

Giving KUDOS

MS SARA CAI has an important role to play in ensuring that parents have peace of mind when their children attend child care centres. Ms Cai makes sure the young ones receive good quality care and education, by diligently checking that they are learning and playing in a safe and healthy environment.

The 28-year-old, however, is neither a child care centre owner nor teacher, but a Senior Early Childhood Officer who handles child care centre licensing at the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA).



Safeguarding the quality of early childhood care

In her role, which she has held for the past four years, Ms Cai's main duties include regulating and monitoring child care centres to ensure licensing standards are met. New centres are issued with an initial licence tenure of 12 months. However, to continue operating a child care centre beyond the first year, centres must continue to rigorously maintain and upkeep high standards to obtain a licence renewal.



WHAT LICENSING OFFICERS CHECK ON

A licensing checklist is used to holistically assess the quality and standard of care and education in centres. It acts as a guide to score the centre, and all officers use the same checklist to ensure objectivity and impartiality in their assessment of a centre. The five areas of assessment (in no particular order) are:

Physical environment

Officers check for appropriate space utilisation, good lighting, ventilation, furnishings, fittings and cleanliness. The learning environment should also contain displays related to children's learning; and there must be a sufficient variety of developmental materials and resources for children's use.

Safety/health/hygiene and nutrition

There should be no safety hazards and children must be adequately supervised at all times. Fire extinguishers should be working and fire drills must be conducted at least once every six months. The first-aid kit must be appropriately stocked. Good hygiene practices should be observed by staff and children, and food is prepared and served in a hygienic manner.

Staff training, qualifications, requirements

The centre must have sufficient staff to meet stipulated staff-child ratios. Staff's professional qualifications should meet the requirements stipulated by ECDA. The centre should also have sufficient staff with first aid qualifications.

Programme and curriculum

Centres should have appropriate curriculum and assessments to promote holistic development, and learning is supported with hands-on and experiential activities. Lesson plans are evaluated, and checks are done on whether the centre maintains documentation of children's progress through progress reports/ portfolios. Officers will also observe staff-child interaction.

Administration

Documents such as children and parents' records should be complete and updated. The centre should also maintain a logbook with complete and updated records on operational matters like accidents, deviations in programme/ menu, occurrence of diseases and other records such as medicine administration, attendance and staff records.



GOING BY The Book

The licensing regulations in place for child care centres are for the benefit of children and parents, as well as educators and the centres themselves.

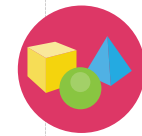
"The licensing process ensures that centres maintain consistent standards of care and education in their daily operations," says Ms Cai. Depending on performance, child care centres could receive renewal licences of different tenure lengths: either six, 12 or 24 months. For example, if a centre receives the maximum 24-month licence, this indicates it has commendably met key licensing requirements. On the other hand, a 12-month licence means the centre has met the required licensing standards, while a six-month licence indicates there are several areas of improvement for the centre. (See sidebar)

Giving some insight into how ECDA officers carry out the evaluation process, Ms Cai says all licence renewal visits are unannounced. It typically starts with a walkabout of the centre during which officers observe staff-child interaction and assess the physical environment and quality of care and education provided. ECDA officers will also look through the centre's administrative records. At the end of the visit, deficiencies and areas for improvement are discussed with the centre. The licensing visit report

THE LICENSING PROCESS ENSURES THAT CENTRES MAINTAIN CONSISTENT STANDARDS OF CARE AND EDUCATION IN THEIR DAILY OPERATIONS

//Sara Cai

will subsequently be provided to the centre, which is then required to update ECDA on their rectifications of deficiencies or action plans and targeted completion dates.



Appreciating the need for stringent licensing and renewal protocols

Rather than finding the licence renewal process cumbersome, educators and child care centres echo the need for this rigorous process. Centre Manager of Carpe Diem Schoolhouse Ms Juvina Lee, 44, says that the licensing process "serves as a benchmark for the child care centre to continuously improve on the quality of services".

"The licensing process helps our Carpe Diem centres regularly review our internal practices and standard operating procedures to ensure all aspects of the centre operations, especially the programme and environment quality, are improved upon,

with the centre's self-evaluation and assessment," she adds.

With so many child care centres in Singapore, choosing the 'right' one can be a difficult decision for parents. Meeting licensing requirements will reassure parents that the child care centres can deliver quality care and education to their children. This was something that Mdm Chua Li Sha, an administrator, placed most emphasis on when deciding which centre to place her three-year-old daughter.

Using the licence as a yardstick, Mdm Chua says she felt assured the centre would be able to "maintain the quality of care" for her child. "It helps maintain children's health, safety and enhance their general well-being."

Ms Lee agrees: "Licensing benefits all the stakeholders concerned — be it owner, educator or parent — but most importantly, the children are given the best during these important early years."♥



Ms Sara Cai (left) going through the big book of licensing requirements with Mrs Lim Seok Cheng, Deputy Director (Child Care Licensing).