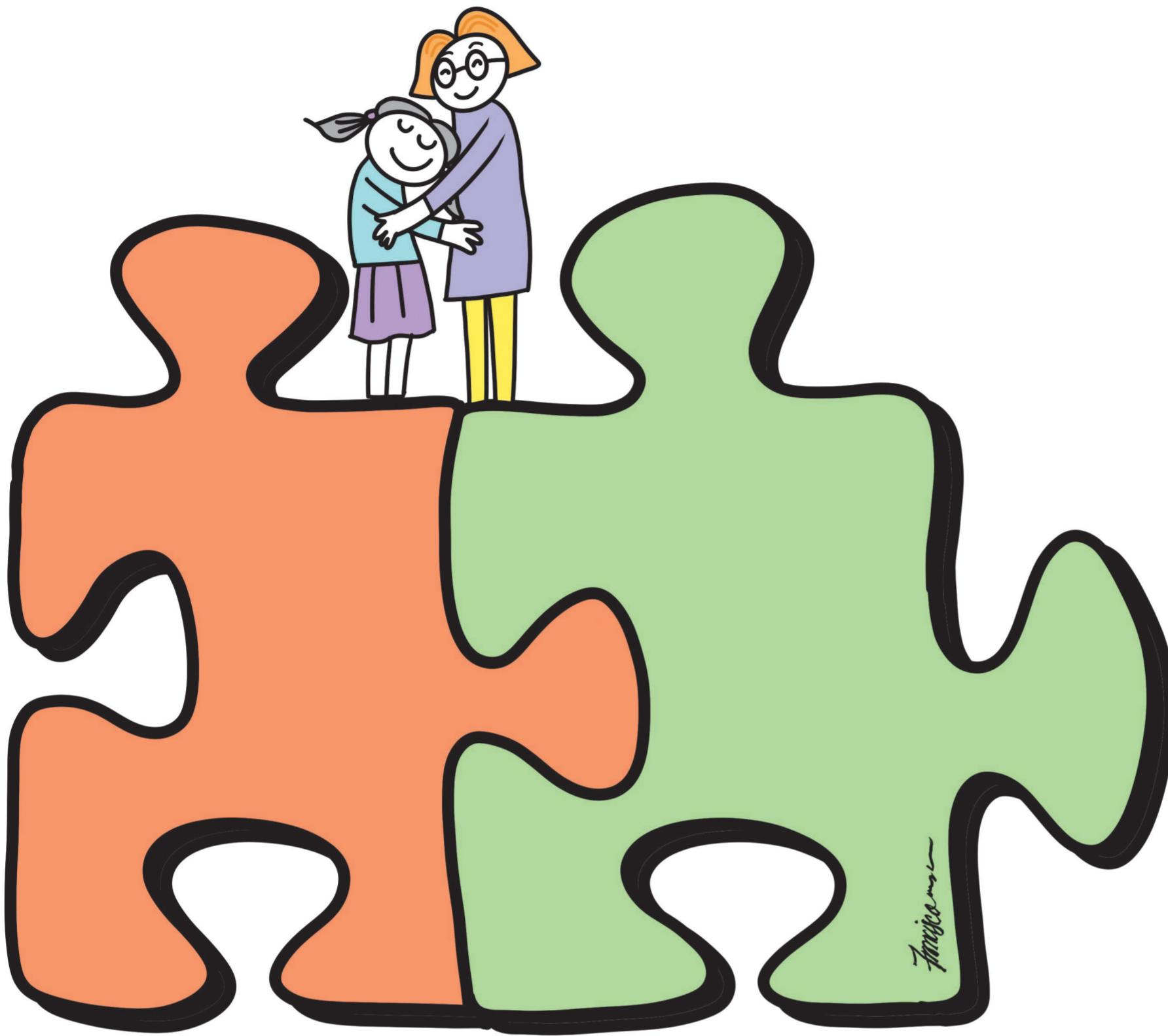


Don't isolate kids with autism, involve them in regular activities



Greater interaction between mainstream and special-needs students can deepen understanding.

Eunice Tan

For many parents, a diagnosis of autism for their child is often met with shock, leading to a period of confusion and uncertainty.

For me, I remember it as a time of sadness, deep reflection, and a profound worry over whether my child can truly lead an independent life where he is accepted fully by society.

It's reassuring to see the growing understanding and help for individuals with autism today. With autism being one of the most researched areas in special education, we now have more solutions and support. That also means parents have more choices to support their children.

As a parent of an adult child with autism with high support needs – and as a special educator – I appreciate that the world has become more knowledgeable in this area of special needs.

There is also more empathy on offer. For instance, during one flight when I was disembarking with my family, a fellow passenger noticed I was struggling with my child and insisted we go ahead of them. Similarly, at airports and theme parks, my child was given priority in lines.

These acts of kindness and support mean a lot. Parents of children with disabilities often face a lot of stress. In some cases, this burden can lead to tragic events, like the father who sadly took the lives of his twin sons with autism in 2022.

Many hold misconceptions that individuals with autism are inherently violent and prone to constant meltdowns. But that's not always true – autism is a spectrum. Just like anyone else,

some individuals tend to be more hot-tempered.

Introducing integration and interaction early on is key for breaking down such misconceptions. By starting this process early, children can gain a real understanding of behavioural differences through first-hand experiences.

This not only helps to reduce stigma surrounding autism but also fosters respectful relationships among all students.

Studies show that when schools embrace inclusivity, everyone benefits. By promoting diverse interactions mirroring those in the real world, students have more chances to learn from different perspectives.

This environment helps all students develop important social, behavioural and cognitive skills.

In Singapore, it's heartening to see efforts to make schools more inclusive from the early stages of education.

Since 2021, the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) has rolled out initiatives to enhance the inclusion of and support for children with developmental needs.

The pilot Inclusive Support Programme (InSP) integrates early intervention services at selected mainstream pre-schools in Singapore. This means, children with developmental needs join their typically developing counterparts in the same classroom and are taught the same curriculum but with differentiated methods. Specialists are on hand to provide additional support.

ECDA is also committed to ensuring every pre-school in Singapore has an inclusion coordinator to provide support for children with developmental needs.

Further up the educational levels, there are at least one to two special educational needs officers at every primary and secondary school. More teachers are also getting trained in special education.

All trainee teachers take compulsory modules at the National Institute of Education to develop a foundational understanding of the needs of diverse learners, including those with special needs.

MORE OPPORTUNITIES, MORE IMPACT

Singapore is certainly moving towards a more inclusive education model. However, inclusion practices could be more deep-seated and impactful.

We need to go beyond occasionally placing students with disabilities in a room with typically developing students or engaging in cursory forms of integration, like participating in an annual Sports Day event with a mainstream school.

More physical integration should happen to allow neurotypical and neurodivergent students to mingle and acclimatise with one another from an early age, setting a foundation for comfortable interaction as they mature into adulthood.

Today, we see this inclusive approach exemplified at Canossian Village, where a single compound houses a primary school, a special school for children with hearing loss, a pre-school, and additional social service facilities.

Dover Court International School, where I taught for several years, has successfully implemented this model for decades. Here, students of diverse abilities, including those with autism, learn together on one campus, benefiting from shared facilities and personalised educational pathways tailored to their unique strengths and needs.

It is my hope that we move towards implementing such practices nationwide so that every child has access to inclusive education.

We can learn from what other countries are doing.

British Columbia in Canada, for example, has moved away from

segregating students based on differences. They phased out special schools and redeployed special education teachers to assist schools across districts in embracing inclusive approaches. Every student with special needs there receives an individualised education plan for personalised support.

More inclusion not only aids in skill development but also alleviates the mental and emotional strain.

Rejection by peers is tough for anyone, especially for those already struggling to communicate and connect. This

Special schools and their staff can play a critical role by acting as experts to help mainstream schools manage students with disabilities, such as sharing knowledge on how to cope with behavioural issues or meltdowns, classroom management and pedagogies. Special education teachers can also learn from mainstream schoolteachers about the pedagogical methodologies and academic performance indicators essential for thriving academically within a mainstream school context.

ostracism can harm a person's self-confidence, dignity and self-esteem, making them and their parents feel isolated, frustrated and helpless.

When my son displays unusual behaviours in public, like sporadically waving his arms or talking to himself, people often stare. It can be uncomfortable, but I always try to explain his condition and the challenges he faces. Fortunately, most people are understanding.

However, encountering mean comments can be hurtful. Some still wrongly believe that behavioural issues stem from poor parenting.

I recall an incident when my son accidentally bumped another car door. The owner criticised me for not teaching him basic social skills when he didn't apologise.

Despite explaining that he has autism and is non-verbal, she dismissed it as an excuse. In a similar incident, a man yelled at my friend's son for kicking his seat on a plane. His reaction after learning the boy has autism? "That is your problem, not mine."

In a truly inclusive society, people understand and empathise with certain behaviours, often because they have encountered them since childhood.

LET SCHOOLS COLLABORATE

In Singapore, about 20 per cent of children diagnosed with a disability attend special schools. Special schools in Singapore are defined by the type of disabilities and its severity. For example, some autism-specific schools, such as Pathlight School and St Andrew's Mission School, cater to students who can access mainstream curriculum and others like AWWA School and Rainbow Centre schools cater to those with higher support needs.

We must encourage a strong collaborative spirit between mainstream and special schools at many levels, including academics, co-curricular activities, performances, and interest-based groups.

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Encouraging greater cross-collaboration among both sets of teachers will enable them to address the diverse needs of all children, whether they have autism or other needs, as a team.

There are opportunities for more regular interaction between students of special and mainstream schools that are in close proximity. For instance, school buses to these locations can be shared, canteens can be shared spaces, and assemblies a combined activity.

Some schools are already doing this under the Ministry of Education's School Partnership (General Education-Special Education) model, providing social interaction opportunities for students through joint CCAs, recesses, workshops, and camps.

The aim is to provide more spaces and opportunities for children and youth with disabilities to be together with typically developing children on a day-to-day basis.

There is a real opportunity here to evaluate how resources, amenities and best practices can be shared effectively.

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

Despite their challenges, children with autism possess strengths and interests, just like everyone else.

They deserve the same chance as other students to grow into the best versions of themselves.

By fostering empathy from a young age, we can help to reduce judgment and create a society where individuals with autism and other disabilities can fully participate and thrive.

The understanding that is nurtured early in life can only help this generation as it matures and enters the working world where the interactions will take place in a more unpredictable, uncertain and demanding environment.

That is crucial in building a more inclusive Singapore society.

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