

# Making it safe for our children

The National Child Protection Policy (CPP), which has been in place since July 2009, is a good standard of practice to look up for all who are concerned with the safety of children.

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**W**HEN it comes to the safety of children, one can never play it too safe especially when the kids are out of their home environment.

Taking the shopping mall as an example, play therapist Chris Ng poses the question: "What if your child were to get lost (in the mall)? Is there a designated shop or office which is a safe place with someone in charge to help?"

The question is even more pertinent as parents these days are increasingly relying on non-family institutions such as childcare centres to look after their kids while they are at work.

Before entrusting their children into the care of these places, parents need to ask questions such as what their rules are on safety, and if the staff have the necessary training and knowledge of children's rights, Ng advises.

This is when he brings up the importance on the part of all concerned with the safety of children, including the management of shopping malls, which are very family-based venues, and childcare centres, to adopt a child protection policy (CPP).

As long as children are part of one's organisation, one should adopt the policy which, although not mandated by the Government, is needed to hold the parties responsible for the child's safety accountable, he says.

Having a CPP in place, he stresses, ensures there is a "checklist" that the organisation can

refer to when required.

While there is no "hard and fast" rule on the contents of a CPP, there is a template that organisations can follow.

This is the National CPP provided by the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry and includes a mission and vision statement, a statement of commitment and behavioural protocols.

It also contains points on recruitment and screening of staff, procedures to follow when handling abuse allegations, communication with and about children as well as training, evaluation and monitoring.

The CPP outlines child protection principles that are consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Child Act 2001. It focuses on advocacy, prevention, support services and research and development aspects for the protection of children.

Ng, who is embarking on a training programme on the CPP, says it is more than just about ensuring that the infrastructure is safe for children.

"The *makkik* down the road who is a babysitter, even she needs to be aware of protection issues," he says, adding that parents need to be advocates of the CPP to make sure their child is safe.

Conversely, he says, a CPP could help those working in an organisation to know what to do if they suspect that a child is being abused.

In the case of shelters, something seemingly innocent like allowing children to be photographed or meeting donors can be highlighted as a cause for concern, Ng says.

Currently, training for staff of institutions



**Kids first:** Children trying out some gadgets at a computer shop in a shopping mall in Kuala Lumpur. The safety of children is always an important issue, more so when they are out of the home environment.

such as shelters is being done by various organisations including Childline Malaysia in conjunction with the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) Malaysia and the Selangor Welfare Council.

Unicef Malaysia senior child protection specialist Phenny Kakama says a CPP is critical for a strong, cohesive and safe society.

"It helps to articulate the preventive and responsive measures that need to be in place to protect children from violence and harm," he says. "A sound policy will also establish the procedures and mechanisms needed to deal with affected children."

Unicef, says Kakama, collaborates with the Government, civil society organisations,

among which is to increase the awareness and commitment of relevant parties in efforts to protect children.

It also encourages organisations that deal directly or indirectly with children to formulate their own CPP to protect them from any form of neglect, violence, abuse or exploitation.

Enhancing support services to address the neglect, abuse, violence and exploitation of children and conducting research and development to improve protection of children are the other main objectives.

Eleven strategies based on advocacy, prevention, support services and research and development have been formulated to achieve these objectives.

corporate partners and other stakeholders to disseminate the CPP.

"Unicef advocates initiatives to strengthen existing national policies and legislation on child protection and juvenile justice," he says.

In addition, Unicef also supports initiatives for strengthening social welfare or child protection systems such as development of social work competency standards and training of social workers, and provides training for child rights NGOs.

Ng himself is undergoing a training programme conducted by the Welfare Department.

The training educates both management and carers on the need for a CPP in their places as well as understanding children's rights.

Rumah Ozanam in Selangor is among the shelters that are now drawing up their own CPP.

According to Datin Elsie Das, board member and chairman of education at Rumah Ozanam, the CPP is very useful because it defines the protocols and standards that are in the best interest of the child.

Elsie, a play therapist, adds that a CPP would help to prevent incidents such as punishing children by making them stand under the sun.

Funding has been provided to 10 homes (in Selangor) to formulate their individual CPP, reveals Elsie, who also heads the shelter homes portfolio of the Selangor Welfare Council.

The homes have been given three months to draw up a draft of the CPP, which should be ready for endorsement and implementation after six months.

For Rumah Ozanam, the CPP will iron out protocols for staff and volunteer training, among others.

In line with their corporate social responsibility efforts, corporations such as Sime Darby Bhd have already adopted initiatives to ensure an environment that is safe for children in their operations.

Sime Darby launched their initiative in March 2010 together with their "Developing a Child Protection Policy" booklet.

## Helping hand

The National CPP has seven objectives,

achieve these objectives.

In terms of achieving the short-term goals, Deputy Women, Family and Community Development Minister Senator Datuk Heng Seai Kie says that some 77 children-related NGOs have been given training and information sessions.

In addition, 55 corporations have been given training sessions and 12 media organisations have also been made aware of the CPP.

A total of 25 training sessions on how to identify abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation have also been carried out in high-risk areas identified by the police.

"There are 11.9 million children in Malaysia and we also have an obligation to abide by the principles in the CRC," says Heng.

Unicef, says Kakama, has been working with the Welfare Department to develop minimum standards of care for NGO residential homes for children.

"These standards will help to increase the capacity of caregivers to provide the best possible care for children in these homes and ensure that children are protected," he stresses.

Unicef has also been collaborating with the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry to develop the Social Work Competency Standards.

The standards, he says, will equip and professionalise the human resource capacity of the Government to deliver quality primary, secondary and tertiary interventions in child protection.

As for Malaysia stacking up against other countries in the region when it comes to child protection policies, he feels it is doing "very well" and this could be seen as a benchmark.

The Government has developed and implemented several measures, including a national child protection policy, a national policy for children, related action plans and the Child Act 2001, he says.

"The country is also making steady progress towards the professionalisation of social work through the development of the social work competency standards and the development of a Social Workers Act," he adds.