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**SPEECH BY DR TAY ENG SOON, MINISTER OF STATE (EDUCATION),
AT THE HOME ECONOMICS SEMINAR: "NEW DIMENSIONS"
ORGANISED BY THE HOME ECONOMICS TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION
AT THE MANDARIN HOTEL ON WEDNESDAY, 19 MARCH '86, AT 2.30 PM**

TEACHING CHILD DEVELOPMENT IN HOME ECONOMICS

I am very pleased to be present at this Seminar on Home Economics. The seminar has quite rightly placed the study of home economics as a school subject within the wider context of family life and home-making in the society at large. This is the important background against which the teaching of home economics must be viewed.

The average Singapore family, in my view, has changed. Fifteen to 20 years ago, the extended family was still quite common. Many people lived with their parents even after marriage. It was not uncommon to find several generations living together under one roof. They did so not because they considered that it was a virtue to do so. It was out of sheer economic necessity. Housing was not so well developed then. Many had to live together simply out of necessity. The cost of rental and cost of living were kept down at the expense of overcrowding. We need not romanticise such multi-tier families. Overcrowding, family disputes, dominance by in-laws are well-known.

But there was an important positive side to multi-tier or extended family living. Many domestic skills such as cooking and child-rearing were effectively passed on to the next generation by example and observation. Young children saw their brothers and sisters being born and how

their mothers, grandmothers and others brought them up. Not only skills, but values and attitudes were transmitted and assimilated within the extended family.

Better education, the availability of better housing at affordable prices, general affluence have changed the pattern. Today, most families, especially young families, are nuclear families. To be sure, the contact between the family and its close relatives is still very good. Visiting relatives is still at the top of the scale of social activities. But within the young nuclear family consisting of parents and their one or two children, the hustle and bustle of an extended family home is gone. There is more freedom, more space. But how much of the transmission of culinary skills and child-rearing skills among other values has been lost?

Many young couples today have their own flats. But I am told that many go back to their mother's flat daily for all their meals. Their young children are usually left with their parents while the couple is at work. This pooling of resources makes sense. It recreates some of the extended family environment without the disadvantages of overcrowding. There is only one problem which our shuttle families will face. When the young working couple and their children grow up, how much of the home-making skills such as culinary and child-rearing skills and values would they have acquired? When their children become young adults and turn to them to look after their children and to provide meals, as they do today with their parents, can they cope? Can they handle the numerous and minute domestic decisions and chores which they had happily handed over to their parents? Probably. But not without much fumbling, tension and frustration.

Does school education have a role to play in providing some of the essential skills and knowledge for future home-makers and parents? I believe so. The home economics course at Secondary One and Two would be a natural vehicle for imparting such skills. Seen in the light of our rapid shift towards young nuclear families, home economics would appear to take on a new urgency. We hope that we can provide some of these essential home-making and parenting skills for our future husbands and wives - and if not for both of them, because our teaching resources are limited, at least the wife. At least one person should know some of these essentials.

The home economics syllabus was revised recently. Food and nutrition continues to be a staple topic in the syllabus. Some parts on fabrics and clothing will be retained. Much of our attire today can be bought off the peg. But home economics teachers still believe in the value of developing hand skills and sewing skills. They are probably right. The main change is in the family life and child development parts of the syllabus, some of which is new, e.g. in child development. This part of the syllabus will deal with the development of young children in the first few critical years of their life. It will deal with their needs and provide the students with many practical points regarding health, nutritional, psychological and safety needs of the baby and the young child.

The new home economics syllabus should address many new topics which are relevant for family life today. In developing teaching materials for the new syllabus, CDIS has drawn upon the advice of a panel of experts comprising a paediatrician, several sociologists and a food nutritionist.

Some of the new materials are being tested in several schools. By 1987, it should be possible to implement the new syllabus in Secondary One and in the following year in Secondary Two. We have given priority to girls for the study of this course. But the opportunity will be given also to boys when teaching resources become available. We view home-making as a cooperative endeavour involving both husband and wife. The day when the man can leave it all to his wife to do all the child-rearing and upbringing is rapidly receding.

May I conclude by wishing you an enjoyable and stimulating time at this seminar and for our overseas visitors a pleasant stay in Singapore.

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