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Survey reveals challenges faced by professionals working with special needs children



Children at Rainbow Centre play the piano as a form of therapy. PHOTO: RAINBOW CENTRE

🕒 PUBLISHED APR 24, 2018, 3:46 PM SGT



Nathanael Phang (mailto:natphang@sph.com.sg)

SINGAPORE - The challenges of working with young children requiring special needs can take a heavy toll on professionals, according to a new survey.

It found that 51 per cent of those polled felt that burning out quickly was one of the key problems they faced.

It also noted that 44 per cent of Early Intervention professionals, as they are called, said salaries and benefits were unattractive while 34 per cent pointed to a shortage of manpower.

The survey, which was commissioned by the Lien Foundation and released on Tuesday (April 24), had two aims.

One was to better understand the challenges faced by professionals in the field, such as teachers, social workers, psychologists and therapists, while it also explored how inclusive they felt Singapore was to special needs children.

The quick burnouts of professionals was attributed to the high physical and emotional strain of the job.

Mrs June Tham-Toh Syn Yuen, former executive director of Rainbow Centre Singapore, said there have been cases when professionals have been bitten by children with "high needs", or children with more severe needs. Some staff members have sustained injuries that have required medical treatment.

Mrs Tham said: "When you work with these kids, it's not just a job - it's a passion and you need to be very strong and very resilient."

An unattractive pay and benefits package was also cited as a key issue.

However, recent efforts by the National Council of Social Service have led to an increase of up to 12 per cent in salary guidelines for those in the social service sector.

An Early Intervention teacher aide with a NITEC or O-level certificate now starts on a basic pay of \$1,690, while fresh social service assistants get \$1,340.

Manpower shortages are another key issue given the growing number of children diagnosed with special needs.

KK Women's and Children's Hospital and the National University Hospital noted that 4,000 children were diagnosed with developmental issues in 2015 - a 60 per cent jump from the 2,500 in 2010.

In order to tackle these challenges, the survey respondents have proposed measures such as increasing the awareness of the benefits of working in the Early Intervention sector through mainstream media and using digital and online platforms to help manage the workload.

On a more positive note, 78 per cent ultimately felt that their work has made an impact on the lives of children with special needs while 76 per cent said they planned to stay in the sector for three or more years despite the challenges.

The survey was conducted in tandem with the Early Intervention Conference 2018, which starts on Friday (April 27) to raise awareness about the profession.

The conference, which will be co-chaired by Mrs Tham, will involve up to 1,000 professionals.