

Dipping into the mainstream

ANG YIYING meets two teens with Down syndrome who gave regular schools a go



SWITCHING FOR THE BETTER

Megan Tang, 13, who has Down syndrome, attended a mainstream primary school, Marymount Convent School, until she was in Primary 4. Then, she transferred to APSN Chaoyang, a school for pupils aged seven to 12 who have special needs.

Said her mother, Madam Jasmine Lai, 46, an IT manager, on why she and her husband first enrolled Megan in a mainstream school: "We wanted her to experience and to learn to take care of herself and relate to the typical kids."

Asked about her time in Marymount Convent, Megan said: "I remember my old friends."

During her interview with IN, she excitedly listed her friends by name and her hobbies, which includes listening to K-pop groups such as Blackpink and dancing. At certain points, she even stood up and showed off a few moves.

While she had to transfer schools due to the increased focus on academic ability in the upper primary levels, she took to the transfer well, saying that she found the work at APSN Chaoyang easier than at Marymount Convent.

Currently, she attends APSN Tanglin, a special education school for those aged 13 to 16. Megan loves her school. She said: "There are so many CCAs in Tanglin school."

She went on to list the different activities available, from percussion and silat to event management. She does fusion dance, and also Latin dance, which she says "looks nice, powerful and sexy".

Asked what she plans for her future, she mentioned dancing.

COPING IN THE MAINSTREAM

Grace Gan, 13, is a Secondary 2 Normal (Academic) student at Zhenghua Secondary School.

She has Mosaic Down Syndrome – a rare variant of Down syndrome, a genetic condition caused by the presence of an extra chromosome 21. The "mosaic" is a reference to the fact that only some cells have the extra chromosome while other cells are not affected.

Those with fewer cells affected by the extra chromosome may present a milder version of Down syndrome.

During her pre-school years, Grace attended both a mainstream kindergarten and Rainbow Centre at Margaret Drive for those with special needs. She enrolled in a mainstream primary school, Evergreen Primary School.

Grace said her parents had explained to her what Down syndrome was when she was in primary school and she said: "I think I'm okay... I don't think I'm weird."

Under the Down Syndrome Association's Integration Facilitation Support Programme, specially trained teachers from the association went to her primary school weekly to check if she needed help with work and if she was fitting in at school.

In Primary 5 and 6, a classmate teased her. She recalled: "He called me names, like the word 'retarded', and I got really offended by it." Some other classmates would stand up for her by telling him to leave her alone.

Said her father, Dr Gan Chee Lip, 44, a university professor: "In Primary 4 or 5, the teacher explained to the class that she has Down syndrome. I guess some of them are not mature enough and they go home and tell their parents and they may have certain misconceptions."

In secondary school, her teachers have not explicitly told her class about her condition and she has not faced similar teasing.

To Grace, she is no different from her schoolmates. She said she can cope with her schoolwork "as long as I don't give up".

Asked about what she hopes for her future, she said: "I hope to do well in my studies and get good results. I can be a great professor like my dad, for example. I can be a gardener as I like plants. I am very good at maths so I can be a maths teacher."



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WHAT IS DOWN SYNDROME?

Down syndrome is a genetic condition caused by the presence of an extra chromosome 21 – three copies of chromosome 21 instead of the usual two. This can result in distinct physical characteristics such as a flat facial profile or low muscle tone. Those with Down syndrome can also have delayed motor and cognitive skills. Globally, the condition affects about one in every 800 babies.

Down Syndrome Association

IN THE MAINSTREAM

The Ministry of Social and Family Development recently announced that it was looking at doing more to integrate children with learning needs into mainstream pre-schools.

Of the approximately 32,500 students with special education needs, about 80 per cent – or 26,000 – attend mainstream schools, from primary school to pre-university, now. Special needs students in mainstream schools include those diagnosed with dyslexia, mild autism

spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, as well as those with physical or sensory impairment.

The other 20 per cent of special needs students attend government-funded special education schools which are run by voluntary welfare organisations.

For those with Down syndrome, the Down Syndrome Association runs the Integration Facilitation Support Programme supporting those attending mainstream kindergartens and primary schools.