

# What about the children?

Families that are unable to afford legitimate childcare due to cost or accessibility often have to make do with unregistered options, which may not be the safest.

BEFORE she goes to work each day, Maimunah H, 29, will send her two-year-old son and twin daughters aged four, to her upstairs neighbour at the low-cost flats where they live to babysit.

"She's been looking after them for more than six months already and we trust her," says Maimunah, who works at a sundry store close to her residence.

Although Maimunah and her construction worker husband, Amin M, 26, realise the importance of early childcare, they can't afford to send their three children to a "proper" daycare centre, and furthermore, there isn't a taska (community daycare centre) nearby. And, they can't afford private daycare.

It's a mandatory requirement for childcare centres in Malaysia to be registered with the Department of Social Welfare, which is under the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development, says women's NGO Engender Consultancy lead consultant (child protection) Amy Bala.

"However, very few parents will check if a daycare centre is registered with the relevant authorities, or whether the staff are qualified and have had proper training in childcare," says Amy.

"They'll mainly look at affordability and accessibility, and even more so when it's lower-income families," she says.

On July 15, *The Star* highlighted issues related to safety in childcare centres (*Thread with care and Research, choose daycare centres carefully*), many of which lack proper child protection policies or measures.



File photo of a registered workplace childcare centre in Penang. According to the Child Care Centre Act (1984), there are four categories of childcare and all must be registered. — CHAN BOON KAI/The Star



'Childcare is not just about meeting the basic needs of a child but also their mental and social development,' says Amy. — Engender Consultancy

"For example, there may be sharp corners where the child could get hurt. There might not be a safety gate leading to the kitchen or toilet. The child – if they're already able to walk – might wander into the kitchen where there is a hot stove, boiling water, or sharp objects like knives, which could be a danger to the child," she adds.

"Secondly, there is personal safety. If the babysitter is looking after a few children, they may not be able to cope, so they might enlist an older child, spouse, relative, or another adult to help, and

childcare must be registered.

Amy says one of the biggest challenges for childcare centre operators is the location where these centres can be set up, which is stipulated by the local authorities.

The high instances of abuse at childcare centres were also highlighted by the Bukit Aman's Child, Sexual, Women and Child Investigations division – out of 2,055 suspects arrested for child abuse (2019-April 2022), 504 were caretakers of children or maids, and 317 were introduced by friends or neighbours.

Maimunah and Amin have decided to send their children to their neighbour to be looked after because they don't have many other options.

"We make do with what we have. We spend on necessities, and we try not to spend so much on other stuff," says Maimunah.

"This is why we've opted to send our children to a babysitter instead of a registered daycare centre. It's not that we don't want to, it's because it's too expensive," she says.

Maimunah adds that while they've heard about the taska komuniti, there aren't any located close enough to be accessible to them.

"We only have a motorbike, so it's impossible to bring our three children to the taska, which is very far away," she says.

The purpose of these taska komuniti is to "provide quality childcare and early childhood (preschool) education for B40 families in a safe, cheerful and comfortable environment as well as balanced and nutritious meals to encourage the healthy growth and development of these young ones.

"They offer trained, qualified and Social Welfare Department-endorsed child minders," says Amy.

"But while their purpose is good, with only 23 such registered taska komuniti throughout Malaysia, it's not sufficient to cater to the many B40 families," she highlights.



There needs to be more community nurseries in densely populated areas such as the PPR flats. – SAMUEL ONG/The Star.

"If there's at least one taska komuniti for each B40 community – although some are so huge that they need more than one centre – it would be better able to meet the childcare needs of these parents," she says.

Also, for families such as Maimunah's, accessibility is an issue because they don't have the necessary transport to get to the centre, and there isn't a centre located close to them.

### Just meeting needs

Single mother Latifah M, 34, who lives upstairs from Maimunah, helps look after her neighbour's three pre-school-aged children.

"It's a win-win situation because she needs help and I also need to earn an income," she says.

However, the only issue is that Latifah's "childcare services" aren't registered.

"I didn't really treat it as a childcare business and initially wasn't aware that 'babysitting' was

required to be registered," she says.

"I believe that strict requirements and additional costs are required, so registering it might be difficult. Besides, I'm only doing this 'babysitting part-time' and I'm not taking care of more than three children," says Latifah, who has a 14-year-old son.

According to the Child Care Centre Act 1984 (Act 308) Subsection 5, there are four categories of childcare: institution-based (more than 10 children under their care and established by an NGO or private organisation); workplace-based (more than 10 children under their care and established by an employer for employee welfare at workplaces); community-based (more than 10 children under their care, receives government aid, and established through a community initiative for low-income families); and home-based (four to nine children under their care and operated in the home of a registered individual). And, all four categories of

"Because of safety, it has to be a corner lot, can't be over a certain floor and many other specifications. And in residential areas, even if one neighbour doesn't agree, then the centre can't be set up," she says.

In low-cost housing areas, even though the rental of premises may be lower, the staff still have to be paid minimum wages.

There is also a staff to child ratio – for 10 children, they may require three staff. Then there is also the cost of food and materials, she adds.

"All these deter operators from registering their centres."

### Safety issues

Having brought up her own child, Latifah says she has the experience to look after children, and makes sure that the children under her charge are comfortable and well-taken care of.

"Although we may not be able to afford expensive meals or toys, I provide the same food that my own son and I have survived on and we're doing alright," she says.

"Our home is simple but it's safe because I've a small gate so the children can't get into the kitchen and the main door grilles are always locked so they can't go outside," she says.

Although Latifah considers herself as "not breaking the law" since she is looking after fewer than four children, there are other considerations such as safety, says Amy.

"While Latifah may be more aware of safety, there are many 'babysitters' who aren't", she highlights.

"Firstly, there is physical safety where the babysitter may have furniture that is a hindrance to the child and their home isn't child-friendly nor child-safe," she says.

"If any other people touch the child inappropriately, there will also be other kinds of abuse – whether it's physical, sexual or emotional such as bullying or shouting at the child," says Amy.

Nutrition is also a concern.

"If the babysitter isn't trained in the nutritional needs of children, they may just give what they think is OK for the child. And if children like junk food, they'll just give that to the child which is bad," says Amy.

Latifah, who lives with her 14-year-old son, reveals that when he's back from school, he'll help with the children.

"When my son is back from school – he's in Form One – he'll help to 'entertain' the kids after he does his homework. He shows them how to write simple alphabets and numbers, and also draw and colour," she says.

"We also have some children's books from Rumah Buku (community library), so my son will use these to read to them. But it's always the same books because the community library is very far away so we don't go there often to get new books," she adds.

"Children need mental stimulation to develop properly," says Amy.

"Every parent wants their child to be able to read and write, but a child won't be able to even hold a pencil if they don't develop their fine motor skills," she says.

"They need to engage in activities with their hands/fingers – such as writing, drawing, colouring, painting, craftwork – which a lot of these unregistered child minders might not have time for or want to spend resources and money on," she adds.

"Childcare is not just about meeting the basic needs of a child but also their mental and social development," she concludes.