

Singapore Government

74 APR 1989
PRESS RELEASE

Information Division, Ministry of Communications & Information, 36th Storey, PSA Building, 460 Alexandra Road, Singapore 0511. Tel: 2799794/5

89-544-13

Release No: 20/MAR
06-2/89/03/11

SPEECH BY DR SEET AI MEE, MINISTER OF STATE FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION, AT THE IE GRADUATION CEREMONY FOR TRAINEES IN THE KINDERGARTEN TEACHER TRAINING COURSE, THE CHILDCARE PERSONNEL COURSE AND THE UPGRADING COURSE FOR NTUC CHILDCARE PERSONNEL TRAINERS AT THE IE THEATRETTE ON SATURDAY, 11 MARCH 1989 AT 11.00 AM

I am pleased to be here today to join you in your graduation ceremony. Some of you will be graduating as kindergarten teachers and childcare givers whilst some are graduating as childcare personnel trainers.

Your aim is one, and it is to educate very young children rendering to them the best care you can give. Your course in IE has equipped you with the knowledge and the skills to provide meaningful experiences for pre-school children.

Children come to you in their most formative and impressionable years. What you do, or not do, can have very significant consequences for what they are capable of doing at the next stage of development.

Children are like young seedlings; given the right environment appropriately stimulating for young children, they develop:

1. intellectually
2. socially
3. emotionally
4. physically

The task of every child educator or childcare provider is to ensure that four aspects of the child's growth is nurtured and to do so with loving care, a care that is as good as a mother's because you have been trained professionally to care and to educate young children. As a child is to the mother, every child to you has to be as important because every child counts.

A few have advanced the view that of all childcare givers, none can be as good as the child's mother. This claim is based on the assumption that mother knows best and that there is a strong emotional bond between mother and child which can guarantee a mother's loving care for the child.

It is difficult to dispute this view. We all carry in our heads and hearts a certain world view about the stereotypical role of women as mothers and housewives so that any deviation from the stereotype is looked upon with disapproval, at least by some.

Research has not shown conclusively that children cared for outside the home grow up disadvantaged in some way. Indeed, it has been shown that mothers who work find fulfilment as a person are richer in experience so that when they return home they are able to provide the kind of quality of care that benefits the child.

Experience has also shown that not all mothers have the knowledge and skill or the natural instinct and aptitude to provide quality childcare.

What is at issue is quality care, whether in the home, or with family care service arrangements or in childcare centres. In childcare centres, we can at least try to provide as good a care as within the home, given the kind of quality environment and well-trained childcare givers who are professionally trained to do the job.

Mothers today have at least three options when faced with the problem of childcare:

- (a) to stay at home with children.
- (b) to continue working but to leave children with relatives or maids or neighbours.
- (c) to continue working but to leave children with childcare centres.

There is a cost to be paid for making any one of these choices and the parents of today, especially the mothers, have to address these options, in the light of their own special set of circumstances.

They have to decide and they have the difficult task of the balancing of the woman's role at work and at home.

It must be recognised, however, that our society, like many others, has undergone many changes. Societal roles have changed and are still changing. This is especially so with women.

The roles women have to play are different today from what they used to be traditionally, ie, as housewife and mother. It is a fact that today not many mothers can or want to stay at home and look after babies and young children during their most productive years.

Today, many mothers work by choice to supplement the family income to enable the family to have a higher standard of living.

This trend for more mothers to join the workforce will continue. With Singapore's expanding economy there is a constant need for all the human resources possible to maintain our steady economic growth.

Educational opportunities have also expanded so that boys and girls have equal chances to reach the highest possible level of educational attainment.

We have to recognise that our society has changed; lifestyles have changed and, so has the pattern of child-bearing and child-upbringing, to accommodate changes brought about by the process of modernization.

Kindergartens have expanded to take care of the education of young children from four to six years. The government, and the private sector, encouraged by the government, have set up childcare centres in increasing numbers to take care of even younger children from two years of age and above.

With proper supervision and with trained kindergarten teachers and childcare givers, these new social institutions will be able to provide quality care and proper education for pre-school child. Indeed, with proper physical facilities and a good psychological and education environment, the quality of childcare will be good.

This quality care can be assured if you who are trained or being trained take your job as a vocation, a true calling, and discharge your duties professionally making the children you care for your first love.

It means, in short and in truth, that "the future is in your hands". You have a vital role to play in shaping the quality of Singapore's future citizens and hence our country's future.

This does put tremendous responsibility on the shoulders of our nation's teachers. Not only do they need to be competent and knowledgeable, they must be the models children learn from. We need good teachers at pre-school,

primary school, secondary and post-secondary levels, and society must accord to these the respect and status due to them for their important societal contribution. At the MOE, I shall be looking closely into upgrading the training of the primary school teachers. The Ministry as a whole is concerned with improving the status of the teaching profession.

A most crucial point, however, is often missed; that is, that despite the setting up of childcare centres, parents and grandparents still have to complement the role played by the childcare centre personnel. The period between birth and five or six is generally regarded as the most critical period of child development.

During this relatively short period, the rate of development or growth is fastest in terms of brain development, language acquisition, mastery of fine muscle control and co-ordination, and the internalisation of social values.

To ensure optimum development, all who are involved with child upbringing have special and complementary roles to play; the mother brings to the childcare situation, that special love and emotional bond that only mothers can give; the father provides love and stimulation that differs qualitatively from those of the mother's; grandparents bring in a very special quality of relationship and societal stability to the child; the childcare centre personnel or kindergarten teachers provide that added stimulus that comes from expert knowledge of child development.

A child's growth rests on a bedrock of emotional security that all childcare givers must provide. When all play their roles well, then young children are assured of balanced optimum growth and the best foundation for development.

May I take this opportunity to wish you, the teachers and carers of our young children, a happy, satisfying and fruitful career. May you grow in love, knowledge and skills in the care of children.

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