

**TEACHERS' DAY SPECIAL** — NOTHING CAN REPLACE AN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR



DESIGN: KIMMIE TAN PHOTOS: TED CHEN, ISTOCK

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# Dedicated through generations

Ms Adeline Koh observes paradigm shifts in society's views on early childhood education after three decades in the industry

BY RACHEL TAN

Since becoming an early childhood educator in 1990, Ms Adeline Koh has served in the same PCF Sparkletots centre for 29 years and has even taught children of her ex-students. She continues to enjoy her work as a teacher, as every cohort of children that she has worked with has challenged her ability through their inquisitive minds and interests.

Having been in the industry for almost three decades, Ms Koh has observed a paradigm shift in how Singapore society views — and values — pre-school education. The vice-principal recalls that her parents were initially strongly opposed to her decision to pursue a career in early childhood education.

"I remember my dad telling me, 'Why did I support your studies for you to end up changing diapers for children?'" says Ms Koh. "This is what people used to think of the industry."

Her dad is now her biggest supporter and the sector is no longer seen as just a form of babysitting. Public perceptions of the industry did not change overnight, but a marked shift occurred sometime in the 2000s. The Outstanding Kindergarten Teacher Award, which recognises the efforts and professionalism of pre-school teachers, was introduced by the Ministry of Education and the Association for Early Childhood Educators (Singapore) in 2009. Ms Koh received the Outstanding Kindergarten Teacher Award (Distinction) that same year.

She explains that parents are beginning to see the value of early childhood education and the importance of giving their children the best possible start in life.

"Parents recognise that their roles complement those of the teachers and are pivotal in their child's holistic development," says Ms Koh. "Beyond nurturing and caring for the children, early childhood educators also help to develop and sharpen a child's learning abilities."

"These are important in helping every child to build a good foundation in the skills and disposition that they need to succeed in school and life."

The rise of early childhood training agencies and stricter entry requirements for new recruits are also a reflection that the industry recognises the importance of early childhood educators and the role they play in nurturing the next generation.

**Keeping up with the times**



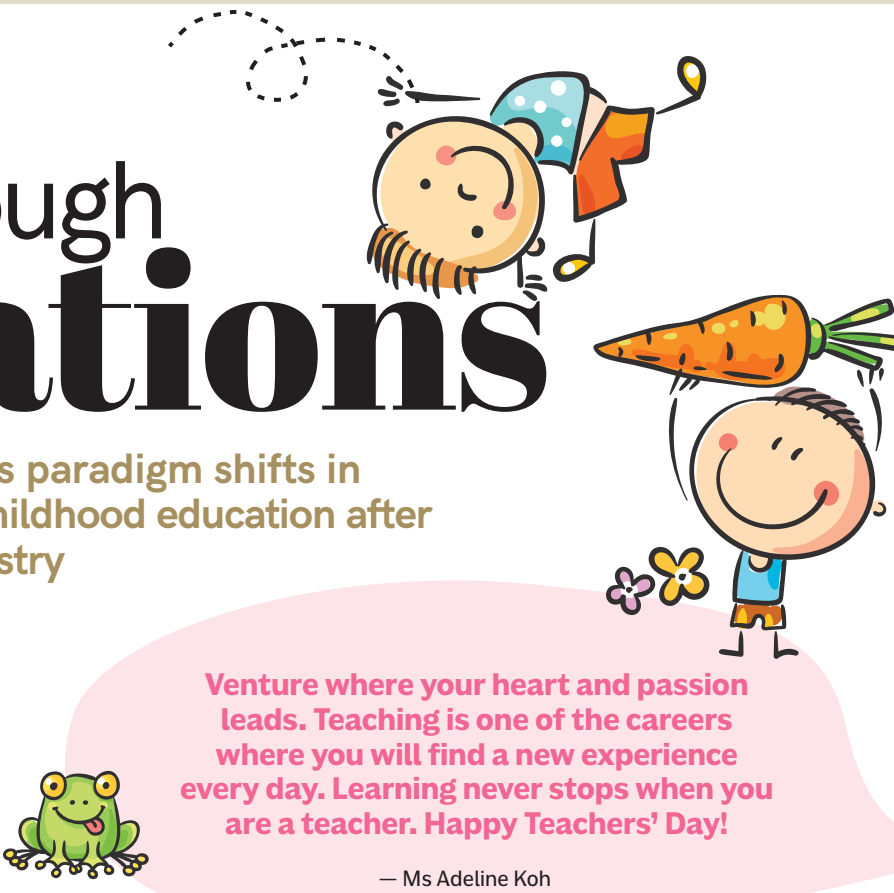
With her years of experience, Ms Koh recognises that it is essential for teachers to adapt to new pedagogies and teaching tools that help young children develop and learn.

For example, her students use the camera on tablets to zoom in for a close-up look at the details of flowers and insects during nature walks. They can also take photos with the tablets and have them printed out for journaling purposes. The children are encouraged to write their experiences and create their very own e-book.

Sometimes, her students will say: "Ms Koh is our Google," or "Ms Koh has bionic eyes".

**Venture where your heart and passion leads. Teaching is one of the careers where you will find a new experience every day. Learning never stops when you are a teacher. Happy Teachers' Day!**

— Ms Adeline Koh



Ms Adeline Koh with her students from PCF Sparkletots over the years.

PHOTOS: ADELINE KOH, TED CHEN, ISTOCK

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John Dewey



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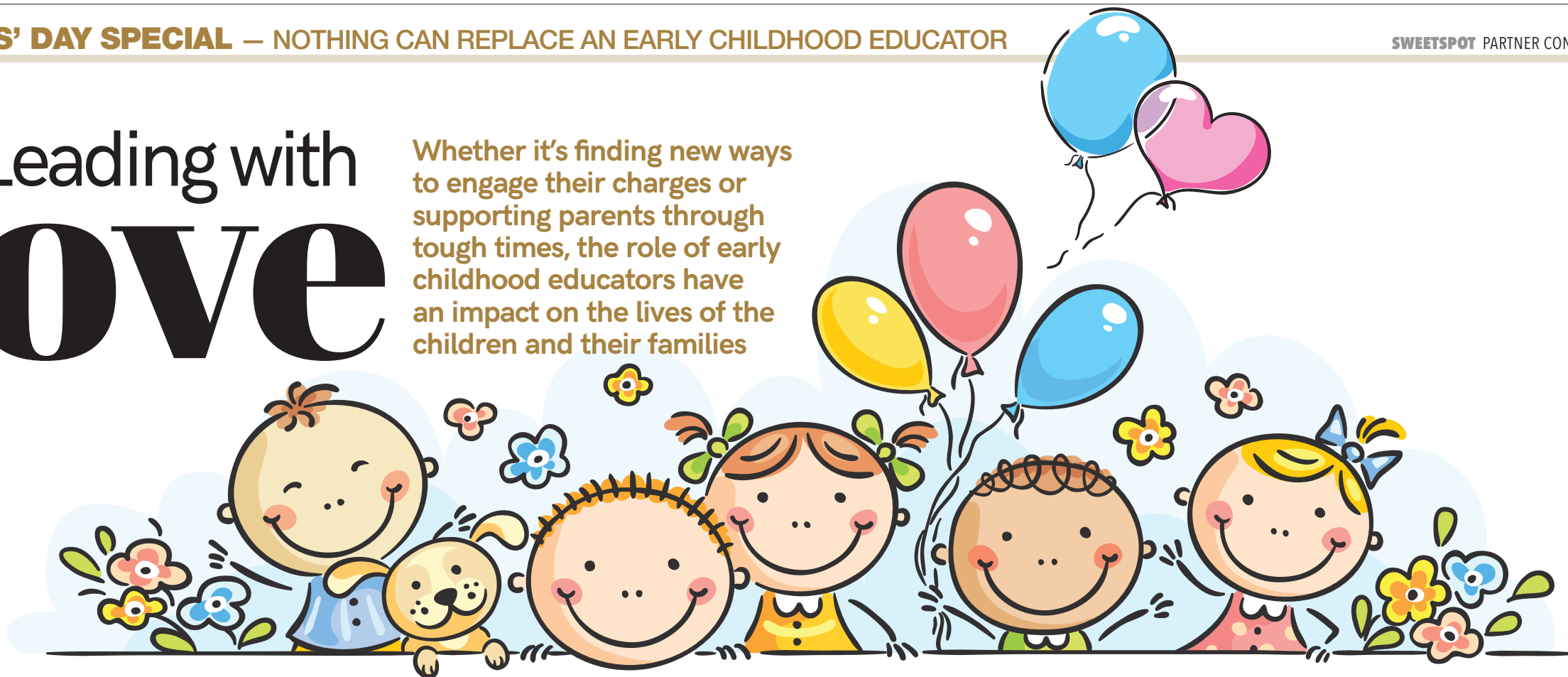
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# Leading with love

Whether it's finding new ways to engage their charges or supporting parents through tough times, the role of early childhood educators have an impact on the lives of the children and their families



## Making magic in the classroom

BY RACHEL TAN

Most people recognise 31-year-old Mohammad Aizat as the principal of Mosaic Kindergarten; to his students, Mr Aizat is a magician, scientist, friend and teacher extraordinaire.

"Pick a card," he says as he fans out a deck of letter-sound cards in front of his students during phonics class. The children would then discuss and try to verbalise the sound of the letter drawn from the deck, after which he invites them to randomly place the card back into the deck. With a wave of his hand, Mr Aizat accurately retrieves the card — much to the delight of the children — and they revise the sound.

In another class, Mr Aizat

dissects a fish to show that food comes from things that were once alive. Through this activity, children get to have a real-world experience and understanding of the different parts of a fish.

Magic tricks and fish dissection are among the many tools that Mr Aizat uses for teaching to keep learning interesting. Other times, he uses Google Maps (Street View) to explore concepts such as maps and directions, and Google Earth to virtually take the children to affected areas to talk about social issues of poverty, trash management and water conservation.

"Early childhood educators are often really creative," he explains. "This is because children learn in different — visual, kinesthetic, auditory — ways, so we often come up with different methods to teach a particular concept. This ensures that everyone gets to learn in their own unique ways."

For this reason, Mr Aizat wears different hats but they are all designed to help a child achieve all the necessary skill sets required before he or she enters primary school.

"Early childhood educators are the first formal teachers for most children," says Mr Aizat. "It is our responsibility to keep the children excited about school as well as maintain their joy for learning."

Mr Hamza and his wife Ms Ezan, parents of two of Mr Aizat's students, echo this sentiment: "It is very important to get a child's first schooling experience right and Mr Aizat has done just that. He makes learning enjoyable and is a strong role model whom the kids can look up to."



## The art of learning

BY MEREDITH WOO

Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) fellow Tan Beng Luan (above), 64, strongly believes that a pre-school teacher's role — interacting with children and attending to the development of their senses — necessitates human touch, especially during creative activities.

Ms Tan feels that each child is different and the learning needs of everyone have to be addressed individually.

"The teacher will have many ways of praising or encouraging the child, such as giving a hug, a high-five or a pat on the head," she adds.

A seasoned professional in the fields of the arts, heritage and culture, Ms Tan realised in the mid-1990s that children in Singapore were not given many opportunities to develop their creativity. Leveraging her 11-year experience as a heritage researcher with the National Archives of Singapore, as well as her art administrator role where she assisted late theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun and choreographer Goh Lay Kuan, she decided to be the change in the education industry.

Ms Tan founded Creative O Preschoolers' Bay in 1998, an arts-focused pre-school that includes two to three hours of arts engagement with professionally trained arts practitioners per week, and also emphasises active learning. The 1,754 sq m space has two studios for activities, indoor and outdoor playgrounds, as well as sand and water play areas.

One of the signature activities at Creative O is an annual three-day-two-night camp for K2 children on St John's Island. Preparation begins three months prior to it, with the little ones helping to plan the menu, packing list, timetable, duty roster and activities. The six-year-olds are also involved in figuring out the potential safety concerns.

Other aspects of the children's education revolve around character building and embracing the many facets of Singapore's multicultural society.

Ms Tan says: "As the Chinese saying goes, it takes 10 years to grow a tree but a hundred years to nurture a person. Educators must continue to plant seeds without expecting a harvest; we must continue to believe in our education philosophy and do our best to help the children and parents."

To my fellow early childhood educators, you all play an important role in your students' lives. Keep your heads up and continue to inspire and change lives, one child at a time!

— Mr Mohammad Aizat



A teacher wears many hats to ensure the well-being of children and their families. In striving to provide the best for the young ones, it is important to remember that our work will be appreciated by them and their families. Wishing all early childhood educators a happy and joyful Teachers' Day.

— Ms Lai Mei Sum



## Building bonds

Two years ago, Mr and Mrs Tan dropped their daughter off at the doors of NTUC First Campus' My First Skool pre-school in Serangoon. The two-year-old girl had a chronic disorder known as cyclical vomiting syndrome, which causes recurrent episodes of nausea, vomiting and fatigue.

Over the next few months, she would regularly burst into tears at school, suck on two of her fingers when she was nervous and was reluctant to go for long walks. This riddled her mother — who dropped her off at school every day — with anxiety, helplessness and guilt.

Each day, lead teacher Lai Mei Sum, 30, would receive mother and child with open arms at the entrance of the pre-school. She was determined to be their constant in a time of change and believed that her role as an early childhood educator was as much about building a strong and trusting relationship with parents as it was about helping their child grow.

To ease Mrs Tan's fears, Ms Lai would update her on the daily progress of her child. She also made a consistent and determined effort to look after the girl's emotional and

social well-being. Her efforts paid off. After months of encouraging and engaging with her charge, the pre-schooler stopped crying in school, ceased to suck on her fingers and now enjoys walking.

"Effective communication is essential in building relationships between an early childhood educator, children and their families," shares Ms Lai.

Constant encouragement, coupled with effective parent-teacher communication, facilitated an encouraging environment in which the child was able to grow mentally and emotionally.

To this end, Ms Lai takes special care to ensure that parents are always kept in the loop on their child's progress. She uses the school's online parent portal and arranges face-to-face meetings with parents to keep them updated on the latest activities in school.

In 2018, Ms Lai received the ECDA Award for Excellence in Early Childhood Development — Promising Early Childhood Educator Award. Mr and Mrs Tan were key supporters of her nomination. "Ms Lai's patient and loving demeanour has helped to build a system of trust among us. Our daughter has learnt values and independence from her too."

RACHEL TAN

Creative O has instilled in my son an inquisitive mind, which leads him to explore knowledge beyond the textbooks. He excels in mathematics and science, and has won medals in Math Olympiad competitions. His teacher also praised him for his ability to solve maths questions creatively.

— Ms Koh Leng Leng, parent of former student Lee Hua Jay, now 11

PHOTOS: TED CHEN, WEE TY, ISTOCK



## Shaping a child's little big moments

BY CHERYL LEONG

A pre-school teacher at Star Learners @ Woodlands Circle, Ms K Durga (left) has guided many children on their journey to achieve milestone "firsts" in life — their first drawing of a stickman, their first successful attempt at dressing themselves and feeding themselves.

The 29-year-old mother of three recalls: "I had a student who couldn't hold his own feeding bottle at the age of three. But in pre-school, we try to help kids take baby steps to become independent. When he finally held his own bottle two weeks later, that was really satisfying. His mother was so appreciative, too."

Ms Durga herself has encountered several "firsts" on the job as well — like the first time a student called her "mummy". She was just 19 years old, a newbie to the early childhood education industry.

"In her excitement to show me something, my

student accidentally called me 'mummy'. She's a non-verbal child, so I was surprised. But from there, she began looking forward to school and would stop crying whenever she saw me," she says.

Today, Ms Durga is a 12-year veteran in the industry and her love for teaching hasn't waned one bit.

From creating fun costumes to engage her classes to imparting important values such as being kind, Ms Durga undoubtedly plays an important role in the lives of her students — often, at the expense of time with her own kids, aged four, two and five months.

She admits: "I understand mummy guilt better because while I'm witnessing the 'firsts' of my students, I'm missing out on some of my own kids' 'firsts'. I try to make up for it by ensuring that I always have a good time with them, and documenting their 'firsts' even if I only hear about it later."

Ms Durga's dedication has earned her a nomination for the ECDA Outstanding Educator Award in 2018, as well as the award for Most Creative Teacher in 2017, given by Star Learners.

Ms Durga took care of my child from N1 to N2. She's like a godmother to Pixie. She taught her what is right and wrong, and has always been there to guide and nurture her to be a wonderful little lady.

— Mrs Cheryl Yeoh, parent of Pixie Yeoh, age 6



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Keep believing that the change you make today will have an impact on the world tomorrow.

— Ms Angeline Goh

PHOTOS: TED CHEN, ISTOCK

# Question and learn

## Teaching children through an inquiry-based curriculum

BY CHARLOTTE KNG

Having spent over a decade educating young children, E-Bridge Pre-School's executive centre leader Angeline Goh believes that an inquiry-based curriculum is most effective in helping them absorb and internalise what they are being taught.

The 36-year-old currently manages Singapore's first mega childcare centre at 78 Edgedale Plains with over 100 staff and 500 children. Under her leadership, her centre was nominated for the Outstanding Centre for Teaching and Learning Award conferred by the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) last year. She was also a finalist for the ECDA Outstanding Childhood Leader Award this year.

Ms Goh explains how an inquiry-based curriculum can help children learn better.

### What is inquiry learning?

"It is an active form of learning. Instead of presenting facts directly to children without any questions asked, we create opportunities for questions to arise and seek answers together with them."

### How is it incorporated in the classroom?

"Recently, we conducted an activity in class to help children explore the importance of conservation. With facilitation and guidance, they came up with creative ways to save the earth by reducing the use of paper products. Some even suggested making paper greeting cards smaller or

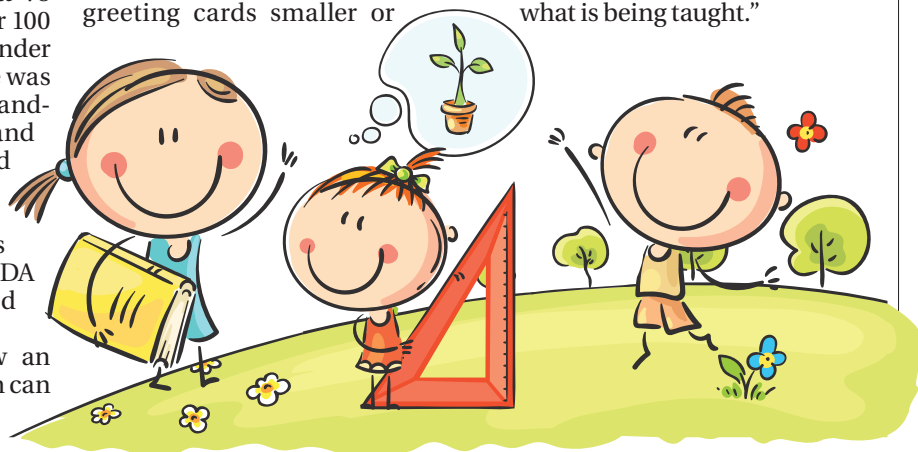
replacing them with thoughtful gifts instead.

"Another way of inquiry learning is getting the children to spell unfamiliar words with an educated guess, based on their phonetic knowledge. This way, they get to navigate and 'own' their learning before arriving at the correct way of spelling the words. This will also improve their literacy skills."

### How does this help with learning for young children?

"Enabling the child to proactively source for information in their environment, make sense of it and then apply what's relevant encourages them to take a more positive learning approach in life.

"It is only when children are in a conducive environment with the right support system to facilitate their own learning that they can truly understand what is being taught."



# Taming the terrible twos

Cultivating good behaviour and self-control

BY PEH YI WEN

When Ms Marvic Morales lifts a bubble wand and gently blows through the centre, chaos immediately turns into order as all 12 toddlers turn their gaze upon the iridescent bubbles floating across the classroom.

A few minutes after getting the group to quieten and focus, some of the young children start getting restless again. Ms Morales takes out another teaching tool — a tambourine — and starts shaking it.

These are some ways the 29-year-old toddler teacher attracts and holds the fleeting attention of her toddler playgroup at Safari House Preschool Toa Payoh.

"We must stay alert and be energetic enough to keep up with children who, at this age, love running around, climbing tables and are more accident-prone because they lack spatial awareness," Ms Morales says.

After seven years in early childhood education, she has grown more patient, dedicating weeks to teach batches of 18- to 30-month-olds simple life skills such as washing their hands and feeding themselves.

How does she deal with temper tantrums in toddlers? One technique is to distract the child with a new activity. For example, whipping out a toy puppet whenever she needs.



PHOTOS: TED CHEN, ISTOCK

To all my colleagues, the effort and commitment you've put into every child is life changing and will make them responsible individuals of the future generation. Your work matters!

— Ms Marvic Morales

Once the child is pacified, she would try to find out the reason for the outburst.

"It's important to be a good communicator by using age-appropriate words so that the child can understand you," she says.

To teach misbehaving toddlers about consequences, she would

get them to sit on the Thinking Chair (marked with a sad face) at a safe spot with no distractions within the teacher's view for one to two minutes, so that they can reflect on their actions.

At Safari House Preschool, videos, e-gadgets and e-media are excluded from the toddler playgroup curriculum. Instead, they spend the entire session interacting with teachers like Ms Morales, picking up language skills through songs and storytelling sessions.

She adds: "Tablets don't stimulate the children's imagination; tablets don't teach them to think of consequences. Neither do tablets offer any face-to-face interaction. Teachers just need to be more interesting than technology and provide experiences that cater to the children's curiosity."

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SWEETSPOT PARTNER CONTENT

 You have the ability to create a positive effect on someone's life. What you do matters, no matter how big or small.

— Ms Jazlyn Choo



PHOTOS: TED CHEN, ISTOCK

# Hands-on opportunities to learn and grow



Educators play an important role in helping children develop lifelong skills

BY RACHEL TAN

A five-year-old makes a cupcake for the first time, following a step-by-step guide with the help of diagrams, another child pens a note to his family on a piece of paper he made himself using recycled paper, newspapers and magazines while another student observes a trail of ants during a neighbourhood walk.

At NTUC First Campus' My First Skool, these hands-on activities pique the students' curiosity about the world around them. These activities also encourage them to interact with their peers and learn concepts

such as measurement, estimation and number sense while having fun.

Most importantly, the children are never alone throughout the whole process, with early childhood educators guiding them every step of the way.

For 29-year-old deputy centre lead Jazlyn Choo, social interaction and a hands-on approach are essential in helping children develop critical everyday skills and discover what they are capable of achieving. Educators are crucial facilitators in this journey of discovery, she says.

The role of an early childhood educator extends beyond teaching

his or her students how to read and write.

"Along with the families, the teachers lay the foundation in helping children grow cognitively, socially and conceptually," she says.

Her students not only learn about the external world, but also learn to be more self-aware.

"During a disagreement between children, for example, educators can step in to guide them in managing their emotions and channelling their thoughts on how to forgive, negotiate or take things one step at a time," she says.

## Growing with her charges

In the early childhood education industry, learning and growing is a two-way street. While Ms Choo may be guiding her students towards their developmental milestones, she, too, benefits in the process.

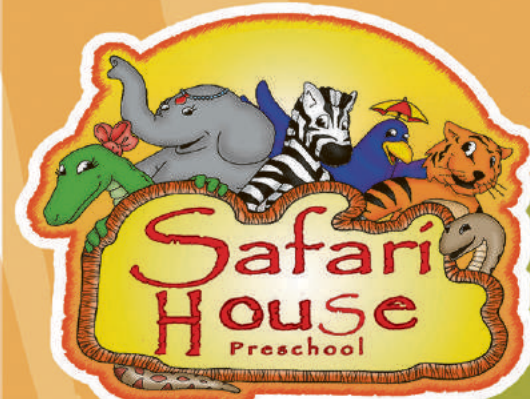
"I am able to tap into my inner child to experience things like

a child would for the first time and witness the moments when a child overcomes challenges," she says. "These experiences allow me to grow as an adult as I help my charges grow as children."

Given an educator's pivotal role in a child's formative years, Ms Choo emphasises the importance of looking for opportunities to upgrade and keep up with the latest trends and news in the sector. Some professional development courses include Early Childhood Development Agency scholarships and training awards, and Professional Development Programmes.

"Being an early childhood educator goes beyond having the love for children. Planning, observation and reflection is also needed," she says. However, with perseverance, the journey is worthwhile.

"The children make me a stronger teacher by challenging me to find ways that will help them the most."




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— Ms Jaime Natalie Tan



PHOTOS: TED CHEN, ISTOCK

# Learn through role play

Dramatic Play is a key part of curriculum at MY World Preschool

BY PEH YI WEN

When Ms Jaime Natalie Tan joins her pre-schoolers during their daily dramatic play sessions, she would often play the role of a Chinese-speaking customer while they act as hawker stall owners selling roti prata or kueh. The aim is to encourage the pre-schoolers to speak more Mandarin although they are more conversant in English.

Ms Tan is the centre principal of MY World @ Ang Mo Kio Central, an anchor operator that provides both English and Chinese language curriculum. Despite the extended exposure to the language, Ms Tan observed that many pre-schoolers still lacked the ability to express themselves confidently in Mandarin.

Working closely with teachers at her centre, she spearheaded a project titled "How Can We Encourage K2 Children To Ask Meaningful Questions During Chinese Language Lessons?" to come up with new teaching methods to get the children to observe, think and ask questions.

Besides in-class discussions and exploration of learning resources, she uses open-ended activities to engage their minds. For example, exposing them to traditional cultural objects like batik sarong and mortar and pestle to pique curiosity, ignite imagination and develop their questioning skills.

Her efforts paid off when the six-month project not only led to vast improvements in the children's ability to converse in Mandarin, but also won the centre the Early Childhood Innovation Award 2019 — Distinction conferred by the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA).

A second award — Promising Early Childhood Leader Award 2019 also conferred by ECDA — went to Ms Tan, a first in her career. "I never expected to be nominated, much less to win the award. I'm grateful that MY World recognises my dedication and commitment," she says.

As young as she may be, the 30-year-old centre principal holds almost a decade of experience in early childhood education.

Her journey in teaching started right after secondary school. She enrolled in Ngee Ann Polytechnic's full-time Diploma in Early Childhood Education, followed by a Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood Education and Leadership with Wheelock College-Singapore.

"It is most fulfilling to be able to witness the children's development and progress in learning," says Ms Tan. "When families talk about how their children have enjoyed their days at the centre and how much they have learned from our activities, I celebrate with them."





TEACHERS' DAY SPECIAL — NOTHING CAN REPLACE AN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR

SWEETSPOT PARTNER CONTENT

Staying dedicated to educating children, a positive mindset and some drive will sustain early childhood educators through hard times.

— Ms Shirmaine Pang



PHOTOS: LIM SIN THAI, ISTOCK

# From A to C: 3 superpowers of early childhood educators

Senior teacher Shirmaine Pang exemplifies the qualities of adaptability, big-heartedness and competence

BY MICHELLE CHIN

A K2 class at NurtureStars @ SAFRA Jurong went on a field trip to River Safari in July and upon returning, the 16 pre-schoolers were given the chance to decide for themselves a project related to the outing that they would do in class.

Senior teacher Shirmaine Pang says: "The project was child-initiated and the children got to decide what they wanted to do and how they would go about it. The children then decided that they would like to create a rainforest in school."

The project turned out to be a fun and rewarding experience for the pre-schoolers and Ms Pang.

She put aside a little time each day to guide the six-year-olds to create the

rainforest; the artwork was completed in a month and was placed in the common corridor of the pre-school.

Ms Pang, 30, had to be creative so that the children could learn something new every day. For example, they learned different ways to create leaves and vines using crepe paper and Papel Picado, a traditional Mexican paper cutting technique, while working on the project.

For take-home projects, the children, working with their parents, created animals from recycled materials such as toilet paper rolls.

Ms Pang has had 14 years of experience in the industry, four of which were spent at NurtureStars @ SAFRA Jurong. Other than having a passion for nurturing young charges, Ms Pang shares other key attributes an early childhood educator should possess.

## A for adaptability

Teaching young children requires the mental flexibility to tackle the unexpected.

For instance, on her first day of teaching, Ms Pang found herself alone with 13 crying toddlers. She had to try various ways to pacify them such as singing and acting out nursery rhymes.

Her strategy paid off: One after another, the toddlers stopped crying.

"You can have everything planned for a lesson, but an unexpected turn can happen anytime. When you remain flexible to changes in situations, you can handle almost anything," says Ms Pang.

## B for big-heartedness

It takes a kind and generous person to love and care for children.

As children are mostly impressionable and may pick up cues from people who nurture them, Ms Pang is mindful to impart values such as kindness and respectfulness at all times.

She says: "Teachers need to recognise that the emotional, social and physical developments of young children have direct effects on their overall development."

"We also get to instill lifelong skills such as empathy, self-awareness, problem solving and communication skills, which will help children later in life."

## C for competence

Young minds are a reservoir of untapped potential. However, Ms Pang explains that due to alternative avenues of education, such as iPad games and television programmes, the young ones are sometimes able to master concepts beforehand and can get bored during class.

Thus, an early childhood educator must read each situation and be competent enough to adopt and change teaching tactics to keep the children's attention.

"I learnt how to keep lessons fun and engaging by allowing lessons to be child-directed," she says. "Instead of just telling children what we are learning today, children are encouraged to ask questions on why things happen and how things work and thus develop the interest to explore and discover new topics and concepts."



sweet

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