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# A CHANCE TO SHINE

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**KUALA LUMPUR** — They danced, ran, crawled, and solved puzzles to compete as a team. More importantly, they participated and learned the spirit of sportsmanship.

It was a day to remember for pupils of the Ideas Autism Centre (IAC) which held its first ever Sports Day at the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) recently.

"This is our first-ever Sports Day since we were established in 2012," said principal Sharifah Salleh.

She said it took about two months to plan the event.

"We are thankful to be able to introduce our special children to the sporting spirit," she said.

"It is our shared responsibility to give children with special needs the same opportunity and space for wholesome development as other children.

"We need to emphasis not just academic development but other skills as well."

The sports day aimed at developing and improving the children's social and

communication skills, provided an opportunity for pupils to interact with the public, and develop their talents in sports and games.

The children, aged between two and nine, participated in tailor-made games such as stacking tin cans, carrying water balloons and crawling through "tunnels".

Teachers and parent volunteers were on hand to guide, cheer them on, and calm them down when they showed tantrums — which happened often, but did not stop the event from running smoothly.

According to teacher Fadilah Mohd Yusof, pupils are grouped based on their developmental levels. At IAC, there is one beginner class, three intermediate and one advanced class.

"Let them throw a tantrum if that's what they need. We need to understand what caused it and if necessary, remove the child from the environment and calm them down," she said.

"That's why it is important for pupils to trust and be comfortable with the staff."

Parent Muhammad Hizarullah Zainal Abidin said his son Muhammad Irfan, six, was diagnosed with autism four years ago.

"He is part of the first batch at IAC. There has been much progress in his development since he started going to school. Previously, he couldn't even make eye contact.

"He now socialises with his siblings, although it takes a while to warm up to strangers.

"He now loves it and he doesn't understand why there is no school on weekends.

"The break in routine today is quite confusing for him and he doesn't like

loud music and crowds.

"I feel protective of him because I know it's hard for him. But at the same time this event is good for him."

Homemaker Normah Man said she encouraged her son Izul, five, to participate to boost his confidence.

"He is the baby of the family and very *manja*. I wanted him to have the chance to shine," she said.

Diagnosed at age three, Normah said she suspected Izul was autistic when his speech and other development came late.

"The doctor recommended IAC. At first he cried every day, but now he likes it and his social skills have improved," she said.

Izul performed the chicken dance with other pupils at the event's opening ceremony.

"He was happy to dance, he's been practising at home," Normah said.

Event organiser SJ Edu Pro managing director Zaleina Jaffar said it was the second time the company has worked with IAC.

"Our relationship started because we're neighbours," she said.

"In March, we conducted an overnight camp at FRIM with the pupils. It was a milestone.

"At the canopy walkway, adults typically take about two-and-a-half hours to complete the walk. These pupils took one-and-a-half hours. It's because they do not feel tired or uneasy; they just go forward.

"The parents were reluctant at first, but they were reassured with the fact that we have been conducting

camp, outdoor trainings and sports days for over 30 years with no untoward incidents."

She said autistic children were just as capable as others.

"They can do many things. All they need is a chance for others to know of their capabilities."

IAC was established after a research project by the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs found that parents from low-income backgrounds with autistic children have almost no access to specialised care and therapy sessions due to high costs.

Autism refers to a range of neurodevelopmental disorders characterised by social deficits and communication difficulties.

Since its inception, the centre's early intervention has been successful in channelling children into the mainstream school system.



The blue house mascot having fun.

Children get ready for a gunny sack run as Izul (right) prepares for the next event. — Pictures by Ahmad Zamzahuri

A girl displays her dance moves at the ceremonial march-past.