

New pre-school scheme to help the disadvantaged

By **SANDRA DAVIE**
SENIOR WRITER

CHILDREN of disadvantaged families will have access to high-quality pre-schooling under a scheme that aims to close the gap between them and better-off pupils.

They will be monitored by a social worker and educational therapist as part of the Circle of Care programme, started by a local philanthropic group and a welfare organisation.

This will allow staff to identify problems and address them quickly – meaning families who need help are spared the lengthy process of dealing with various organisations and agencies.

The programme will be run at two centres operated by Care Corner, with the help of \$1.8 million pledged over four years by the Lien Foundation. It aims to be up and running by next month.

At the moment, children and families who need additional help sometimes face an uphill struggle.

Problems that are often multifaceted have to be identified by a social worker or pre-school teacher. The family will then be directed to various centres run by gov-

ernment agencies and welfare organisations.

Care Corner chief executive officer Yap Poh Kheng said the new scheme will streamline the process by making help available at the project, which will be run in Leng Kee and Admiralty.

“Let’s say a pre-school teacher notices that a child is overly anxious,” he said. “She can bring in the social worker who will go and meet the families, investigate the matter further and bring together different aspects of help and care. These could range from educational therapy to nutrition, counselling and financial aid.”

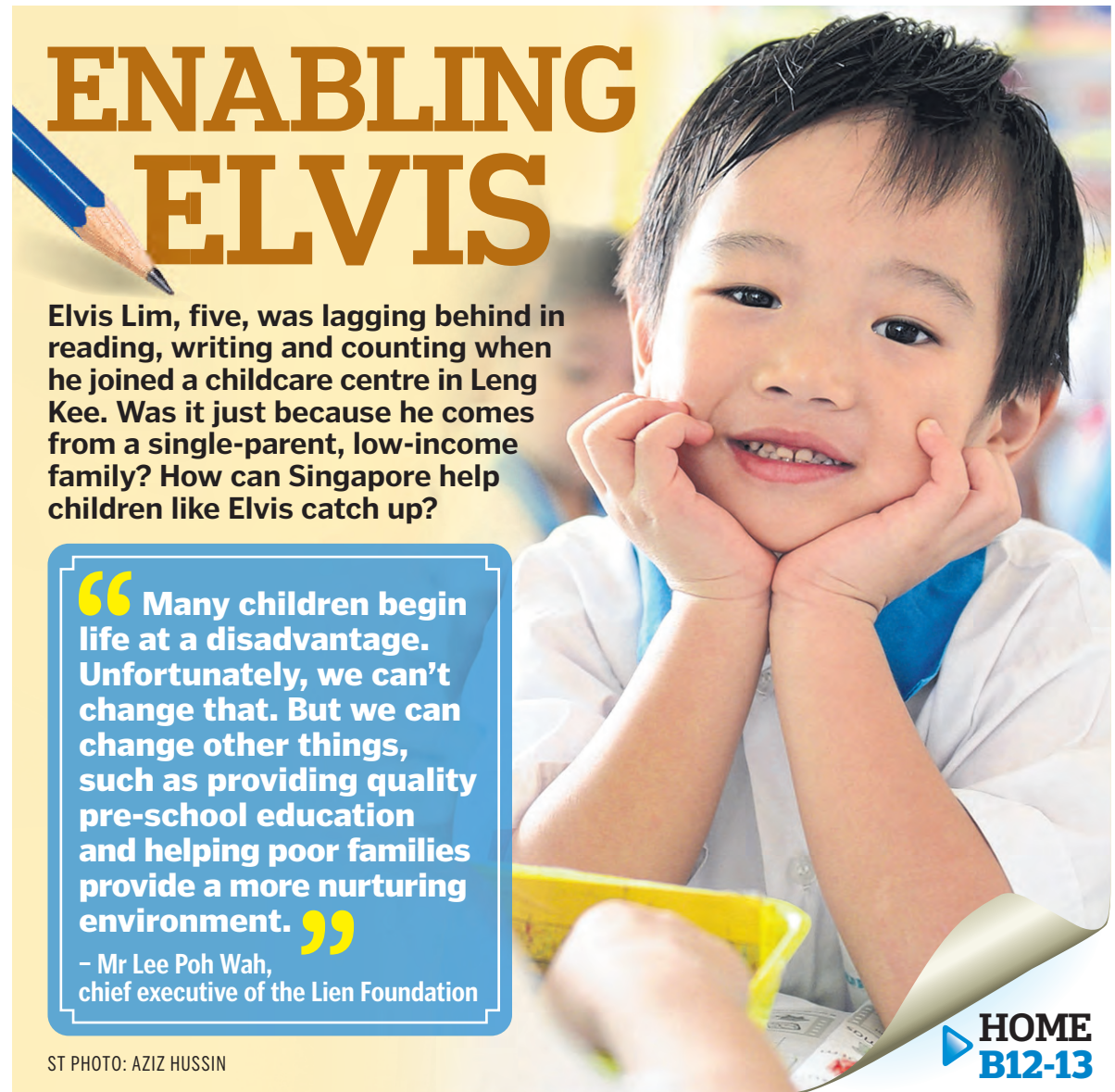
Lien Foundation officials said various studies show high-quality early education provides a good foundation for academic achievement later on.

Early childhood expert Khoo Kim Choo will review the centres’ curriculum to make sure it boosts the children’s holistic development. Talks, workshops and support groups will also be set up to enhance parents’ skills.

“Research has shown children’s sustained gains in development are closely associated with parental involvement,” said Dr Khoo.

Lien Foundation chief executive Lee Poh Wah said: “Young children are most vulnerable to the harmful effects of poverty. They often lag behind their peers in social and intellectual development as they do not have access to the same educational and developmental resources.”

The Government has taken several steps to raise the quality of



ENABLING ELVIS

Elvis Lim, five, was lagging behind in reading, writing and counting when he joined a childcare centre in Leng Kee. Was it just because he comes from a single-parent, low-income family? How can Singapore help children like Elvis catch up?

“ Many children begin life at a disadvantage. Unfortunately, we can’t change that. But we can change other things, such as providing quality pre-school education and helping poor families provide a more nurturing environment. ”

– Mr Lee Poh Wah, chief executive of the Lien Foundation

ST PHOTO: AZIZ HUSSIN

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pre-schooling and is looking into how it can be made more accessible to children from low-income families. Mr Lee said more help such as counselling and educational therapy must be made available within easy reach.

One mother, whose husband is a lorry driver, said she hopes that an educational therapist can help her four-year-old. “I cannot get my son to do his homework,” said the 34-year-old housewife, who asked not to be named. “I really don’t know what to do.”

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Is it nature or nurture that leads to children | school? **Sandra Davie** delves into research to look from poor homes lagging behind in | at the causes and solutions.

Children's learning gap: A study in contrasts

Early intervention before Primary 1 can help low-income kids to level up

PRE-SCHOOL teacher Daphne Teo smiles as she looks through five-year-old Elvis Lim's work-book.

The talkative, curious boy has improved by leaps and bounds. A year ago, he could not even count from one to 10 or recite the alphabet.

But like many of the children at the Care Corner childcare centre in Leng Kee, Elvis still lags behind the rest of his age group in reading, writing and numeracy skills.

Mrs Teo, who is in her 50s and used to teach at Nanyang Kindergarten in Bukit Timah, says she was shocked when she started work at Care Corner last year.

"My K1 kids at Nanyang were reading simple story books and could do addition and subtraction. Here, I worry because many of them can't count from one to 10."

But she is also aware that many of the children have home circumstances that are less than ideal.

Elvis' single-parent father is a 22-year-old hawker assistant who works nights and fathered him at the age of 16, while awaiting his N-level results. The boy is now cared for by his 56-year-old grandmother Chua Lee Kwee in the family's cluttered one-room rental flat in Lengkok Bahru.

Shaking her head, she says it is

not a good area for children. "I see police every day." Madam Chua realises that education is important and tries her best to get Elvis to watch English TV shows and learn his alphabet and numbers. But she is unable to help him because of her own limited command of the language.

"Elvis always tells me... Nai Nai (grandma in Chinese), your English wrong," she says in her halting English.

With her son's meagre earnings of about \$1,000 a month, she is unable to afford tuition for Elvis. But the childcare subsidy given to low-income families allows her to pay only \$5 a month for him to attend Care Corner.

Nature or nurture?

SHE hopes that the teachers at the centre will be able to prepare her grandson well for primary school in two years. With the additional funding from philanthropic organisation Lien Foundation, Care Corner also hopes to close the gap for children such as Elvis, before they enter Primary 1.

Emerging research is starting to shed light on why poor children quickly fall behind rich and middle-class children, and stay there.

Is it nature – for example, the parents' IQ – or nurture?

Or is it because rich parents place more importance on education and provide their children with more books and educational toys?

What about the massive doses of early enrichment activities that children from richer homes receive, such as speech and drama, phonics and art classes?

Studies around the world have highlighted some possible reasons for the learning gap. Much of the evidence points to the quality of the nurturing environment.

For example, a 1995 study of 42 American families showed that by the age of three, children of professionals had vocabularies of about 1,100 words, compared to 525 words for those whose parents were on welfare.

The study also found differences in the kinds of words and statements that children heard. By age three, the average child of a professional had heard 500,000 encouragements and 80,000 discouragements. For the welfare children, the situation was reversed. They had heard an average of 75,000 encouraging phrases and 200,000 discouraging ones.

The researchers Betty Hart and Todd Risley concluded that professional parents were giving their children an advantage with every word they spoke, and the advantage just kept building.

Another researcher, American sociologist Annette Lareau, peered into the homes of poor and rich children, and found that mid-

dle-class parents practised a different kind of child-rearing – one she termed "concerted cultivation" and which built various abilities and skills.

Middle-class children grow up with a sense of entitlement. They expect people to take their concerns seriously. This builds a confidence that less wealthy children lack. According to Professor Lareau, the differences translate into a distinct advantage in school, and, later in life, in the workplace.

All these studies suggest the disadvantages that poverty imposes on children are not primarily about a lack of books or the absence of speech and drama classes.

Overcoming disadvantages

THE real advantages that middle-class children gain come from something far less tangible – the language that their parents use and the social skills and confidence they build in their children.

"The research is quite clear," says pre-school operator Denise Lai, 42, who is enrolled in the National Institute of Education's doctorate in education programme.

"Middle-class parents bring up their kids differently – and they give their children a definite edge."

The question then arises – can these disadvantages be overcome and, if so, how? Can poor families be taught to bring up their children differently? If so, how can



this be done and who should take on the responsibility?

Many countries, including Singapore, have schemes to help children who lag behind. Every year, about 10 per cent of the Primary 1 cohort in Singapore attend an English learning support programme

and 5 per cent attend a maths one. The results have been positive.

About 65 per cent of pupils who have gone through the English programme in the past few years are able to read at their age level and pass their end-of-year school examinations, said the Ministry of Education.

But does it come too late?

Many child experts looking at the wealth of research overseas would argue that the gap has to be closed much earlier.

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.

The most reliable data comes from two experiments carried out in the US – the Perry Pre-school Project in Michigan in the 1960s

and the Abecedarian experiment performed in North Carolina in the early 1970s. They are particularly revealing as they follow children into their adult years.

The Perry Pre-school Project involved providing high-quality pre-school education to a group of three- and four-year-olds living in poverty and assessed to be at high risk of school failure.

The pupils were taught by certified public school teachers with at least a bachelor's degree. The average child-teacher ratio was 6:1 and the curriculum emphasised

active learning.

These children were tracked for decades after leaving pre-school. Not only did more of them go on to complete high school and enter college, they also had better jobs and earned higher salaries.

Renowned American economist James Heckman said every dollar invested in the programme produced a 7 to 12 per cent return.

He has argued that early intervention programmes have a much greater economic and social impact than the later interventions being carried out in school



Left: Five-year-old Elvis Lim with his pre-school teacher Daphne Teo. Elvis comes from a low-income background and lags behind the rest of his age group in reading, writing and numeracy skills. Above: Lien Foundation chief executive Lee Poh Wah and Care Corner CEO Yap Poh Kheng (left). With the additional funding from Lien Foundation, Care Corner hopes to close the gap for children such as Elvis, before they enter Primary 1. ST PHOTOS: AZIZ HUSSIN, DESMOND FOO

systems, such as reducing pupil-teacher ratios.

Advocates of early intervention such as Lien Foundation chief executive Lee Poh Wah acknowledge that in recent years, the Government has taken steps to improve the quality, accessibility and affordability of pre-school education here. But Mr Lee argues that high-quality childcare and pre-school are still not available to children from low-income families.

These children and their parents also need help in many other

areas, and at the moment, they have to go to various agencies and welfare organisations.

"I feel there is currently a certain poverty of ambition on the issue," he says. "We cannot afford to be stingy or short-sighted to deliver on greater equality of opportunity, as persistent poverty and social immobility are ultimately extremely expensive for society."

Different schemes can be tried out by philanthropic groups and welfare organisations working hand in hand.

Says Mr Lee: "Early childhood

poverty is a complicated issue and we must try new approaches. If it is shown to work, then the Government can come in and scale it up to make it available to more children."

He adds: "Many children begin life at a disadvantage. Unfortunately, we can't change that. But we can change other things, such as providing quality pre-school education and helping poor families provide a more nurturing environment. That would change the equation for children like Elvis."

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LAGGING BEHIND

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MIDDLE-CLASS ADVANTAGE

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OVERCOMING DISADVANTAGE

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