

For quality childcare, care for parents too

Having social workers, educational therapists on the spot allows for early intervention



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Last week it was heartening for me to see the results of a new pre-school education model being tried out at two childcare centres run by the welfare group Care Corner.

Under the Circle of Care programme started in February last year, 159 children from two centres at Leng Kee and Admiralty received a high-quality pre-school education, which included music and movement classes, field trips and literacy and numeracy programmes.

With generous funding from local philanthropic group Lien Foundation, the centres were able to employ more teachers and lower the ratio of teachers to children to 1:8 for the kindergarten classes.

But what was novel about the programme was that the staff now included social workers and educational therapists. This made a crucial difference to children needing help in anything from learning to health or financial aid. Identified early by social workers, they and their families were given appropriate help, often at the centres themselves.

It is a big change from what happens at most other childcare centres, where children and families needing help, for what are often multifaceted problems, can face an uphill struggle. If they are identified by a social worker or pre-school teacher, the families are then directed to various centres run by government agencies and welfare organisations.

The Circle of Care programme has shown encouraging results. Not only are the children attending pre-school more often, but they have also shown big jumps in reading and numeracy skills.

Children at the Leng Kee centre used to attend class only five days a month on average. Now they attend an average 12 days a month.

Twenty-four children at the two centres, who could read only a few words such as "I" or "me", received educational therapy. Among other things, they were taught reading and told stories by students from Wheelock College, a pre-school teacher training institute.

After more than six months, the children could recognise the letters of the alphabet.

The centres also ran talks and workshops for parents and invited them on field trips. This has made the parents more involved in their children's education.

For a start, they are taking their children to the centres on time, at 9am. Previously some would arrive as late as 4pm.

And before the programme started at Leng Kee, only one parent turned up to meet her child's teacher. Last year, 25 parents attended the meeting.

I also saw the difference the programme made to a six-year-old boy I met last year.

A year ago, he was hyperactive, unable to sit still in class for even a few minutes, and his reading and numeracy skills were poor. His mother, a security guard who worked late shifts, was at a loss about what to do and was worried



Two centres are trying out a new pre-school model. (From left) Educational therapist Sharon Yeoh, head/principal educational therapist Isaac Tan, assistant senior social worker Geraldine Foo and principal Patricia Tham of Child Development Centre (Leng Kee) are among those helping both children and parents.



Ms Yeoh using a multi-sensory approach in teaching words. The children use playdough to form and spell words such as "come" and "love".

he would fall into the wrong company in their neighbourhood.

Last week the single parent was happy to report that her son was improving in his reading and maths and didn't need much urging to do his homework.

What had made the difference,

she said, was that the educational therapist had trained her son to focus better and helped develop his reading and maths skills.

The mother herself had received counselling and was coached on effective parenting techniques, including how to help her son with

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es at the Education Ministry-run kindergartens, for example, are being set aside for these children.

Having access to high quality pre-school education can change the equation for children who lack a stable, nurturing home environment.

But as the Circle of Care scheme has already shown, other services such as counselling and educational therapy must be made available to these children and their families.

Parent education must be included. The children most in need often come from homes where parents are busy making ends meet, beset by more urgent problems, ignorant of their children's needs or unaware that they can help.

Experts have attributed part of the success of the landmark Perry Preschool project in the United States to home visits made by teachers. They helped mothers pick the right storybooks from the library and taught them how to read aloud to their children and even how to play simple number games with common household items.

Childhood poverty is a complicated issue.

Various studies in the United States and Britain show that early intervention – at pre-school level – produces more positive and lasting effects on children from disadvantaged families.

American economist James Heckman has shown that early intervention has a much greater economic and social impact than programmes run later in school systems, such as remedial schemes or lowering the teacher-student ratio.

Researchers such as Betty Hart and Todd Risley in the United States found that the gap between rich and poor kids starts from age 0. They studied how parents spoke to their young children and concluded that professional parents gave their children an advantage with every word uttered, and the advantage just kept building.

Sociologist Annette Lareau peered into the homes of poor and rich children and concluded that better-off parents practised a different kind of child-rearing – one she termed "concerted cultivation", which built various abilities and skills. She found that the differences translated into a distinct advantage in school and, later, in life and in the workplace.

So the disadvantages that poverty imposes on children are not merely about a lack of books or missing out on speech and drama classes. Much of the evidence points to the quality of the nurturing environment at home and this is something that can be addressed by offering help to the child as well as his family.

As Singapore looks at ways to do better by the most disadvantaged children, all signs tell us we cannot stop at providing quality pre-school education to the child alone.

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