to help them meet their financial needs.

Can more still be done by the Government, partner agencies and even the community? Yes, certainly.

We have strong advocates for the disabled community, such as Mayor and MP Denise Phua and Professor Kenneth Poon from the National Institute of Education, who continue to push for more help and provisions for underserved communities such as persons with disabilities or special needs.

As a society, we are constantly striving to do more and do better to ensure that underserved groups can be better served and assisted and that our society remains inclusive to all.

As we continue to strengthen our laws, policies, and frameworks to better serve less privileged groups such as persons with disabilities or special needs, we also need individuals in our society to step up and look out for those who are underserved or who may need help.

This can be done at the individual level, through informal ground-up networks such as neighbours in a housing estate, or through a more structured network such as teachers and parent volunteers in a school, or colleagues in an organisation where a child with special needs is in.

The power and social impact of kind-hearted individuals in our local networks cannot be discounted or undermined, for it truly takes a village to raise a child – typical or atypical alike.

It's important for parents to recognise that they are not alone in their journey to support their child and with confidence, take that initial step towards acceptance of the child's special needs. This can profoundly benefit not just the child but also the entire family unit.

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