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SPEECH BY MRS YU-FOO YEE SHOON

SENIOR PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY

Ministry of Community Development

at THE OPENING OF THE SEMINAR on early childhood

"HEADING TOWARDS BEST PRACTICES"

AT ROCK AUDITORIUM, SUNTEC CITY MALL

FRIDAY, 1 OCT 99, 9.35 am

Good Morning

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I am pleased to be here this morning at the opening of today's Seminar on Early Childhood "Heading Towards Best Practices". Early childhood care and education, and pre-school is a subject that is very special to me. I have long believed in the important role pre-school plays, and have myself been involved in the early childhood field for over twenty years.

## Evolution of the Role of Child Care in our Society

2. When I was first involved in this area in the seventies, Singapore was in the early stages of industrialisation. One significant factor that made possible our rapid economic development was the increasing number of women joining the workforce, including mothers with young children. Hence, when child care services first started in Singapore, our concern was to ensure that women entering the workforce could find care arrangements for their children. It is therefore not surprising that our first child care centres focussed primarily on custodial care.

3. Today, the role of child care is similar in some ways, but different in others. As before, women today form a significant part of the workforce. The workforce participation rate of women aged between 25 and 34 is 66%. This is the group most likely to have young children. Not only is this group an essential part of our workforce, but for many families, they contribute an important share to the household income. The median income of males after CPF deduction is about \$1,600. If their wives do not work, their families would find it difficult to make ends meet on just the father's income alone. As for many higher-income families with highly educated mothers, having a career is an end in itself. Even if they do not need the income, many will still choose to work for the fulfilment and self-actualisation that work brings. In other words, child care has become a necessity for some families and a way of life for many of us because of its economic and social roles.

## The Early Years Matter: Evidence of Research

4. What is different from before though is the focus of child care. The concept of child care has evolved and greater emphasis is placed on its developmental role.

5. To quote a report by the Families and Work Institute based in the United States, "throughout the entire process of development ... the brain is affected by environmental conditions, including the kind of nourishment, care, surroundings, and stimulation an individual receives".

6. Another publication by the World Bank states that "it is well established scientifically that the early years are critical in the formation of intelligence, personality, and social behaviour. There are critical points in children's development where it is important to ensure that children are having the kind of experiences that support their growth and development".

## Important Role of Child Care to Develop our Young

7. Singapore, which has embarked on a knowledge-based economy, depends very much on developing its human capital. The ideal time to start is at a young age, with our children. Thus, the nurturing of our children in their early years and

quality child care have become very important not just for the individuals but also for the nation.

8. The long-term positive effects of good quality child care have been confirmed by many studies. One U.S. study established quality child care has "sizeable long-term effects on school achievement, grade retention, placement in special education, and social adjustment". A study done in Singapore by Dr Celine Kwan of NIE (National Institute of Education) also found that "a high quality day care environment ... (promoted) language development". I note that our two keynote speakers, Dr Lily Wong and Dr Celina Kwan, will be talking on the effects of good child care, and what determines good quality child care.

#### Need for Quality and Standards in Pre-school Programmes

9. A good child care centre is one that provides not just care, but also a nurturing and stimulating environment for the children. They build on the young child's natural curiosity in all things and turn it into a lifelong love for learning. They encourage creativity and stretch the minds of children. They instil in children good values, important life skills and help build up fortitude and resilience in character. In short, a good child care programme develops the child holistically – cognitively, physically, emotionally and socially.

10. There are many child care centres today which fit this description. However, while all child care centres meet the licensing standards, there is still room for some centres to improve.

11. Take for the example the emphasis some centres place on academic studies and preparing the child for Primary One. While this may be one of the objectives of an early childhood programme, some centres go overboard and even teach their children the Primary One syllabus when they are only of kindergarten age. Children learn differently at different ages, and early childhood programmes must be age-appropriate. Cramming Primary One lessons into a child who is not ready is not only going to be futile, but will put the child off learning altogether. Such an imbalance may also overlook the development of the child in other aspects, such as character building and creativity.

12. Sometimes, it is not the child care centres themselves giving the undue academic focus, but the parents. Some parents believe that if their children do not come back with worksheets, the centre would not be doing its job. As a result, centres respond to parents' demand by dishing out homework, and focusing on teaching the 1, 2, 3s and A, B, Cs. The responsibility of bringing up a child is first and foremost with the parents. But as child care professionals, you should help parents understand how their child is developing, and explain to them that play is not necessarily bad, and worksheets, not necessarily good. Your role must extend beyond the child care centre and include building stronger parent-centre partnerships.

13. My example above illustrates the variations in quality and focus we have in our child care centres and kindergartens in Singapore. It shows that there needs to be some standardisation of what pre-schools teach. Guidelines on curriculum and

desired outcomes for early childhood are required at a national level. Such a document will set out clearly what our pre-schools should achieve. Each centre may have its own style or method since there are many good approaches in early childhood, but the goal of all pre-school centres should be the same. I am therefore very pleased that MOE (Ministry of Education) has announced that it will develop a curriculum for pre-school that will meet this need.

#### Life-long Learning and Professionalism is Key

14. A good curriculum however is only as good as its implementation. This responsibility lies on you as child care professionals. To fulfil this heavy responsibility, you will need the necessary training and knowledge. As architects of our children's future, you have to be experts in early childhood care and development, and confident in your own professionalism. This can be achieved by continually updating and upgrading your skills and knowledge, and keeping up with the latest findings and developments in the early childhood field. Indeed, having well-qualified child care workers is the linchpin of good quality child care programmes.

15. For many years, MCD has established a training system whereby child care workers can upgrade from a Basic level certificate, through the Intermediate level, to an Advanced level certificate. This system has served us well. Today, most staff in our child care centres are trained. Almost 80% of our child care centre supervisors have already attained the Advanced level training or higher.

16. However, certificate level training for our child care workers will not be enough as we look towards the future. Today, 60% of each cohort that joins the workforce is tertiary educated, that is, either holders of diplomas, degrees or higher. Given the critical role child care workers have in developing and caring for our young children, child care workers should ideally be no less than diploma-trained as well.

17. This means that many of our child care workers must upgrade their skills and qualifications. While experience in working with children will always be important, formal training cannot be passed over as theory can help one understand more deeply what one learns from experience. Life-long learning and continuing education are the order of the day.

#### Steps to Raise Professionalism by MCD

18. The importance of life-long learning and well-trained child care staff is well-recognised by the Ministry of Community Development. I would like to announce that the Ministry is taking steps to raise the qualification level of supervisors and teachers in child care centres.

19. Firstly, the Ministry has, for the first time, developed a set of guidelines for diplomas in Early Childhood Care and Education, or ECCE in short. Only ECCE

diplomas that meet these guidelines will be accredited by MCD. With these guidelines in place, individuals embarking on an MCD-accredited diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education can be confident that the diploma will equip them well for a career in the early childhood industry.

20. These guidelines have been worked on over the past few months, in consultation with experts in the field, and are now ready. MCD will be releasing the first list of ECCE diploma courses that meet these guidelines on 1 Nov.

21. Secondly, MCD will raise the minimum requirements for child care workers, beginning with supervisors as a first step. In March this year, MCD informed child care centres that by 1 Jul 2000, all supervisors must be trained at the advanced level. In the longer term, however, that is not enough. Supervisors must obtain diplomas, if not degrees.

22. We recognise that this requirement must be implemented gradually to give in-service child care personnel time to upgrade as well as child care centres and training agencies time to attract more trained manpower into the industry. MCD will therefore give the industry a 5-year lead time.

23. By end 2004, MCD will require all supervisors employed by child care centres to be trained at the diploma level. In addition to the supervisor, MCD is also aiming for all centres to have at least one diploma-trained teacher within the same 5-year timeframe. Together, the pair of diploma-trained supervisor and teacher should be well-equipped to ensure an improved standard of care in each of our child care centres.

24. To help centres defray the costs of upgrading their staff, MCD has arranged with the Skills Development Fund (SDF) for accredited diplomas to receive 80% SDF funding. This should help centres upgrade their staff qualifications speedily.

25. Thirdly, MCD is working with training agencies to increase their trainee intakes. In particular, we want more polytechnic students to consider a career in early childhood education. Ngee Ann Polytechnic and RTRC Asia (Regional Training and Resource Centre for Early Childhood Care and Education for Asia) have just taken in their first intake of ECCE diploma students this year. Next year, they will be increasing their intake to 120 from its current 80. Other training agencies offering in-service diplomas are also gearing up to increase their intakes, such that all existing child care personnel will be able to upgrade their skills.

26. Ngee Ann Polytechnic and RTRC Asia will also be mounting for the first time next year, a ECCE diploma course targeted at graduates with diploma and/or degrees in other fields. This diploma will be specially tailored for diploma and degree holders from other industries to facilitate their move into the early childhood field.

27. These three steps will help bring about higher professionalism in the child

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care industry. With the child care industry moving into an upgrading mode, I encourage each and every one of you to join in the spirit of lifelong learning and take up the challenge of continuing education.

What More Needs to be Done?

28. While these steps will help improve the quality of child care, we cannot rely on them alone to bring the quality of pre-school in Singapore to the next higher plane. More needs to be done. Before I end, let me invite you to think about what else needs to be done for our young children in Singapore. What must we do to make sure that all young children receive the early childhood experience they need? What systems, policies and structures do we need to put in place? I hope you will ponder over this question and discuss the issue over the next one and a half days. Together, we can make a difference in the lives of our children.

29. On that note, I wish you a successful seminar. It is my hope that this will be the first of many future collaborations between MCD and the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Singapore, or AECES.

30. Thank you.

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