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SPEECH BY DR SEET AI MEE, MINISTER OF STATE FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION, AT THE CONFERENCE ON "TOWARDS QUALITY CHILD CARE : THE HUMAN FACTOR" AT THE GLASS HOTEL, 30 MARCH 1989 AT 9.00 AM

The demand for child care centre facilities is high and during the Budget Debate eight days ago, the issue was again brought up. We are aware of the urgent need to match the supply of child care centres with demand and will step up the development of child care centres. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that good physical facilities and equipment contribute only partially towards quality child care. It is the human factor which is the crucial component in the equation.

A centre can have the best premises, the most modern facilities and an excellent programme of activities and yet a poor child care centre. Why? Without the key factor of personnel, namely the management, the child care centre personnel themselves and the parents of the children, there can be no good child care services.

The personnel-child relationship is a special one. One only has to look into a pre-school centre and one will always see young children crowding around the "teacher", some sitting on her lap even. Young children just enjoy being with and close to adults who are near to them, especially those with that special commitment of love and touch which is a pre-requisite for any child care personnel. It is a gift which, I'm sure, all of you possess and I urge you to nurture the gift and use it widely in your interaction with young children.

Centre operators and management committees of centres, through their policies and support, can and do make a significant impact on the quality of service provided the government wishes to encourage these to continue to uphold high standards of child care provision.

Parents and child care centre personnel are the primary care givers in the lives of the children. To provide the continuity and consistency in the care of the children, parents and child care personnel must see themselves as partners. This can only happen if they are comfortable with each other, clearly understand each other's role and are able to discuss and share information on the child - only then can they together work towards the development of the child.

The experiences and learning which occur in the pre-school years have a great impact on how a child develops in his later years. It is during this stage that children develop their personalities and various skills that will enable them to understand, relate to, and cope with, the world around them. Care givers be they child care centre staff, parents, or family care givers at this stage are therefore truly VIPs: Very Important Persons.

In the context of child care centres, and in recognition of the importance of the role of child care staff, the government has placed much emphasis on their training and development. Child care in child care centres is not and should not be mere child-minding. Training is to provide staff with skills and knowledge to be child carers.

With the growing body of knowledge on the importance of early childhood education, it is inevitable that parents' expectations for quality child care service will also grow. However, we are providing quality child care service not just because of parents expectations, but also to the government stand that children are important and we must provide the best we can for them.

While visiting some pre-school centres, I was impressed with the ingenuity of some of you. From bits of aluminium foil, cloth and coloured papers, paper plates and old plastic bottles, you have fashioned tools for teaching like clocks and puppets, playthings and equipment. Some have even hand painted Big Books for small group story telling. I applaud your practical skills and ingenuity. Instead of making the usual statement of: "We do not have money, hence have few equipment"; some of you have shown that, given the imagination and the will, bits and pieces of old things which often are thrown out in the garbage can be transformed to useful and beautiful playthings.

Sadly today in our affluence, we in Singapore are becoming a "disposable" society where we use and discard far too quickly and too freely. Thrift and recycling of old toys and things are fast becoming lost traits.

Perhaps it is because manufactured available child teaching equipment are very expensive that many of you have been put to be ingenious. Whatever the reason, I am glad to see your innovation. I am not merely advocating a habit of thrift, but more so one of applying one's ability to produce something when one discovers a need for it.

This conference provides an excellent opportunity for those in the child care field to take stock: Where we are today, what are the future directions and finally, how should we go about achieving our aims. We are indeed fortunate today to have a group of experienced and knowledgeable persons from Singapore as well as overseas to share their expertise with us and help answer these questions. I am confident that all of you here who have an interest in and commitment to the welfare of children will find today's proceedings interesting and useful.

It is now my pleasure to declare this conference open.