

# Outdoor Sports Kakis: Promoting active living through inclusive engagement in nature and sports

text by  
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## Introduction

Outdoor Sports Kakis (OSK) is a community-based initiative that connects individuals with additional support needs with volunteers from different walks of life through nature and sports-based experiences. It is founded with the aim of promoting inclusivity and a healthy lifestyle. Throughout this article, we will use the term additional support needs, not just special needs, to encompass all individuals, who require any additional help or support beyond disabilities.

At OSK, participants with additional support needs are the “Kakis” while the volunteers are the “Kawans”. These names are inspired by terms in the Malay language, where Kaki refers to a buddy and Kawan refers to friends. Hence buddies and friends.

The activities are held monthly. Each session is purposefully crafted and takes place at different outdoor spaces. While the invitation to participate is extended to anyone with additional support needs, as well as their families, most Kakis who have joined so far are individuals with Autism.

OSK is founded by two enthusiasts, Maria and Kian Seng. Maria is a trained physical education educator for people with additional support needs. In the course of her work, she has witnessed many of her students gaining weight and becoming sedentary after graduation from school. This prompted her to want to do something to change the trend. Kian Seng is a professional paddle sports coach and a certified Forest Therapy Guide. Similarly, he has observed that opportunities and access to outdoor sports programme for individuals with additional support needs are few and far between. There was meeting of the minds, and very quickly the OSK was founded on the shared vision that everyone, regardless of abilities, can be connected with nature; to enjoy the tranquilities and benefits it has to offer. Further, they can be empowered to care for the environment, while keeping the body and mind fit and healthy.

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Kawans supporting for  
a session at Singapore  
Botanic Gardens



### Integration and Inclusion

One of OSK's core motto is advocating and promoting inclusiveness for people with additional support needs. Here, we are not talking about social integration, which is the incorporation of "different groups" into a society. This creation of dedicated groups to fit into society, in our opinion, further increases the separation and labelling, amplifying the fact that they are not part of the main "society". In fact, it's on the opposite spectrum of inclusion and is an opposing notion, pushing away from inclusivity.

Social inclusion, on the other hand, assumes that a person with additional support needs or disability has the same rights, access, choices, opportunities as everyone else in the society. It builds itself on equality, acceptance and respect. Therefore, we pay attention to how we treat and make each other feel during the companionship.

We recognize that each Kaki with additional support needs is different. We make efforts to understand each Kaki prior to their participation in our events. For example, an individual with Autism, has unique challenges, and we seek to understand these challenges beforehand and make room to accommodate and provide support, so that the obstacles are reduced during their participation.

Our activities are curated with a combination of approaches, teaching methods and engagement strategies. For example, a nature walk activity may involve the touching of different parts of a tree. Here, the visually impaired may use fingers as the sense of touch while a participant with sensory issue uses a stick. To sum, we are sensitive to the individual's needs and will come up with different but appropriate engagement methods for the same activity.

Providing multiple means of expressions are also part of the process for designing an OSK session. Participants may share and express in any manner that they are comfortable with. For instance, for participants who are non-verbal, they could use body movements instead of speech. Kawans are required to attend a briefing session before each event. There is also a session-specific resource kit which would be handed out to them. This includes a visual schedule with checklist, communications board, writing materials to facilitate communication with the participant.

The way we advocate, train and engage our volunteers are closely aligned with our philosophy and motto. As much as we care for our Kakis, we are hoping to develop our Kawans, to empower them to interact with people who are unique in expressing themselves.

It is heartening to note that several Kawans have stepped up as co-leads, to plan, execute and support our events. Their involvement goes beyond facilitating the actual sessions, to take part in event planning, site visits, preparation, pre-event briefing for volunteers, and signup management. This empowerment of volunteers to co-lead also presents another opportunity to share our knowledge with more people, the processes and know-how of developing an inclusive programme, advocating for inclusion. In addition, we make efforts to guide suitable participants with additional needs to transit from Kakis to Kawans.

*"I noticed that I have become more adept at handling changes, and I choose my words and actions carefully when interacting with people."*  
-Kawan with Autism

## Opportunities and Access

Each event that OSK organises takes into consideration the plausible obstacles or challenges caregivers might face. This includes the suitability of the outdoor venue for individuals using wheelchairs or participants with challenging behaviors that might be triggered by certain sounds or a particular object in the public. Our principle is to not reject nor exclude. Instead, we plan around these challenges, to enable participants with additional support needs and their caregivers the opportunity to participate in our activities and have fun.

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The process of spending time together, having fun in the outdoor activities, creates a safe space to socialize and build friendships. This dimension of encouraging interactions and expanding awareness of the Kakis is important, as it allows them to be exposed and be connected with the larger community.

Most often, caregivers would sign up activities for their care recipient/s based on the perceived benefits. Sometimes it can be a stressful task as they need to manage their child while trying to engage them in the activities. At OSK, we understand these challenges. Hence, for all OSK events, each family (Kaki and their caregiver) would be grouped with a Kawan, who will assist the Kaki in taking part in the programme. This support creates a short period of respite for the caregiver, as he/she can also join the activities with a more relaxed state of mind.

Being in an inclusive environment where everyone is patient and kind to one another, allows caregivers to be more at ease during the programme. It is also encouraging to note that some caregivers would also share their contacts with fellow caregivers, to arrange future playdates among themselves.

The activities and venues are different each time, varying from land-based or water-based sports to nature walks. Therefore, Kakis and caregivers get to learn and experience new things.

*“We can meet more new friends and people. My kids can explore around Singapore and play group games with others that improve their social skill and know more about the outside world.” -Caregiver*

Left / Kaki and Kawan engaging in ball passing  
Right / Group art based activity



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### Nature Connection

There are many therapeutic effects to be gleaned from spending time in nature, from physical to psychological and emotional benefits. In an OSK experience, there are some principles that guide the development of the programme, such as prioritising the engagement of the five senses and the foundational senses of proprioception (body location), vestibular (balance) and interoception (understanding and feeling what's going on inside the body).

For Kakis with additional support needs for self-regulation, knowing how the activity flow is important. In this case, the use of schedule helps to minimise any anxiety they might face. In fact, the use of a visual schedule is pertinent in all our OSK events. This is the way we begin our events, setting the stage for our Kakis and their caregivers.

As mentioned, OSK plans curated experiential-based nature activities that are designed for small groups. While Kawans facilitate the session, they build rapport with both the Kaki and caregiver. Kawans may adapt or modify the approaches that are best targeted to help the specific Kaki to engage and be led through the experience.

During the facilitation of the activities, we also encourage self-directed nature play, encouraging Kakis to decide what they like to do or not do. There is no fixed way of expressing or engaging in our planned activities. One may run around barefooted in an open grass patch, or sit on the ground playing with the ball or be engaged in taking photos. The selection of the event venue goes beyond the presence or absence of amenities. The process also includes evaluating how the ambience and its sensory scape is as it may influence the way participants respond.



The closing of a typical session would normally conclude with a group sit-down reflecting and reviewing what they had gone through. In addition, we give opportunities to Kawans, Kakis and caregivers to express themselves, appreciating each other and being as one with nature.

### Insights

We have also learnt from the caregivers that, through joining OSK experiences regularly, their child has become more outgoing, confident and physically stronger. With the heartfelt encouragement from the caregivers and the joy we see from everyone during the activities, we do hope that our monthly programme could take place more often, but this will require more support.

Through the work of OSK, we hope and envision that more people in society would come to appreciate and accept the uniqueness of individuals with additional support needs and come forward to be their Kawans. To see them as individuals who have their thoughts, strengths and vulnerability, (just like any of us), to befriend them not as a charitable act, rather being with them because they enjoy their companionship. With this, then people with additional support needs are truly included and accepted.

*"The event in Fort Canning Park was most memorable, people worked together to collect the sticks and make a jumping game for all kids to play on after that."-Caregiver*

### Find out more about OSK

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