

## Feature



Wisma Harapan trainees who graduate from its vocational training programme will move on to the sheltered workshop where they carry out contract work such as packing, sorting and folding pamphlets.

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THE World Health Organisation (WHO) has found that one child in 160 has Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Of those who were diagnosed, around 50% also have an intellectual disability.

The level of intellectual functioning varies ranging from profound impairment to superior non-verbal cognitive skills.

At present, there is no epidemiological data available on the prevalence of autism in Malaysia.

However, a smaller scale study by the Health Ministry on children between the ages of 18 to 26 months showed a rate of 1.6 in 1,000 children, or approximately 1 in 62,512 has ASD.

National Autism Society of Malaysia (Nasom) chairman Feilina Feisol said the estimated number of autistic individuals in Malaysia stands at 300,000, with many more cases undiagnosed and unreported.

"Malaysia's Social Welfare Department only has less than 16,000 autistic individuals registered as OKU (Orang Kurang Upaya)," she noted.

Universiti Malaya Faculty of Education senior lecturer and clinical consultant Dr Madhyazhagan Ganesan said according to the Individual Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), all children and adults with special needs must be provided with appropriate special education and intervention at their level of disabilities.

He noted special educational instruction, intervention and therapeutics for infant, toddlers, young children, children, adults and adolescents are very different according to their age and degree of disabilities.

"Hence, instructional or teaching and intervention services for them should be focused on appropriate and systematic approach, style, techniques, strategies, methods, and models such as pedagogical, psychological, psychosocial,

# Giving special needs children equal chances

In our second part this week, StarEducate looks at the education options for children who have Autism Spectrum Disorder.



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technological, psychiatric, biological, neuro-biological, sociological and geological," he said.

Autism Behavioural Centre (ABC) director and co-founder Charlene Marie Samuel said one of the effective and often used techniques in supporting individuals with autism is Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), which is the only method backed up by research.

"ABA has 40 years of research behind it to prove time and time again that it is effective.

"It is a very intensive and engaging programme where an autistic child has to go through minimally 16 hours a week to show signifi-



Samuel says Applied Behaviour Analysis is an effective technique in supporting individuals with autism.

cant changes in their speech development, social skills and learning," she explained, adding that a child can attend this programme for a maximum of 40 hours a week.

She said ABA is based on operant conditioning where motivation is used.

"We find out what an individual likes, their interest and use it as a tool to teach.

"ABA in essence uses the theories of operant conditioning, anything that uses reinforcement to increase behaviour or no response or negative response to reduce a behaviour is operant conditioning," said Samuel.



Prof Aini says Fusion Lab explores various approaches such as community and music therapy to help autistic youth.

Additional therapies that can be integrated into ABA include Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), and Pivotal Response Training (PRT), she added.

"PECS is a method of teaching communication through pictures and is ideal for children with limited or no verbal skills.

"PRT focus on behavioural and motivational challenges a toddler with autism may experience. PRT, builds upon these skills and focuses on developing a child's motivation to manage behaviour, communicate with others, and learn both in and out of the classroom," she explained.

Besides ABA, Samuel also recommended speech therapy and occupational therapy.

Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) vice-chancellor Prof Datin Paduka Dr Aini Ideris shared that UPM's Special Education Laboratory, also known as Fusion Lab, has been exploring various approaches such as community therapy and music therapy to help autistic youth acquire better connection with their surroundings and people.

She said Fusion Lab provides a platform for student and community volunteers to be part of the therapy while learning how to create groups and teams that consist of children with special needs.

"Imagine the kind of impact that can be created if all universities encourage their students to embark on special community programmes involving autistic children and their families.

"We may be able to assist gifted and talented autistic kids to realise their potential and contribute to the society in their own unique ways," said Prof Aini.

Institutions must also play their part in advocating the awareness and understanding of autism.

"This can ensure that everyone understands how to address autistic children and the best course of action in order to support their development and empowerment," she said.

## Intervention matters

The Education Ministry's Special Education division director

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# Different levels based on individual abilities

## Wisma Harapan

THE Selangor and Federal Territory Association for the Mentally Handicapped (SAMH), also known as Wisma Harapan, is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) set up by a group of concerned parents and voluntary workers under the Rotary Club of Klang and Port Swettenham.

Established in 1964, the organisation aims to provide activities and training to mentally disabled children and adults to improve their general welfare.

Wisma Harapan manager Krishnaveni Vellayatham said mentally disabled children have rights to education.

"It is important that education and training is provided so that they may one day be capable of employment or being self-sustainable," she said, noting that Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) is used in all three of the association's centres.

She explained ABA is used to teach autistic children compliance, communication and appropriate behaviour in order for them to integrate into society.

"Interaction is very important. They need to know how to greet people and how to behave appropriately. These include refraining from biting themselves, self-harming or grabbing at people's clothes," said Krishnaveni who has 28 years of special needs education under her belt.

She said Wisma Harapan has three centres - located in Klang and

Kuala Lumpur - that provide Early Intervention Programmes (EIP), special learning integration programmes, vocational training programmes, as well as a sheltered workshop for special needs individuals.

"Here we do not segregate autistic children from those who are diagnosed with down syndrome, slow learners, cerebral palsy or others. The children are assigned to classes based on their IQ level. This way they can learn together as well as from each other," she said.

Before enrolling into Wisma Harapan, students would need to have been diagnosed and certified by an expert and have relevant documents as proof, she added.

Mother of three Dharshini Ganeson said her daughter Preeya Nanthini, 27, who is dyspraxic, has been at Wisma Harapan for over five years.

Dharshini said her daughter first enrolled in the centre's vocational programmes and has since learnt art, handicraft, sewing and more before moving onto the sheltered workshop programme, where the trainees are paid a salary to carry out contract work such as packing, sorting and folding pamphlets.

"I saw a natural progression in my daughter," she said, stressing that special needs individuals can function in society and earn a living.

Dharshini said Wisma Harapan has provided a place for Nanthini to learn and "fit in".

"The programmes at the centre keep special needs individuals occupied, lets them learn and earn a living."

"They can't progress and develop if they are kept at home doing nothing," she said.

Dharshini believes in the importance of a special child being educationally and medically assessed as soon as the disability is discovered.

"This is ensure the special child receives systematic help throughout the years. For the child to be educationally assessed as to his or her IQ, the psychologist is the best person and a report will then be issued on the child's mental and behavioural patterns and what needs to be done," she said.

The formulation of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) for the special child is best done after assessing his or her requirements, she added.

"If this is not done, the parent might not be able to achieve the best goals for the child. It is like shooting arrows in the dark," she said.

Wisma Harapan has about 300 special needs individuals.

For more information, visit <http://mysamh.org/>.

## Nasom

Formed in 1987, the National Autism Society of Malaysia (Nasom) aims to deliver lifespan services to the community of people suffering from autism as well as deliver services and programmes that are

results-oriented and focuses on acquisition of skills and changes in behaviour.

A parent who sends her 16-year-old autistic daughter to Nasom's centre for vocational classes, said the NGO provides opportunities for personal development and growth to the children.

The mother said her daughter has made significant progress, 11 years after enrolling at the centre.

"She learnt how to manage herself. She used to cry a lot and was non-verbal, but now she asks for things in simple sentences and can perform basic chores, such as washing dishes and doing cross stitch," she said.

Nasom chairman Feilina Feisol sends her son Naim Rafaie Abdul Rahim for vocational training at Nasom, where special needs educators train him in a few skills including cooking, baking and sewing.

But before attending vocational classes, she said Naim attended early intervention, transition and pre-vocational classes at Nasom as well.

"It helped him learn to socialise and be more comfortable around people so that he would be able to be brought out of the house," she said.

Nasom is the only autism centre that does not have an exit age.

With over 20 centres across the nation, Nasom offers six programmes including early intervention; vocational; transition; residential; mainstreaming; pre-vocational;

therapy; as well as assessment and diagnosis.

For more information, visit <http://www.nasom.org.my/>.

## Autism Behavioural Centre

Autism Behavioural Centre (ABC) director and co-founder Charlene Marie Samuel said it is vital for a diagnosis to be done as early as possible to ensure no time will be wasted for the child to gain access to EIP and IEP.

ABC is one of the first intervention centres in Malaysia with 45 rooms and 32 therapists.

In order for a diagnosis to be made, a child will usually be assessed by a team of experts comprising an occupational therapist, speech therapist, special needs psychiatrist or psychologist, neurologist, paediatrician.

ABC offers comprehensive programmes including ABA, occupational, and speech therapies; play groups; parent and teacher workshops; free autism screenings; and shadow aide services.

All comprehensive individualised treatment utilise the ABA based interventions.

"ABA therapy includes EIP programmes, school readiness skills, life skills, vocational skills as well as integration into work," she added.

ABC also offers the ABA therapy in Mandarin due to the demand of families that are Chinese-speaking.

For more information, visit <http://abawithabc.com/>.



Wisma Harapan teacher Sharifah Aluyah Sayid Mohammad (in grey tudung) and her teaching assistant and trainee Nur Dalilahani Yusuf (in blue tudung) conduct motor developmental activities in class.



Special needs students Hafiz Mohd Yasir (left) and Chong Chen Yun (right) weave baskets out of rolled up recycled magazines at their vocational training classes.

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Paridin Jais said special needs students including autistic students who are capable of performing academically can attend classes at selected government schools around the nation, or opt for Vocational Special Education Secondary School or the Special Needs Integration Programme (PPKI).

He noted that providing the best education for special needs students has always been one of the ministry's main focuses, which is in line with the Malaysia

Education Blueprint 2013-2025.

"We (the ministry) try to produce high-quality teachers and student management assistants specialising in special education to provide the best for our students."

Paridin stressed that special needs students are encouraged to join special education schools (SPK), PPKI or inclusive education programmes (PPI) that are available.

Feilina said that programmes focusing on the acquisition of skills and changes in behaviour is beneficial to autistic individuals.

These programmes include

early intervention; pre-vocational; vocational; residential; therapy; mainstreaming; and transition programmes, all of which are available at Nasom's centres nationwide.

She noted that with the right support at the right time, people with autism can live rewarding and fulfilling lives and can achieve great things.

"This can happen only if they are supported by people who believe in their potential," she said.

Nasom was formed in 1987 by a group of parents and professionals

with the aim of delivering lifespan services to the community of persons with autism, and now has over 20 centres around the whole country.

"We hope we can promote the treatment, education, welfare and acceptance of people with autism, and provide assistance to families of people with autism," said Feilina.

Nodding in agreement, Nasom chief executive Razin Murat said Nasom primarily focuses on handling low-functioning autistic individuals.

"Not everyone can send their

children to private autism centres," he said, pointing out that the prices range from RM2,000 to RM5,000 a month.

Other centres could cost as much as RM10,000 to RM15,000 a month, he added.

"Although we mainly deal with severely autistic individuals, we welcome anyone who needs help," he said.

Razin also pointed out that Nasom is one of the autism centres that do not have an "exit age"

"Our youngest student here is two-and-a-half years old while the oldest is 37," he added.