

Leave no child behind, say early childhood intervention advocates

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Marianne Clark-Hattingh, UNICEF representative in Malaysia, addressing the NECIC conference.

INCLUSIVITY was the buzzword at the three-day National Early Childhood Intervention Conference held last month in Kuala Lumpur.

Organised by the National Early Childhood Intervention Council (NECIC), the conference was attended by more than 500 families, professionals, therapists, policy makers and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

According to the NECIC, the conference concluded that there are five important directions that services for children with disability need to take in Malaysia:

Preschool inclusion

According to Datuk Dr Amar Singh, NECIC's immediate past president, and Dr Wong Woan Yiing, the current president, it is vital that the majority of children who are identified with some disability have their preschool education in mainstream kindergartens.

“For this to happen, we must focus less on segregated, early intervention centres (EIP) and more on inclusion in kindergartens. Kindergartens must be more open to accept children with disabilities. In addition EIP workers need to partner with kindergartens and work there to support such an inclusion,” said Drs Amar and Wong in a press release.

School inclusion

Despite national targets for inclusion, the education for children with disabilities in the Ministry of Education facilities is still largely segregated. According to NECIC, this is partly because parents who have no children with disabilities object to the inclusion in the schools. Another obstacle is that currently less than 10% of all children with special needs are identified by the education department. Unidentified children number in excess of 500,000.

“The vast majority are currently in school, unrecognised, with no provision of services and often placed in classes for ‘weaker children’. Some schools even reject these children completely. Schools must stop focusing on achievement KPIs and focus instead on inclusion KPIs,” explained Drs Amar and Wong.

Family and parent empowerment

Currently most services developed or run by government agencies and non-governmental agencies do not have parental involvement in their planning. NECIC believes that there should be a token parent representative in national disability councils. In the conference, it was highlighted that the different parents groups have been reaching out to each other through social media to form a united voice.

Training of professionals

Professionals in the healthcare, welfare and education government agencies have limited training and awareness of children with disabilities and their needs. Most healthcare professionals are poorly trained. The undergraduate training in most universities is extremely poor for disability conditions that affect 15% of children. As such they come out to work with almost no skills and ideas what to do. It is vital for all medical university programmes to change and offer sufficient and adequate training in this area. In addition, all teachers should have basic training on disabilities as part of their routine undergraduate teacher training courses.

Bring balance to the private sector

Many parents have expressed their distress to the NECIC regarding the rapid increase in fees charged by private professionals in offering services to children with disabilities. It is vital that the care and support of children with disabilities does not become a profiteering business.

“The NECIC strongly advocates that the government and its agencies work to create a fee schedule so that all forms of therapy for children with disability, including early intervention services, has an upper limit to the cost of these services. In line with the recently passed Allied Health Act, it is timely that such a fee schedule be created. This should include fee schedules for speech and language therapy, psychology assessment/therapy, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and others. In addition, unconventional therapies that feed on the fears of parents should also be curbed or regulated,” said Drs Amar and Wong.

The NECIC reiterated that inclusion is not about success but about acceptance. “A successful, developed country is one that leaves no child behind,” concluded Drs Amar and Wong.

Source: <http://shotsntots.com/leave-no-child-behind-say-early-childhood-intervention-advocates/>