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Small world, big hearts for kids

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"Have you been to America yet? Have you tried the lasso yet? No? Why? Go ahead and get your passport stamped!" went the chatter at a primary school in Sunter, North Jakarta, on Friday.

Yes, it was that easy for the children of the Kiddie Planet Pre-school and Beacon Academy Primary School to hop, skip and dance around the globe that day, as the schools celebrated United Nations Day, which falls on Oct. 24.

The celebration saw parents set up stalls representing various countries from around the world, and children parade around in traditional costumes, stopping at the stalls to try out the food and activities offered by the parents.

In the hallway of Kiddie Planet, the children visited the Chinese stall to get their names written in Chinese characters, and the Indian stall to get temporary henna tattoos.

All of the stalls introduced culinary treats from the countries they represented, including tempeh at the Indonesian stall and chocolate at the Swiss stall.

"Each class came up with ideas for the countries," said Kiddie Planet operations director Shareen Ratnami.

"The parents, with the help of the teachers, organized the stalls, and the children learned various things about each country."

The hands-on experience was very good for teaching the children about diversity, Shareen added.

The students carried a "passport", and each time they visited a stall, a page in the passport would be stamped, much like in real life.

In one classroom, students sang songs about unity and diversity, including the ever-popular "We are the World", led by teacher Ms. Bhatia.

Before that, the children performed dances from across the world.

Ms. Bhatia said UN Day was a great time to teach the children about tolerance and the things they could do to help others in need.

"The kids actually learned about what the UN is all about," she said.

"They learned about respecting other cultures."

The parents learned a few lessons too. Caroline, managing the Philippines stall, said she knew very little about the country when she was assigned to it.

"We researched it on the Internet and asked around," she said with a smile.

Embassies also lent a hand at the event. One parent, Jiya Mulani, went to the Philippine Embassy earlier in the day to borrow flags and decorations.

At the Beacon Academy primary school, the children also enjoyed similar treats from stalls depicting different regions of the world, such as South America and Australia.

However, these older children had to face more challenges in getting through "immigration".

"When they try a certain food from the stall and follow an activity held there, they get their passport stamped," said school director Richard Sidharta.

So over at the West Asian stall, for instance, the children learned to perform a simple dance, and in the European stall they learned to cook pasta the easy way. (dis)

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