

THE FIRST 1,000 DAYS

THE EARLIER THE BETTER — PARENTS AND PROFESSIONALS DISCUSS THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING A SOLID FOUNDATION FOR CHILDREN SO AS TO ENSURE A STRONG START IN LIFE.



THIS SPREAD On: Muhammad Fauzi & Mika Zarif: Full outfit Model's own. On Diya: Striped Dress Seed Heritage, Floral Headband Zara Kids, Silver Sneakers KidSport. On Anastasia: Tropical Parks Cotton On Kids, Pink Romper Zara Kids, Floral-print Shoes FLOSSY KIDS, Hair Clips Gingersnaps. On Hansel: Printed Romper KATE QUINN, Shoes Kookies + Milk. On Nanthini: Cardigan and Pants UNIQLO, Tee Model's own, Necklace Marks and Spencer, Shoes Stylist's own. On Kaili: Floral Bomber Jacket Marks and Spencer, Striped Tee Cotton On, Green Midi Skirt UNIQLO. Photo: Sharon Tan assisted by Jessica Khor Hair: Annie Tay Makeup: Cherylm Koh.

THE FIRST 1,000 DAYS OF A CHILD'S LIFE IS SAID TO BE A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY. DO YOU AGREE?

Wang Kaili: Definitely. We strongly believe that the first 1,000 days is a unique period during which the foundations of optimum health, growth and neuro-development are established. The brains of children at this early stage can be twice as active as that of an adult's. The connections their brains form are essential building blocks for their future.

Yu Xixi: Yes, this is the time when infants and toddlers learn most of their basic motor and cognitive skills, like standing up on their own and walking. This is also the time they pick up simple language and social skills.

WHAT DO THESE YOUNG CHILDREN NEED MOST DURING THIS TIME FOR THEIR BRAINS TO THRIVE?

Nanthini: Infants and toddlers need good nutrition, as well as a safe, culturally-sensitive and stimulating environment. They also need responsive and nurturing adults who care and love them. Talk to them during various routines like meal and bath times to develop their language and communication skills. Young children's understanding of language starts even before they start talking.

Kaili: The primary needs of infants and toddlers are comfort, nutrition and stimulation. I too believe that they require a higher level of positive attention from their caregivers. Their safety is also top priority.

Muhammad Fauzi Bin Ravi: As new parents, my wife and I believe that our baby, first and foremost, needs to be healthy. He needs to be well-fed and well-taken care of by his caregivers.

KAILI AND NANTHINI, AS EC PROFESSIONALS, HOW DO YOU ENSURE THAT THESE NEEDS ARE MET?

Nanthini: As an educator, it is important to provide a positive environment where young children feel safe to explore and express themselves. I also seek to form a closer and deeper bond with every child under my care, so that he feels secure and accepted. It is important that toddlers and infants receive quality care and this can be achieved only when educators spend time observing and getting to know each child and their family.

Kaili: Our centre adopts a play-based curriculum aimed at providing enriching developmental experiences for infants and toddlers. This involves activities such as music and movement. Children in our centre have daily outdoor and nature experiences. For example, educators take them for walks around the neighbourhood, or to a

We strongly believe that the first 1,000 days is a unique period during which the foundations of optimum health, growth and neuro-development are established. The brains of children at this early stage can be twice as active as that of an adult's. The connections their brains form are essential building blocks for their future.

Ms Wang Kaili



Ms Wang Kaili
33, Centre Leader,
Aspiration
Child Care
Centre



ALL ABOUT THE BRAIN

The growth of the brain during a child's first 1,000 days exceeds all other segments of human development, Associate Professor Linda L. Hestenes from the Department of Human Development & Family Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in the US, tells *Beanstalk*.

A/Prof Hestenes cites a 2009 report by the Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University:



Every **SECOND** a young infant's brain forms **MORE THAN 1 MILLION NEW NEURAL CONNECTIONS**

This astounding rate of growth stems from early experiences and genetic influences. Family members and professionals in the early childhood community have the unique opportunity and privilege to influence an infant's developing brain, and guide the foundation upon which later learning and well-being will be built.

A/Prof Hestenes

MAKING THE MOST OF EVERY DAY



Ms Tashka Anne Shalini Hodge, KidSTART facilitator and educator at PCF Sparkletots Preschool at Taman Jurong Blk 161, offers tips to parents on how they can support their infants and toddlers' optimal growth and development:

▶ LISTEN, READ, TALK

Listen to child-friendly music and rhymes. Sing and read to help infants and toddler learn sounds and the meaning of words. Your children may not respond in words, but the exposure to the sounds of words develops their conversation and language skills. (Refer to tips by Associate Professor Sharon Underwood Mims for specific examples.)

▶ BUILD A STRONG AND SECURE RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR CHILD

Make it a priority to have positive adult-child interaction with your children. Warm and

nurturing relationships help infants and toddlers feel safe and secure and strengthen their social-emotional wellbeing.

▶ EMPOWER CHILDREN TO BE CURIOUS AND CONFIDENT LEARNERS THROUGH PLAY

Never undermine the effect play has on your children. Through exploration, experimentation and investigation of various materials in play, children develop a range of thinking skills and processes — they make new discoveries and construct their own understanding of the world around them.



KidSTART is a pilot programme for vulnerable young children to enable them to have a good start in life. The programme coordinates and strengthens support across agencies, extends new forms of support, and monitors the progress of children from birth onwards.

mini garden behind the centre. We also serve nutritious meals to ensure a balanced diet of protein, iron, calcium, Vitamin D and fibre — all of which are essential for brain development.

PARENTS, HOW DO YOU BUILD A POSITIVE HOME ENVIRONMENT THAT IS CONDUCTIVE FOR AN INFANT/TODDLER'S EARLY DEVELOPMENT?

Fauzi: We try to spend as much time as possible with our son. Face-to-face interaction and talking to our son are important even though he cannot talk yet. We respond to the sounds he makes to make him feel secure and safe.

Xixi: Both my husband and I are working, so the only time we have with our two children on weekdays are in the evenings. We have dinner together, followed by playtime before they go to bed at 9pm. On weekends, we spend time as a family. We enjoy taking them to the playground to play and socialise with other children.

IN WHAT WAYS CAN PARENTS AND EDUCARERS SUPPORT ONE ANOTHER IN HELPING CHILDREN BUILD STRONG EARLY FOUNDATIONS?

Kaili: I often encourage parents to speak to any of our educarers if they have any queries, and not wait until the meet-the-parent session. Educarers, in turn, must be open and receptive. Our centre has an active Facebook (FB) page where parents are updated with photos and videos of their children engaging in classroom activities. This way, they don't miss out on how their little ones are growing and developing. For the children's safety, the information on this page can only be accessed by the parents who are given access rights. Effective parent-educarer partnership is key to building a strong foundation for infants and toddlers.

THIS SPREAD ON MUHAMMAD FAUZI: Pink Polo Shirt, Marks & Spencer; On Mikha Zariff: Full outfit, Seed Heritage; Scarf, Stylist's own; Shoes, Kookies + Milk; On Hansel: Printed Romper, LEIA + LAUREN; On Xixi: Pink Crew Neck Tee, UNIQLO; Printed Top, Cotton On; On Nanthini: Full outfit, UNIQLO.

COVER: On Muhammad Fauzi: Printed Shirt and Crew Neck Tee, Marks and Spencer; Pants & Shoes, Model's own; On Mikha Zariff: Striped Crew Tee, Guess Kids; Shorts & Shoes, Model's own; On Xixi: Pink Crew Neck Tee, UNIQLO; Printed Top, Cotton On; On Hansel: Striped Crew Tee and Denim Shorts, Seed Heritage; Denim Shorts, Guess Kids; Shoes, Kookies + Milk; On Nanthini: Floral Crew Tee and Jeans, UNIQLO.

As new parents, my wife and I believe that our baby, first and foremost, needs to be healthy. He needs to be well-fed and well-taken care of by his caregivers.

Mr Muhammad Fauzi Bin Ravi

Mr Muhammad Fauzi Bin Ravi
33, Train Service Controller, Father of one aged 8 months



THE POWER OF TALK

AP Associate Professor Sharon Mims from the Department of Human Development & Family Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, offers practical tips on how to have effective interactions with infants and toddlers:

✔ Talk to the child during routines of care, such as mealtime and bath time, to facilitate brain development and teach the value of communication.

✔ Repeat sounds or expressions infants make while holding or playing with them. For example: "Coo" when they do, smile back at them, repeat "da-da" or "ma-ma".



✔ Describe what a child is experiencing during bath time or mealtime. For example: "I see you splashing the water with your feet" or "These soap bubbles smell good".

✔ Give simple choices to older infants or toddlers. For example: "Would you like to drink from the red or blue cup?" or "Which of these two shirts would you like to wear today?"

✔ Narrate what you're doing. For example: "I am putting your milk into the bottle" or "I am using the towel to dry your skin".

Nanthini: I agree. It is important that we involve parents as much as possible, as they are the child's first and most important caregivers. Educarers, on the other hand, must work to build a deeper level of openness and trust with parents. This can only be achieved through regular and honest communication.

Xixi: I trust educarers to be the people with the knowledge and skills to care for my children. While I don't expect them to ensure my younger child meets his expected milestones, I know that they are trained to support my child's development through the centre's activities and interactions with him. Receiving regular updates directly from the educarer or through the centre's Facebook page gives my husband and I peace of mind so I don't get anxious at work while my child is at infant care. The most important thing is knowing that the educarer truly cares for our children. Once, when my son was sick and couldn't go to infant care, his educarer called and made a house visit. Such acts reassure me that my child is in good professional hands. ♥

Ms Nanthini d/o Sativil

Ms Nanthini d/o Sativil
36, Educarer, Sunflower Baby House & Preschool



Both my husband and I are working, so the only time we have with our two children on weekdays are in the evenings. We have dinner together, followed by playtime before they go to bed at 9pm.

Ms Yu XiXi



Yu XiXi,
36, Real Estate Executive,
Mother of two aged 4 years and 15 months

LET'S TALK EPIGENETICS



Studies have shown that an infant's in utero exposure can have an effect on his epigenetics, or the way his genes function or are expressed, says Associate Professor Denise Goh, Head & Senior Consultant, Division of Paediatric Genetics & Metabolism, National University Hospital. Scientists are continuing to learn about what factors influence epigenetics.

To support children's holistic development and wellbeing via epigenetics, A/Prof Goh suggests starting when the child is in the womb. "The expecting mother should remain healthy," she advises. "After birth, the child should lead an active lifestyle by exercising and maintaining his weight in the normal range."

A/Prof Goh stresses, however, that humans are not ruled by epigenetics. "Many things that can help a child's holistic development and wellbeing are not due to epigenetics," she says. "These include positive parenting, building resilience in the child, enabling the child to feel safe to try and even fail, and imparting virtues like kindness, compassion, respect and gratitude."

