

Early education is no child's play

Experts: Properly trained childcare providers go on to shape young lives

PETALING JAYA: Childcare providers must be properly trained and be appropriately paid for their services to ensure the best quality for pupils, say experts.

Child psychologist Dr Chiah Wan Yeng said the country needs more qualified early childhood educators as the formative years are most crucial for a child's development.

"These years set the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour, school readiness, and one's overall well-being.

"And as dual-income households are the norm, more and more responsibilities are being shouldered by early childhood educators," said Chiah, who is an assistant professor and the head of academic affairs at the UCSI Child Development Centre (CDC).

She explained that as far as training goes, the job scope for childcare providers must be defined.

"It's not just about one's level of education.

"Other things need to be considered, like pedagogical knowledge and the amount of hands-on training early childhood educators receive at university or college.

"Practical exposure and simula-



Hands-on educators: Chiah (in white) instructing UCSI students on coaching techniques for children during a music and movement lesson. — AZHAR MAHFUF/The Star

tion rooms help immensely, and we work closely with UCSI University to provide their Bachelor of Early Childhood students with hands-on learning opportunities," she said yesterday.

Chiah also suggested that child-

care educators should undertake psychological assessments periodically – perhaps biennially.

"Childhood education providers must also be vigilant when it comes to mental health screening. At UCSI CDC, we look into the finer details

like one's family history of depression or anxiety and the reasons behind prolonged or unusual sick leave.

"This is important as early childhood educators must be resilient," she said.

She added that a diploma in Early Childhood Education must be the minimum academic requirement for educators.

"The process of earning the qualification would require one to be well-versed with child development milestones, numeracy, literacy, physical education, arts and craft, curriculum design, and health and safety guidelines," she said.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Council founding president Datuk Dr Chiam Heng Keng also agreed that it was absolutely important for care providers to be well trained.

"It needs knowledge and skills to care for children in their formative years. The younger the child, the more knowledge and skills are needed.

"However, in Malaysia the requirements for qualifications are in the reverse order – the older the child, the greater the need to be

properly trained.

"There is a difference between having a paper qualification and being properly trained. The sad reality is that the vast majority of those with paper qualifications are not properly trained and are not able to put into practice their theoretical knowledge.

"It is very vital that the practice must go hand in hand with the theoretical knowledge," she said, adding that childcare providers should also be appropriately paid for their service.

"If the salary is low, there is no incentive to be trained and go into the industry permanently. Even though they like to work with young children, the low pay deters them from venturing into the industry.

"Hence, the industry is filled with people who are unable to get jobs or use childcare as a temporary job while waiting for a better offer," she said.

The Women, Family and Community Development Ministry must also give appropriate attention to the welfare of childcare providers and make sure the centres are registered and are operated appropriately, added Chiam.

'Have agencies under one roof to oversee childcare centres'

PETALING JAYA: A one-stop centre should be set up to speed up the licensing and registration of all illegal childcare centres, say childcare providers.

Such a facility involving relevant government agencies including the Welfare Department, Fire and Rescue Department, Health Ministry and local authorities would cut down the application and approval process that could take months or even over a year, they say.

Association of Registered Childcare Providers president Anisa Ahmad said red tape in the paperwork process and difficulties in meeting local councils' requirements were the main roadblocks to childcare centres obtaining an operating licence.

Each district had different requirements and childcare centres in some areas had to pay assess-

ment at commercial rates, she said.

"To encourage the registration and licensing of childcare centres, we must have this one-stop centre where all the relevant agencies are under one roof.

"It will help centre owners with the applications because they will not need to run here and there.

"Besides that, the local councils must also standardise the requirements for each district so that they will be the same in every state.

"Childcare centres that want to get licensed often have problems with the local councils' many requirements," said Anisa.

Compounded by a lack of incentives to get childcare centres registered, many operators felt that it would be easier if they did not register, she said.

"But this is dangerous because the Welfare Department will not be able to monitor these unregistered

centres, which might not even have certified and trained workers."

She added that the government must also make it mandatory for home-based childminders to register with the Welfare Department.

This is because currently, the Child Care Centre Act 1984 only requires nurseries that accept four children or more, aged below four years, to register with and be certified by the department.

"That means those who are running a childminding business at home and taking care of fewer than three children do not fall under the department's radar," she noted.

Child rights activist and Suriana Welfare Society chairman James Nayagam said introducing a one-stop centre to legalise childcare centres would be the "only way out" of this situation, where over 1,000 illegal centres are running unregulated nationwide.

He said that in the past, such a system had been implemented, whereby a panel was set up to help register illegal childcare centres.

"When we had that, the application process was cut from over a year to just one month and we managed to help many centre owners with their applications.

"And of course these were centres that met the authorities' requirements and had safeguards in place.

"This initiative has faded away over the years but it should be brought back and the panel can be led by NGOs," said Nayagam, adding that he would be happy to help.

He also suggested providing incentives to encourage illegal centre owners to come forward and register themselves.

These included offering milk coupons, furniture discounts, staff training sessions, cooking and food preparation lessons among others,

he added.

Nayagam warned of possible dangers if there was no oversight by the government.

Safeguards such as CCTVs and minimum standards like hygiene, fire prevention and building safety must be in place at these centres.

"Unlicensed premises might not have these in place and that's where the danger lies."

On June 11, Women, Family and Community Development Minister Datuk Seri Rina Harun revealed that 1,028 privately-run childcare centres remained unregistered after being given warnings.

This comes amid news reports of abuse cases happening at childcare centres, with a recent one being a 15-month-old toddler who was found dead in Seremban.

The Coroner's Court is set to start an inquest into the child's death on June 29.