

# SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS RELEASE

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SPEECH BY MR S DHANABALAN, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE  
FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, AT VICTORIA SCHOOL FOUNDER'S  
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Age is a curious thing. When you are young you never realise how young you are, but when you are old, no one lets you forget! I am happy to be with you today, and though I am older and you are younger, I hope I speak to you as one who has been young.

When I was younger, my life revolved around the classroom and the schoolfield. I believe your life is organised in much the same way. But there is something I may have known when I was young which you may not know today. In my time, kampongs and villages and small clusters of houses were common social units of life. Today, you are more familiar with HDB flats and high-rise buildings. The village atap huts have given way to the flats and the flats to the housing estates.

The transition is quite dramatic. When villagers and others from small communities move into new high-rise estates, they find themselves missing the close community living and familiarity of their former place where everybody knew everybody else. In their new place, they withdraw into their own homes and somehow seem to lose their sense of gregariousness. Moving house is nothing new. In societies which are old and mature, people do shift from place to place according to changes in income, status and economic need. But they move into communities which are already established and the newcomer fits into a traditionalised framework and order of things. But when you get an area where everybody is moving in at about the same time, as in the case with many HDB areas, there is no established framework. Everybody in the block is feeling his way and it may take many years before any community spirit and sense of belonging develop. This lack of neighbourliness and sense of belonging differs even from one HDB block to another. In my visits to HDB estates, I have found that generally there is greater neighbourliness among those staying in one- or two-room rented flats than among those staying in three- or four-room purchased flats.

It is easy to explain why. In the one- and two-room flats, people tend to leave their doors open for ventilation, and to use more of the

common corridor and other common areas. This encourages greater mixing and gives neighbours more opportunity to come together. But in the bigger flats, especially where neighbours do not share a common corridor, families live almost entirely behind closed doors. When they leave home, they lock the doors behind them, and when they are home, they shut the doors after them. They have more to do within the home or their pleasures are found in places away from the HDB estate. And as families become more affluent, the desire for privacy appears to become greater.

But neighbourliness is more than greeting your neighbour and visiting and talking to each other. Knowing your neighbour is only the starting point. From this there must proceed care and concern and consideration for the neighbour.

One sign that shows clearly a lack of concern and consideration is the misuse of public property. When people do not care about the welfare of others, they adopt a careless attitude in their use of public amenities. After all, why bother about the others who will use this property after me, when I am not concerned with their welfare? Instead, I will get the most out of this, and well, why not spoil it so that no one else can enjoy it after me? When we stop caring for others, we become - as you can see - increasingly selfish and destructive. Caring for others does not, sad to say, come naturally to everyone. It must be taught and learned. We have tried to train Singaporeans to care for the community through various laws and regulations such as those against littering. This attempt has certainly been successful but has led to some curious results. We find that Singaporeans would not dare litter the streets but think nothing of littering the corridors and staircase of HDB flats or public areas in shopping centres. Thus roads and sidewalks are clean but the public areas inside buildings are filthy.

Fear of punishment is a good starting point for social discipline but until our people learn to go beyond this primitive stage, we will continue to get these disconcerting results. There is a difference between doing the right thing because you want to avoid the unpleasant consequences of doing the wrong thing and doing the right thing because you want to enjoy the pleasant consequences of doing the right things. The Singaporean must cultivate good habits not because he wants to avoid unpleasant consequences but because he wants to create a clean and pleasant surrounding for himself and his neighbours.

This attitude of mind must start in the schools. Your signature is found in how you use the classroom and schoolfield, especially the state in which you leave them. A dirty classroom and a littered schoolfield, for example, reflect careless students and irresponsible players. A dirty toilet stinks of a dirty user. The state of the school toilets is a good measure of the social responsibility of our students.

If we have uncaring and careless students, we should not be surprised if later we have broken-down lifts in HDB estates, filthy corridors and staircases and dirty toilets in shopping centres. One usually grows to be an older version of what one was while young.

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