Most back inclusion, but acceptance of autism wanes closer to home: Poll
By Christine Tan Correspondent

The Straits Times, Prime, Page 18,19, Section: | SINGAPORE
Friday 13 November 2026
758 words, 455cm² in size
386,100 circulation

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Survey shows fewer respondents accept a worker, neighbour or partner with autism

Christine Tan
Correspondent

Most Singaporeans believe people with autism should have the same opportunities as others to pursue milestones like going to university, getting a job and finding a life partner.

But a recent survey by the Singapore Management University (SMU) suggests that the trouble lies in turning these beliefs into action.

Of the 3,153 respondents in its Being.Me. survey, over nine in 10 believe people with autism can succeed at work with appropriate support, but employers remained hesitant about hiring them.

Similarly, while most respondents supported equal opportunities for people with autism to marry, only four in 10 felt comfortable with a partner with autism.

More than nine in 10 think people with autism should not be separated from the community, but a slightly smaller share, 88.5%, felt comfortable having a neighbour with autism.

This gap between support for inclusion and personal acceptance was of note to Rosie Ching, principal lecturer of statistics at SMU, who led the study with the support of St Andrew's Autism Centre.

"Our findings suggest that acceptance becomes more complicated as autism comes closer to our personal lives. We may support equal opportunities for autistic people in principle, but feel differently when asked to imagine an autistic person as our neighbour, colleague or life partner," said Ching.

One possible reason for this gap is that people's perceptions of autism may be shaped more by assumptions about those they have yet to meet, Ching told The Straits Times.

She pointed to another survey finding: 97.5% said they had heard of autism, but 69.5% estimated they knew less than half of what the condition entailed.

The survey comes amid rising diagnoses of autism in Singapore. A 2023 study estimated that slightly more than one in 100 children here had autism, compared with an earlier estimate of one in 150 in 2016.

Ching and her students surveyed respondents between August and September in person, online, and through calls and e-mail. These included people with autism, their families, those who knew someone with autism and others who did not.

Over 400 respondents were in positions to hire people with autism, but the survey did not explore what might make them reluctant to do so. One possibility is that employers believe in the potential of people with autism, but are unsure what support they would need, how much it will cost or who will provide it, said Ching.

The gap also exists in attitudes towards education. Over nine in 10 supported people with autism having opportunities to go to university, but only about six in 10 disagreed that including these students in mainstream classrooms could adversely affect other students' learning.

The research team said these findings point to lingering reservations about inclusive education in mainstream classrooms and the need to better support schools and teachers.

At the workplace, candidates with autism need a fair chance to show their abilities through actual job tasks. Supervisors have to be trained to engage with them, while employees also need to know who they can turn to for support, said Ching.

With many Singaporeans still unsure what autism entails, the team called for more public education and outreach to dispel misconceptions, such as the belief that people can "grow out" of the condition.

Ching added: "I think we would have to work hard to make it easier for people to get to know those on the autism spectrum in the ordinary course of life, work, school and in the community."

Separately, the National Council of Social Service's Public Attitudes Study conducted in 2019 and 2023 found that positive sentiment towards persons with disabilities had declined in Singapore, mainly due to a dip in attitudes at the workplace.

As Being.Me. used different survey methods, Ching said its findings could not establish if this decline has continued. But she noted that 85.7% of its respondents believe people with autism face stigma or discrimination.

St Andrew's Autism Centre chief executive Bernard Chew said that the findings validated what the organisation has suspected, that awareness of autism here has not yet translated into genuine inclusion.

Many still do not understand enough about the challenges of living with autism, Chew said.

He added: "We hope this survey brings to light the very real challenges that (they) and their caregivers have and invites Singaporeans to take time to really hear the stories of those affected by autism."

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yujiatan@sph.com.sg

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