

# Early help for kids with mild learning problems

Pilot programme targets slower learners who may otherwise go unnoticed

BY LEOW SI WAN

KINDERGARTEN pupil Abdul Rashidin, six, could neither identify the sounds associated with the letters of the English alphabet nor read simple English words.

He could not even tell his teachers when he needed a toilet break.

The boy could have fallen through the cracks had he gone to Primary 1 in a mainstream school, only to face difficulties in keeping up with his peers.

But an early detection and intervention programme for children with mild learning difficulties gave him a leg up. He can now read basic English words confidently.

Launched a year ago by the Lien Foundation, the KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) and the PAP Community Foundation (PCF), the programme was introduced in 22 PCF kindergartens in Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC as a three-year pilot project.

It targets slower learners, including those with mild autism and those with delays in speech and language development or motor-skill coordination problems.

Professor Ho Lai Yun, a senior consultant at KKH's department of child development, noted that children with severe special needs already have programmes serving them, so this programme is for those with mild developmental needs that can easily go unnoticed.

With the programme, they are prepared for primary school, he said.

How it works: A mobile team comprising a paediatrician, a psychologist, therapists and other learning-support providers visits the selected centres and offers therapy to pre-schoolers, advice to teachers and guidance to parents.

Each identified child has an education plan customised for him, with 10 therapy lessons and five in-class support sessions, all run during the hours he is in school.

Currently, about 5 per cent to 6 per cent, or 2,000 children, from each cohort



Abdul Rashidin, six, playing a "fishing game", in which he has to read a word on the "fish" correctly before hooking it, during a therapy session yesterday. The kindergarten pupil, who is on a programme for children with mild learning difficulties, can now read basic English words. ST PHOTO: MALCOLM KOH

of pre-schoolers have a range of developmental problems that could trip them up as they make their way through the education system.

Almost 1,000 pre-schoolers have been screened since last year under the pilot.

Prof Ho cited three advantages of the programme.

One is that it gives better continuity. He noted that in the past, parents took their children to clinics for therapy, and there was no guarantee that what was taught in the clinics was taken back to the school or home and reinforced.

"Now, the clinical team, teachers and parents, who can sit in during sessions, can work very closely together," he said.

The second advantage is that the drop-out rate for this school-based programme is zero, as parents no longer need to take leave to take their children for therapy.

The third advantage lies in its low cost. With a gift of \$2.5 million from the Lien Foundation, therapy fees are down to \$30 per session, or \$300 for 10 sessions, compared with the more than \$100 that an hour of private therapy costs. Children from low-income families are treated free. Teachers are not forgotten either.

The Lien Foundation will offer 10 scholarships, each worth \$20,000, for the at-

tainment of relevant early education diplomas and degrees at Ngee Ann Polytechnic and its affiliated Wheelock College.

More than 70 per cent of teachers in the centres have been trained to identify and support students with developmental needs.

Lien Foundation chief executive Lee Poh Wah said part of the money will also go into research on the programme's strengths and weaknesses. It is still too early to say whether the programme will be extended elsewhere, he added.

PCF group chief executive Tay Swee Yee said more than 90 per cent of children who have gone through it have shown improvement.

Among the parents who have seen a positive change in their child is Mr Morgan Tan, 43, whose six-year-old son is in Kindergarten 2.

Mr Tan said that two years ago, his son was crying nearly every school day. It was only when the child finally started talking at age five that his parents realised he disliked school because he felt he could not catch up or answer questions.

Mr Tan said: "After just one session of therapy, we saw immediate improvement. He became more confident and would walk into the classroom on his own."