



Bringing together children with and without special needs to create and have fun in an art kitchen

Learn

development and communication with friends of the same age group. At the same time, they foster positive attitudes in typically developing children, equipping them with the vocabulary and skills to work with peers with diverse needs, says Ms Loo.

BUDDY SYSTEMS

Superhero Me has conducted a variety of art projects with inclusive preschool Kindle Garden since 2016. These range from costume crafting to creating books to producing zines about supper recipes. “The projects are very intentional in bringing about collaboration among the children,” shares teacher Ms Winnie Soh. “Over the sessions, we can see it becoming part of their nature to include their peers in all that they do, from decision-making to sharing their creations.”

The projects always involve a craft element. Superhero Me consults teachers beforehand to understand the children’s needs and abilities to ensure that all can participate fully. “For children who need more sensorial experiences, we would consider materials with more texture. Or we would buddy up children whose strengths complement one another,” explains Ms Soh.

She observed that children learned by modelling from their peers, whether or not they have additional needs. “For instance, a child who thrives on routines would ensure that there is structure during a craft session, and that benefits his partner as well.”

CULTURE OF EMPATHY

Teaming up children regardless of abilities has also provided opportunities for typically developing children to adjust their communication methods to engage and support their atypically developing peers. “They learned to step into their peers’ shoes, which further developed their social skills,” says Ms Soh. Some social habits, such as taking turns, have become so ingrained that the children would even remind teachers to ensure that everyone gets a go.

Ms Loo witnessed for herself how working collaboratively on projects has benefitted all children in Kindle Garden: “Children would say things like, ‘Don’t scold her, she is still learning’ or ‘We try again?’. Now, I see kindness in the classroom as children embrace diversity, and friendships are formed between children of diverse abilities.”



Inclusive art projects benefit both typically and atypically developing children

THE ART OF INCLUSION

Through exploring and creating art together, children of different abilities and backgrounds learn to embrace diversity and develop empathy.

All children benefit from various art forms being a part of their curriculum, and children with special needs are no exception. “The arts, such as painting and music, provides space for openness, expression and connection,” says Ms Jean Loo, co-founder and lead producer of non-profit inclusive arts movement Superhero Me. There is no right or wrong in art. Children are not limited in how they want to express or interpret a subject, be it a flower or what home means to them.

More meaningfully, art can foster inclusion and empathy. Ms Loo says, “The arts is a bridge to enable interaction and understanding between children from different backgrounds, where they learn to accept diversity in a creative — and eventually social — context. We don’t see people with special needs as beneficiaries, but as collaborators with whom we spar creatively. In doing so, we create opportunities for them to self-advocate.”

Before COVID-19 struck, Superhero Me organised annual inclusive arts festivals where preschools were paired with special education schools. From 2016 to 2019, each festival hosted around 300 children, who participated in workshops, holiday camps and art exhibitions. These activities have since shifted online in the wake of the pandemic.

Such collaborative art projects help children with special needs build self-confidence in expression, and allow them to experience belonging, social-emotional

CREATING TOGETHER OVER THE YEARS

Some of Superhero Me’s art projects with partners.



2017

↑ ‘Who is Coming to Dinner?’ was an inclusive arts workshop series and art show held at the Objectifs Centre for Photography and Film. Children with and without special needs had fun together in an ‘art kitchen’, whipping up dishes from materials like bottle caps and fabrics. The idea for the event was sparked by a story creation workshop conducted earlier that year for Kindle Garden preschoolers.



2018

← The **Wild Child Festival** at Enabling Village was an arts camp for both abled children and children with conditions such as autism, cerebral palsy, intellectual disability and global developmental delay. Children danced and made crafts together, and teamed up to navigate an obstacle course made out of recyclables. They learned empathy and gained a better understanding of one another’s differences through these activities.



2019

↑ The ‘**Peekaboo!**’ festival at Rainbow Centre (Margaret Drive) showcased artworks created through a collaboration with artists and more than 300 children, including those with disabilities. Children and their families participated in workshops and went on an interactive tour around the school to experience the artworks through experiential storytelling.



2021

↑ ‘**The Greatest Supper Party!**’ started out as a food art project for Kindle Garden alumni and was subsequently turned into an online storytelling and craft workshop series for this year’s Singapore Heritage Festival. The materials have been compiled into a set of books and recipes celebrating food and friendships, and will be launched this December.



Follow [@superheromesg](https://www.instagram.com/superheromesg) or www.facebook.com/SuperheroMeSG for details on upcoming ‘The Greatest Supper Party!’ programmes.

LET’S GET ARTY

Ms Loo shares strategies from Superhero Me’s ‘Readiness Toolkit’ to design art activities to include children of all abilities.

➤ **Offer multiple points of access.** Find out what children like, and what they are like, so you can plan options for different children. Mix art forms, such as music and movement with visual arts. For instance, with children who find it difficult to sit still during a storytelling session, let them participate on their own terms by scribbling or colouring their reactions as they listen to the story.

➤ **Establish rules and expectations.** Display visual schedules to help children understand the group rules, programme flow and options. For children who need additional support, manage expectations by telling them about the expected behaviour prior to the activity.

➤ **Model positive behaviours.** Be calm and give space for children to form relationships. Use positive language to frame the special need in the appropriate manner, rather than label it as bad behaviour (e.g. “He’s still learning” instead of “He’s naughty”).