

## Re-think education for special needs children

Thursday, 10 Oct 2019

THE National Early Childhood Intervention Council (NECIC) would like to respond to a report entitled “A school of their own” (Sunday Star, Sept 15; online at [bit.ly/star\\_intervention](http://bit.ly/star_intervention)), which highlighted the immense lack of early intervention services to serve the increasing number of children with autism in Malaysia.

We at the NECIC agree that both the public and private sectors need to collectively upscale efforts to ensure that no child is left behind.

Although building physical centres that cater to the physical and sensory needs of children with autism as well as other disabilities is an option, it is not the only feasible solution. Not only is it not cost-effective, it can also take a long time. We would like to highlight constructive and workable solutions that can be implemented in a timely manner without waiting, as our children cannot wait.

> Integrate early intervention services into existing childcare centres and preschools.

We can only build so many autism-friendly or disability-friendly early intervention centres, and waiting lists will always be long. A huge body of research evidence has shown that early intervention that is conducted in the child’s natural setting is most efficient and cost-effective.

A child’s natural setting in early childhood years means his/her home environment, childcare centre, and preschool or kindergarten.

Therefore, while we do need more early intervention centres delivering quality services that can work hand-in-hand with early childhood care providers, we should not aim to construct more early intervention centres which are expensive to build.

Instead, the focus needs to shift to making existing early childhood care and education centres inclusive by delegating early intervention therapists to provide services in these settings, as well as making environmental adaptations to the existing building to accommodate children’s sensory and physical needs.

This is because childcare centres and preschools are places where children spend the most time in, aside from their family homes. And many parents opt to enrol their children with disabilities in mainstream preschools because the learning environment is more conducive for children’s development and inclusive education benefits ALL children, not just those with special needs.

> Emphasise training for early childhood educators. Our country has a deficit of well-trained personnel to provide quality early intervention services to children with disabilities. Ideally these should be transdisciplinary therapists who are able to support all children with special needs throughout the country, urban and rural.

The skills and knowledge in inclusive early childhood education and disability support should be imparted to the early childhood carers and educators who care for these children in their settings. Thus, resources should be channelled into training personnel (early childhood educators) instead of physical buildings.

> Empower parents to teach. Currently, intervention plans are mostly developed and conducted by early childhood intervention therapists. International research as well as combined years of experience from numerous local professionals has seen the effectiveness of early intervention programmes when there is committed parental involvement.

Parents can be great teachers for their children with disabilities when they are empowered to deliver intervention, because parents have keen observations of what their children need. They are also resourceful when designing intervention plans that best meet their children's needs.

It is time that early intervention therapists share the teaching responsibility with parents, empower parents and also allow parents to take the lead in making decisions concerning their children's needs.

With the limited funding and human resources, factors that have plagued early childhood intervention services in Malaysia for years, we need to rethink and re-strategise how the nation is addressing this pressing need.

We acknowledge that making changes to existing systems and buildings will require effort. But it is the right thing to do.

The burden should not fall only on therapists/professionals and families of children with disabilities. All members of society and the government have the responsibility to "Make the Right Real" for our children with disabilities.

DATUK DR AMAR-SINGH HSS, Advisor, National Early Childhood Intervention Council (NECIC)

DR WONG WOAN YIING, President, NECIC & consultant paediatrician

PROF DR TOH TECK HOCK, Vice President, NECIC & consultant paediatrician

NG LAI THIN, Project Officer, NECIC