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**SPEECH BY DR SEET AI MEE, MINISTER OF STATE (MINISTRY OF
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND MINISTRY OF EDUCATION)
AT THE PUBLIC FORUM ON "CHOOSING A SUITABLE CHILD CARE
ARRANGEMENT FOR YOUR CHILD", AT THE DBS AUDITORIUM ON
8 APRIL 1989, AT 2.30 PM**

I believe all present, including myself, have one thing in common - we are all concerned parents. That you have taken time off on a Saturday afternoon to learn from the three experienced and knowledgeable speakers, Dr Irving Lazar, Dr Joan Bergstrom and Mr John Ang, is expression of concern for your children. The issue before you today is: Options available for child care and I am sure that our three experts are amply qualified to throw light on this issue.

Today, I wish for a few minutes to share some personal observations and perceptions of what we Singaporean parents are doing in the education of our young children.

When my children were pre-schoolers in the 1970s, the prevailing thinking of most parents seemed to be "faster is better". So we tried to get our children to learn faster, read faster, learn to swim faster and in short, grow up faster. I notice a distinct change in the trend in the 1980s. It's not just being quicker that matters but doing more and being the best which are the issues. I was amused by a term a teenager used recently. She likened the drive to one of producing "super gifted kids".

Where once we would accept that "super gifted kids" are exceptional, today they seem to be the rule of norm for all children to strive for. The scenario is one of young

pre-schoolers being fetched and sent to ballet, better English, violin, piano, swimming, art, martial arts and even deportment classes. Perhaps it is time for us to take stock and consider the situation carefully.

Today, also, there is great pressure put upon child care centres and kindergartens by parents to teach children to read, write and count. Parents also have been, and are, comparing notes among themselves and have complained to child care and kindergarten teachers that their children have not been given as much worksheets to complete, writing assignments and homework to do as children in other centres. Indeed, there have been cases where parents have taken children out of child care centres and enrolled them in selected kindergartens which have more formal teaching.

There are also instances where mothers spend their time ferrying pre-schoolers from place to place for their numerous lessons. Are more formal lessons, ballet, piano, violin lessons etc etc good for the very young children? Who really benefits from all this rushing around and striving for the best available? Is it the pre-schooler?

In 1985, Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues published a study of gifted and talented people who were successful adults. The finding was that the parents of these eminent people were careful not to impose pressure on their children but, instead gave support and encouragement by creating an intellectual climate in the home.

Another study also published in 1985 by J Cox and others concluded that home life and parental guidance play crucial roles in shaping unusually creative minds. These findings contradict the concept that early instruction will produce children who will attain eminence. They also found that the excitement about and enthusiasm for learning were the most important elements and that skills were easily learned when there was motivation.

I am taking this opportunity to express a concern. Young children should not be pressured to undergo early formal instruction. The immediate risks of early instruction are frustration, failure, and undue identification of academic accomplishment with self-worth. It is only when these lessons are given too early or for the wrong reasons that the child's development is in jeopardy. I would like to quote an excerpt from *Miseducation* by David Elkind. This book has a chapter of questions asked by parents after Elkind's lectures. I quote one of the questions and Elkind's reply:

Q: "You seem to be against pressuring young kids. But isn't pressure necessary and even good for kids? Many successful athletes had coaches who worked them hard, and many successful people had parents who pushed them hard. I am afraid that if I don't push my child, she may just take it easy and never achieve anything in life. How do you know when to push and when not to?"

A: "You have posed what is perhaps the most difficult question in child-rearing. If children don't want to take music lessons, should we make them? If children don't do their homework properly, should we insist they do it over? If children are not social, should we insist on their playing with other children? And if we do decide to pressure our children how should we go about it? Should we offer rewards, threaten punishment, appeal to children's self-interest, or play upon their guilts and fears?"

These are difficult questions, and there are no simple, easy answers to them. The only guideline I can suggest is to examine your motives. Is it really the child's welfare you are primarily concerned about or is some personal motive or ambition the dominating factor? If you really have

your child's best interests as your primary concern, then pushing a child, with whatever method is most comfortable for you, will probably do no harm. What will come through to your child is your caring enough to make the effort. Indifference is much worse.

On the other hand, if your personal motives dominate over what is in the best interests of your child, pushing is likely to do harm. No one likes to be used, and when children are pressured to achieve something under the guise of doing something for themselves but really for the purpose of satisfying parental need, they will eventually realize the truth. When that happens, children rebel against both parental motives and methods and the result is often just the opposite of what the parents intended."

In short, Elkind advises parents to think about their motives before they apply pressure on their children. I agree with this advice and I would add that parents should also consider who really benefits from the pressure.

Once parents have established in their minds what kind of child care environment they would wish their child to grow up in - bearing in mind the issue of pressure on the child, and the environment of encouragement, enthusiasm nurture and support, it is then the task of parents to choose the type of child care which is best suited to the child.

Selecting a child care arrangement is not an easy task for most parents - as no two children are alike, what may be suitable for one may not be right for another. A choice has, however, to be made. Today, at this forum, to help parents make the choice, the options available for child care and the possible implications of these options on the child will be discussed.

In the selection of child care suitable to the child - consideration should be given to the fact that a pre-schooler will progress on to the normal primary school and a child who starts off in pre-school with confidence, a positive desire to learn, to discover and to befriend will be starting school with the advantage of a good foundation. The decision of selection of child care should be made with this in mind.

On this note, I will turn you to the main order of the day. I wish you a fruitful, thoughtful and meaningful discussion, which, I hope, will help you to make a wise decision in the care and up-bringing of your children.

It is indeed my pleasure to declare this Forum open.

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