

**ENGLISH SPEECH BY ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR MUHAMMAD FAISHAL  
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FAMILY DEVELOPMENT AT COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY 2017**

**STRENGTHENING FAMILIES**

**INTRODUCTION**

1. Mdm Chair, strengthening families has always been a key priority of my Ministry. **Families are the basic building block of society and key pillars of support for individuals. We want Singapore to be a great place to raise children and build families.** We will do all we can to continue to support families through significant milestones and life-stages, especially those who need help to stay together and strong. We want every child to have a good start in life and grow to become caring, resilient and engaged individuals in society. **Starting from the early years is key.**
2. To realise these aspirations, my Ministry has undertaken various initiatives in recent years.
3. We have introduced broad-based measures that support families across life stages, from pre-marriage to new parenthood and the challenging teenage years. We have enhanced paternity leave and introduced the Child Development Account (CDA) First Step. We have also extended Government-Paid Maternity Leave and the CDA benefits to unwed mothers.
4. Since 2012, the number of childcare places has increased by more than 40% to about 140,000 places today. We have also enhanced means-tested child care and kindergarten subsidies. Since 2012, the number of beneficiaries from these means-tested subsidies has doubled to about 45,000 children. To support low-income and vulnerable children, we have piloted the KidSTART and Safe and Strong Families initiatives, which I will talk more about later.
5. This year, we will continue efforts to build strong families, support parenthood, and ensure a good start for every child. We will provide comprehensive support for families who experience abuse and neglect.

**BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES AND SUPPORTING PARENTHOOD**

6. **Ms Jessica Tan** asked about the measures to support parents and build stronger family relationships.

*Strengthening families from the very start*

7. **We believe that building strong family relationships should be supported from the very start.** Children grow well when they are raised in a close-knit family. This starts with a strong marriage. Hence, we work with community partners to provide marriage preparation programmes, covering communication, problem-solving and conflict resolution between couples.

*Strengthening families through different avenues*

8. **Parenting skills have to evolve as children become tweens and teens.** Under the FamilyMatters! initiative, we piloted the Positive Parenting Programme (Triple P) and Signposts in schools to support parents during their children's transition years. Based on our study, parents who completed the programmes reported greater parenting competence, lower parenting stress, improved emotional states and reduced behavioural problems in their children. We are encouraged by the positive results and plan to expand outreach to 175 schools by 2018.

*Partnerships with the community*

9. **Partnerships with the community are critical in rejuvenating and reinforcing family ties.** We work with family champions such as the Families for Life Council and the Centre for Fathering to reach out to families. I would like to thank **Mr Murali Pillai** for his suggestions to appreciate seniors in our community and celebrate strong marriages. We will explore them further. Last year, the Registry of Marriages sent commemorative certificates to couples celebrating their 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Families for Life also organises meaningful and celebratory programmes such as the 2017 Marriage Convention for couples to reaffirm their lifelong commitment.

*Support for single parents*

10. **Mr Kok Heng Leun** and **Mr Desmond Choo** asked about the support for single parent families. Over the years, we have reviewed and introduced new programmes to better support children from families with single parents, who may be divorced, widowed or unwed.
11. **Today, we already extend benefits that support children's growth and development to all children, regardless of their parents' marital status.** Single parents in need of financial and socio-emotional support can also approach our Social Service Offices and Family Service Centres.
12. **We have stepped up support for divorced and widowed single parents, who form the bulk of single-parent families.** Four Divorce Support Specialist Agencies have been appointed to help divorcing couples understand the impact of divorce on their children and look out for their children's well-being. In our housing policies, divorced and widowed parents with children are recognised as a family nucleus, similar to married parents. HDB's Assistance Scheme for Second-Timers (ASSIST) also gives priority to divorced and widowed parents. As our policies may not address every circumstance, HDB exercises flexibility to help single parents with their housing needs on a case-by-case basis.
13. Mr Kok asked if we could do away with the use of 'illegitimacy' in inheritance and tax reliefs. This suggestion has far-reaching implications and will need careful consideration. Our society continues to desire parenthood within marriage, and we should promote it.

14. **Mr Leon Pereira** spoke about the role of the Government in collecting maintenance payments. **Maintenance of children as well as spouses and ex-spouses is first and foremost a family responsibility.** A collection agency may not guarantee that claimants receive maintenance, if it is unable to obtain payment from the other party. There is thus a need to differentiate between those who can afford but refuse to pay maintenance, from those who are genuinely unable to pay. To this end, we are piloting the Maintenance Record Officer initiative to help the Courts identify recalcitrant defaulters earlier. Concurrently, the referral system to the Social Service Offices has been enhanced, to help families and individuals in financial need if they are identified. We will continue to explore ways to make our enforcement regime more effective and robust, without eroding the principle of family responsibility.

## GOOD START FOR EVERY CHILD

*Enhance early childhood provision and affordability for families with young children*

15. Let me now share our plans to support families with young children.
16. Given the ramp up in child care places, we have already exceeded our 2017 target of providing 1 place for every 2 children. We agree with **Dr Lee Bee Wah** that there is still unmet demand in estates with more young families. Over the next year, we will add another 10,000 child care places, and the market should be able to better meet demand within the next few years. At the Second Reading of the Early Childhood Development Centres Bill, **Ms Joan Pereira** also suggested building child care centres and HDB flats concurrently. ECDA is already looking into this. They will work with HDB to bring forward the completion of child care centres for new Build-To-Order (BTO) developments as much as possible.
17. **Mr Ang Hin Kee** asked about our plans to expand infant and child care services. As announced at Budget 2017, we will increase the number of infant care places from 4,000 infants enrolled today, to over 8,000 by 2020. Many of these new places will be in new housing areas such as Punggol, Sengkang, Tampines, Woodlands and Yishun.
18. Overall, parents now have more options for affordable and quality child care. Almost half of all pre-school children are enrolled in an Anchor or Partner Operator centre, where fees are capped.
19. **Mr Louis Ng** also asked for child care to be made more affordable for stay-at-home mothers. We do see more working mothers requiring full-day child care services to help manage their work and caregiving responsibilities. For non-working mothers, they can choose to place their children in shorter kindergarten programmes that focus more on child development. These are generally more affordable, with a median monthly fee of \$170 compared to around \$850 for child care before subsidies.

20. Regardless of the mother's working status, low- and middle-income children enrolled in Anchor Operator or MOE Kindergartens receive further support with the Kindergarten Fee Assistance Scheme (KiFAS). With KiFAS, a low-income family can pay as little as \$1 a month for pre-school.
21. We will continue to pay close attention to the cost of raising children and regularly review the affordability of preschool.

#### *Home-based care options*

22. While we continue to improve centre-based infant and child care, we acknowledge that some parents may prefer to have their children cared for at home as mentioned by **Ms Cheryl Chan and Mr Gan Thiam Poh**.
23. It is not feasible to extend centre-based grants to home-based care. While our centres are governed by regulations to ensure quality and service standards, home-based care is more informal and based on mutual trust and support. As home-based care is varied in nature, it is impractical to apply common standards. Also, **while we recognise the contributions of these home caregivers, we must be careful not to monetise personal relationships**. Nevertheless, we have been progressively enhancing parental leave schemes to support parents who prefer home-based care. Parents can also tap on the CDA First Step to help defray approved child-related expenses.

#### *Ensure adequate manpower to support early childhood provision*

24. **Dr Lee Bee Wah, Associate Professor Randolph Tan, Mr Ang Hin Kee and Ms Jessica Tan** mentioned the need to increase the supply, salaries and capability of educators to support the expansion of early childhood services.
25. **Our work with operators and training agencies to attract, retain and develop early childhood educators has started to bear fruit**. Salaries have been rising steadily across all job roles – salaries of entry-level diploma trained teachers are competitive and comparable to other sectors. Student intake for early childhood diploma courses has also grown by more than 70% last year from 400 to 700 places. To further support these efforts, my Minister launched the Early Childhood Manpower Plan last October to provide professional development opportunities, better recognition and a more supportive working environment for early childhood educators.
26. **Even as we attract fresh school leavers, the early childhood sector offers meaningful and attractive careers for mid-career workers who want to switch sectors, and women wanting to rejoin the workforce**.
27. To support our expansion plans for infant care, we will need about 1,000 more infant educators over the next four years. To meet this large demand, I am pleased to share that **my Ministry will pilot a new job role called Allied Infant Educators**. These Allied Infant Educators will work with existing infant care staff to provide holistic care and development for infants aged two to 18 months.

28. **To train Allied Infant Educators, we will also pilot a new training approach.** We understand that some people with interest, aptitude and competence to care for infants may be unable to join the sector, either because they do not want to attend classroom-based training, or they lack the appropriate academic records. **Under this pilot, ECDA will work with the SEED Institute and Anchor Operators to provide new entrants with on-the-job training and coaching to work as Allied Infant Educators. Our emphasis will be on aptitude and competency, rather than academic qualifications.** This is in line with Mr Ang Hin Kee's suggestion to look into allied job roles.
29. Training for the first batch of Allied Infant Educators will begin later this month.
30. With the Allied Infant Educators supporting our existing infant educators, the more experienced ones can then progress to become Senior Infant Educators. These Senior Infant Educators will receive training to coach and mentor new entrants. Some will play a more active role in facilitating developmental activities for our infants. Overall, parents can feel assured that their infants will benefit from higher-quality infant care.
31. Ms Nyaneswari D/O Paramasivam is a mother of two. She previously worked as an untrained staff at a child care centre, but more recently worked in other jobs in security, administration and after school care. With this new opportunity to become an Allied Infant Educator, she has decided to come back to the sector. Ms Nyaneswari welcomes the new training approach with more hands-on practice. This is similar to how she learnt to care for her own children; by observing how her mother cared for her and her siblings. We need more individuals like her to join this meaningful profession.

*Ensuring quality early childhood services*

32. Mr Ang Hin Kee and Ms Jessica Tan rightly highlighted the need to ensure quality, even as we scale up these early childhood services.
33. **The Early Childhood Development Centres Bill recently passed in Parliament is one initiative to raise and ensure consistent quality standards across the sector.**
34. To enhance quality in the sector, **we will provide more structured professional and career development opportunities for our educators.** Today, **I am happy to announce that we will be launching the Professional Development Programme (PDP) for Educators this month.** Educators are early childhood professionals who work with infants, toddlers and nursery-aged children.
35. Similar to an earlier PDP for pre-school teachers, educators will undergo a structured training over three-years to deepen their skills and prepare them for larger job roles, such as team leaders and mentors to newer colleagues. Educators will also receive cash awards ranging from \$3,000 to \$5,000 at the end of each professional development milestone.

36. Overall, our approach towards raising the quality and professionalism in the early childhood sector is aligned with the SkillsFuture movement. Early childhood educators should be provided opportunities to deepen their competencies throughout their career. Last year, ECDA launched the Skills Framework for the early childhood sector to map out career pathways and competencies for various job roles.
37. To enhance the skills of our early childhood teachers, I am pleased to announce the launch of a **new Advanced Diploma in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning**. **We will extend the SkillsFuture Study Award, worth \$5,000, to support pre-school teachers embarking on this programme.** With this Advanced Diploma, teachers will be better prepared to take on larger roles such as lead teachers and curriculum specialists, and thereby raise the quality of our preschools.

#### *Update on KidSTART programme*

38. We recognise that low-income and vulnerable children will need more support to get a good start in life. **Mr Louis Ng** asked whether we could strengthen the Kindergarten Fee Assistance Scheme (KiFAS) to improve the attendance of pre-schoolers in kindergartens. He has rightly highlighted that the reasons behind irregular pre-school attendance are not so straightforward. There are many other needs of the child such as health, social skills and emotional development. This is why we introduced the KidSTART pilot last year to proactively identify and support these children in their earliest years. Let me provide an update on this programme.
39. Since KidSTART was launched in July 2016, we have supported more than 300 children in the pilot sites at Bukit Merah, Kreta Ayer, Boon Lay, Taman Jurong and Geylang Serai. As part of the programme, KidSTART home visitors regularly visit parents and their infants. They support parents with practical skills and knowledge for the child's growth, health and nutrition. These home visitors also work closely with social service agencies, such as Family Service Centres, to address the multiple challenges faced by some of these parents.
40. Any success under KidSTART depends on close partnerships with the community. Ms Nur Azlinah Binte Jumali is a mother of four, with two children in child care and the youngest waiting to enrol in infant care. Under KidSTART, she learnt more about early childhood development issues from professionals, socialised with other mothers in the community, and received help for her children's necessities. Her children also attend pre-school more regularly. These have improved the children's development and her family's well-being. We hope that KidSTART can continue to create such success stories.
41. We are also piloting an enhanced support model at preschools. Today, ten Anchor Operator centres are provided additional manpower to better engage parents of children from low-income and vulnerable families, enrolled at these centres. These Child Enabling Executives closely monitor the children's developmental needs and improve their school attendance.

42. **Ms Rahayu Mahzam** asked about the plans for KidSTART. We have had an encouraging start and plan to support 1,000 children over the next three years. We will need to review and refine our processes before introducing KidSTART to more locations. In the near term, ECDA will partner the community to roll out more playgroups and enhance support for preschools in the pilot areas.

## **SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES WHICH EXPERIENCE ABUSE AND NEGLECT**

### *Out-of-home care transformation*

43. Let me move on to talk about how we are supporting children who have experienced abuse and neglect. We believe that children grow best in families, where they can bond with familiar persons who can help them develop socially and emotionally. Unfortunately, there are times when a child cannot be safe in his family because of abuse and neglect. In such times, my Ministry believes in empowering these families to provide proper and safe care for the child where possible. If this is not feasible, the child should be cared for in a nurturing foster family where available, until we are able to reunite them safely with their natural families.
44. To better care for abused, neglected children, my Ministry begun efforts to transform the out-of-home care sector in 2013. The emphasis is on **creating more options for family-based care by growing fostering capacity and providing intensive support to keep children with their families.**
45. My Ministry has been expanding our fostering capacity by stepping up outreach and setting up two fostering agencies. Run by MCYC Community Services Society and Boys' Town, these fostering agencies are currently supporting 150 children. We plan to set up a third fostering agency later in the year.
46. We previously aimed to recruit 500 foster families by 2019. After intensive recruitment efforts, we are closer to that target with 420 foster families today, which is 70% more compared to 2013. With more foster families, we have been able to place 40% more children in foster care as compared to 2013. This achievement is very encouraging and I would like to thank these warm-hearted foster parents for opening their hearts and homes to vulnerable children who need love and care.
47. Last year, my Ministry celebrated the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Fostering Scheme and published a commemorative book. One of my favourite stories is that of Mr Tan Kah Poh and his wife, Madam Chua Siew Gek. They previously managed a chicken rice stall. When their first foster child came to them, he was traumatised and anxious. Through their daily care and nurturing, the foster child is now well-adjusted. The couple have even taken in a second foster child. I hear that the foster children like their delicious chicken rice and this was the secret to their "chemistry". We often take simple family meals for granted. Yet as shown in this story, these little family rituals make such a positive difference to our children.

48. **While we encourage fostering, it would be even better if more natural families can care safely for their own children and not require out-of-home care at all.** Many caregivers who come to our attention through the child welfare system do want to care for their children. With additional support and links to resources, it is possible for them to learn how to provide better and safer care for their children.
49. Hence, MSF announced the Safe and Strong Families (SSF) pilot last year. The pilot aims to preserve the care of children within their families, and reunify children who were temporarily removed, back with their families when conditions are safe and stable. Under SSF, professionals work intensively with parents at home to rebuild their relationships with their children, and learn how to care for them safely.
50. **Ms Jessica Tan** asked for an update on the SSF pilot. It is well on-track. We have **eight newly appointed agencies**. These are AMKFSC Community Services, Boys' Town, Chen Su Lan Methodist Children's Home, Kampong Kapur Family Service Centre, Montfort Care, Muhammadiyah Welfare Home, Singapore Children's Society, and The Salvation Army. Families and children have started receiving services. We expect to reach out to 400 families over three years.

*Support for youth-at-risk*

51. **Ms Kuik Shiao Yin** asked whether national surveys could be conducted to understand youth well-being and improve interventions for youth-at-risk. **Today, many agencies already do so, to better understand our youth trends and concerns.** These include the Student Health Survey by the Health Promotion Board, the National Youth Survey by the National Youth Council as well as the Youth Perception Survey by the National Council Against Drug Abuse. In addition, the National Committee on Youth Guidance and Rehabilitation has commissioned an inter-agency longitudinal study to better understand the factors that affect offending and drug abuse, as well as successful rehabilitation and reintegration among at-risk youth.
52. One key programme that has yielded positive results is the Youth GO! Programme which was launched in 2012 to reach out to at-risk youth on the streets. Under this programme, social and youth workers keep a look out for youths on the streets who may be at risk and befriend them over multiple sessions to better understand their situation as well as build trust. During these sessions, the Youth GO! workers also help youths who may be experiencing trouble in school or with peers and family, and work closely with them to resolve or cope with these issues better. Early findings showed that youth engaged under the Youth Go! Programme displayed a positive change in attitude toward their parents, studies and career plans.



*Raise public awareness on family violence*

53. **Mr Amrin Amin** asked a timely question about our plans to strengthen family relationships and prevent escalation to family violence. While the number of reported family violence cases is low and stable, every case is of concern to us. Furthermore, family violence is often a hidden problem, and cases may go unreported. We have completed a study to understand public perceptions on family violence. Findings showed that awareness about family violence remains low. 4 in 10 respondents were unsure what family violence meant. In addition, children were less likely to seek help compared to adults. What does this mean for us?
54. We need to go upstream and educate all segments of our society that **strong, positive relationships are the best way to prevent escalation of family violence**. We will focus on family violence prevention strategies targeted at different stages of a person's life.
55. For the young, we will continue to cultivate understanding about respectful relationships in schools. In Character and Citizenship Education, students learn how to develop positive relationships with their family members, manage family conflicts effectively, and seek help when the situation calls for it. For couples who intend to get married, we have worked with community partners to enhance marriage preparation courses to emphasise respectful relationships.
56. It just takes a small act to prevent the escalation of family violence. Last November, MSF launched a three-year "Break the Silence" campaign to encourage all persons, especially bystanders, who have witnessed family violence to report it early.
57. **Family violence is unacceptable and should not be allowed to perpetuate. It is not a private affair.** We should continue to encourage those affected by family violence to seek assistance, and urge the community to play their part by reporting abuse immediately. Let us "Break the Silence" against family violence.

*Updates on Vulnerable Adults Act and Mental Capacity Act*

58. Dr Lily Neo asked about the progress of the Vulnerable Adults Act (VAA). **We are working towards introducing the Bill in Parliament in 2018.**
59. There are two key principles under the VAA. Firstly, the **family remains as the first line of care and protection**, and the **community plays a critical role to support families**. Secondly, a **vulnerable adult who does not lack mental capacity is best placed to decide how he wishes to live, and whether or not to accept any assistance**. If the vulnerable adult has to be removed from the place where he is staying, MSF will explore if he or she can be placed with any suitable relatives. We will also work with community agencies such as Social Service Offices and Family Service Centres to provide additional support. If community and family options are not feasible, MSF will be empowered to place the vulnerable adult at gazetted places of temporary care and protection and places of safety.

60. We will continue to engage community-based organisations and work with them to detect cases involving vulnerable adults and provide interventions. With their ground feedback, we are currently finalising the details of the Bill. While the work is ongoing, the public can call the police if they witness vulnerable adults who are in danger and require immediate help. They can also report suspected cases of vulnerable adults to one of the three Family Violence Specialist Centres, or through the ComCare hotline.
61. Ms **Rahayu Mahzam** also asked about the progress of the Mental Capacity Act which was amended last year. We are developing the framework for the professional deputy and donee scheme. When the scheme is launched at the end of this year, professionals such as lawyers, accountants, social workers, doctors and nurses may register to be professional deputies or donees. Interested applicants will have to undergo certification. We are finalising the details.
62. I would like to encourage all Singaporeans to pre-plan and appoint someone they trust to make decisions on their behalf if they lose mental capacity.
63. **Ms Cheryl Chan** asked whether the Government is working with the community to provide home-based care options for the elderly, many of whom prefer to age in their own homes with their loved ones for as long as they can.
64. In addition to programmes by MOH, MSF also has Senior Cluster Networks to coordinate and integrate services for vulnerable seniors living in rental flats, within each town. The Networks reach out to low-income and vulnerable seniors living alone so that they can age within the community. In addition to that, we have the Smart Elderly Monitoring and Alert System (SEMAS) which is piloted by HDB in Yuhua and this will provide another form of support to seniors.

## CONCLUSION

65. As a Ministry, we can develop meaningful programmes and services to support families. However, there is much more that goes into enabling and sustaining strong families.

65.1. At the individual level, we have to make deliberate efforts to make time for our own families and engage them through quality activities and conversations. Relationships will only grow stronger if we invest the necessary time and effort in building them.

65.2. At the corporate level, employers can create supportive environments for families by providing flexible working arrangements for employees to strike a balance between family and work.

65.3. At the community level, we should extend support to fellow peers, neighbours and co-workers if they face marital or familial distress. We can encourage them to invest quality-time with their spouses and families, resolve their issues amicably and seek professional help when needed. Where there is reason to suspect that there is abuse or neglect,

everyone has the responsibility to “break the silence” and alert the authorities.

66. Let us work together to make Singapore a great place to raise children and build strong and resilient families.

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