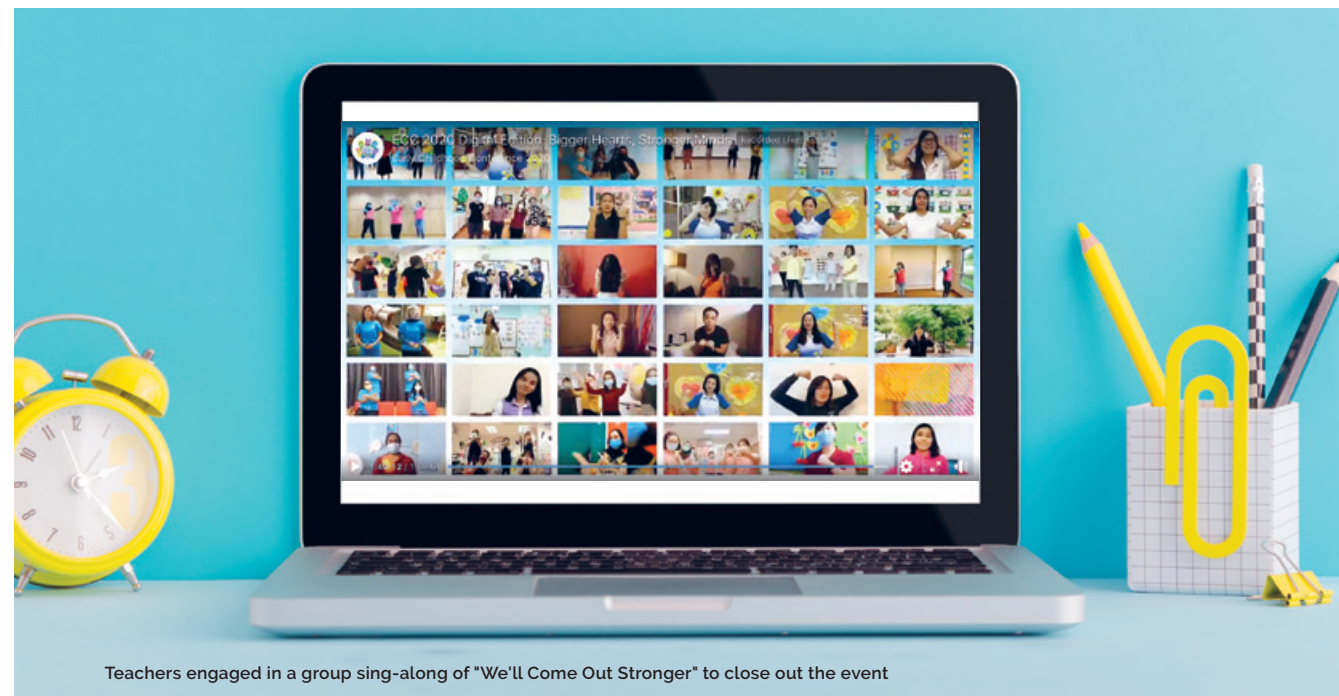


BIGGER HEARTS, STRONGER MINDS



ECDA'S EARLY CHILDHOOD CONFERENCE 2020 WENT VIRTUAL FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER, WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING, A TIMELY THEME IN THESE EXCEPTIONAL TIMES.



Teachers engaged in a group sing-along of "We'll Come Out Stronger" to close out the event

For the first time, ECDA's annual Early Childhood Conference (ECC) 2020 was held online on 10 October to ensure the safety of our educators amid the coronavirus outbreak. Preschool educators tuned in via Facebook Live to the 90-minute event, themed 'Bigger Hearts, Stronger Minds', bringing focus to social-emotional development and resilience. "Preschools have had to deal with constant change since we started our fight against COVID-19 at the beginning

About **7,000** educators attended the ECC 2020.

of this year," said ECDA's Chief Executive, Ms Jamie Ang, in her video address. "Even as our teachers and children practised safe distancing measures, I'm glad that this did not mean social distancing from each other. Teachers continued to find ways for children to express their love and concern for one another." Kicking off the event was the new Minister for Social and Family Development and Second Minister for Health Masagos Zulkifli, who observed that the EC sector comprises people with "passion and purpose".



The two event emcees moderated the Q&A session with keynote speakers, Dr Jared Ng (centre) and Ms Vivienne Ng (second from right), and ECDA Fellow Ms Seri Rahayu Binte Ariff (far right)

He outlined upcoming plans in the industry (page 8) and applauded educators for exercising tremendous creativity to help children cultivate new COVID-Safe ABC habits to stay safe, as well as continue to learn during disruptions like the Circuit Breaker. Mr Masagos said, "How the sector stepped up during the COVID-19 crisis clearly showed the passion and care of our early childhood professionals for our children." The keynote speakers gave insights on how educators can nurture social-emotional competence in young children and develop it in themselves too (page 4). They also participated in a question-and-answer session with the attendees, providing practical strategies related to self-care and social-emotional foundations.

“In life, we are bound to face challenges and unexpected situations. We need to help our children learn how to cope with these challenges and to work with one another.**”**

MS JAMIE ANG,
Chief Executive of ECDA



A video of SSDB 2020 highlights was shown



PUPPET PLAY

Educators who registered for the Conference will receive a set of five finger puppets. Centres will also receive a few sets of finger puppets as a teaching resource created specially to support children's social-emotional development. Each embodies a particular disposition or quality such as confidence, serenity, empathy, and being respectful and responsible. Let us know how you've used the puppet characters in class! Send your stories and photos to Partnerships@ecda.gov.sg. Five entries will be selected and featured in the next issue of *Beanstalk*.

A video of the 'Start Small Dream Big' (SSDB) finale was shown, featuring a compilation of SSDB 2020 highlights to thank preschool teachers and community partners who supported the community projects (page 6). The event ended on an uplifting and inspiring note with a sing-along session of an original song titled "We'll Come Out Stronger".

BUILDING FOUNDATIONS FOR LIFE

HOW EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS CAN NURTURE CHILDREN'S SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES AND RESILIENCE.



“**G**ood social-emotional skills lead to improved outcomes in education and employment, better physical and mental health, as well as greater productivity in school and later, the workplace,” said Dr Jared Ng, a psychiatrist and consultant at the Institute of Mental Health’s Department of Developmental Psychiatry, who was one of two keynote speakers at the ECC 2020.

He also pointed out the link between social-emotional wellbeing and resilience. “Having both of these qualities enables a child to solve problems with optimism, build healthy interpersonal relationships and cope with changes,” explained Dr Ng. “Building resilience does not just come from dealing with tragedies or major crises. When children respond to challenges, no matter

how small, it creates opportunities for them to learn coping skills and find possible solutions. The process can build confidence and self-esteem, and it encourages independence.”

Early childhood educators can nurture social-emotional competence and resilience in children by:

- Helping children identify, understand and express emotions.
- Advocating the value of friendship to children.
- Teaching children how to manage negative emotions and disappointments (see box).

These strategies can be incorporated into lesson activities, for example, through dramatisation and role play, which give children the opportunity to act out and explore issues, attitudes, behaviours and values while in character. Engaging

“**One way to help children learn to label their emotions is to have healthy emotional expression modelled for them by adults. Imagine driving your child to preschool when someone cuts you off on a busy road. Instead of having an outburst, you could say that you are angry, and that you are going to count to 10 or take deep breaths to calm down. Another way is to provide feeling names for children's emotional expressions. Growing their feeling vocabulary enables them to better communicate with others about their emotional states. This is an important step in learning to regulate emotions — for example, to be able to recognise and label their 'anger', before they can proceed with steps to calm down.**

DR JARED NG

IT'S OK TO NOT BE OK

Dr Ng recommended five ways to help children better cope with negative emotions and disappointments.

- ✓ **WHEN CHILDREN CRY, IDENTIFY THEIR FEELINGS AND YOURS TOO** Tell your child, “I know that was scary falling off the slide. I was worried about you. I am glad you are okay.”
- ✓ **HELP CHILDREN LEARN TO CALM DOWN** Deep-breathing exercises include counting to 10, and pretending to smell a flower or blow out birthday candles.
- ✓ **PROVIDE MATERIALS FOR CHILDREN TO EXPRESS THEIR FEELINGS** For example, they can squeeze playdough or run laps during breaks. Remind them that it is okay to be upset and that there are safe ways to express anger.
- ✓ **ENCOURAGE CHILDREN TO HELP EACH OTHER** When a child is upset, encourage another child to help him feel better. Suggest comforting phrases or materials to use that might help.
- ✓ **TEACH PARENTS NOT TO BE OVERPROTECTIVE** Assure them that it is perfectly fine for their child to experience difficulties and disappointments.

children in small-group activities also helps. “When children play in small groups, they learn to work cooperatively and develop important social skills,” said Dr Ng. “Teachers can encourage interactions and acknowledge their positive attitudes and dispositions.”

SETTING THE RIGHT TONE

Both keynote speakers were joined by Ms Seri Rahayu Binte Ariff, ECDA Fellow and Executive Principal at PCF Sparkletots, in a Q&A session where they responded to questions posted by educators. The panel discussed topics such as how to reduce children’s anxiety so as to improve their concentration and ability to learn, how centre leaders can create a supportive environment to encourage positive social-emotional behaviours in preschoolers, and how to support educators’ wellbeing.



“Centre leaders set the tone in creating a psychologically safe culture in preschool, which in turn inspires collaboration and creativity. Give teachers space to not feel okay and to struggle without judgements. Human beings are not robots.”
MS VIVIENNE NG

“Building relationships with parents is important. When they trust that you’re sincere in wanting to help the child, they will be more forthcoming in receiving feedback.”
MS SERI RAHAYU BINTE ARIFF

“Remind parents that you are also on the child’s side. Maintain an open and honest conversation with them.”
DR JARED NG

DISCOVER INNER CALM

SELF-CARE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHERS WHO ARE EXPERIENCING STRESS OR BURNOUT.

“**P**reschool teachers’ work is demanding on physical, emotional and mental levels, and can lead to exhaustion, stress and burnout. It is why self-care is crucial,” said Ms Vivienne Ng, Chief Psychologist at the Ministry of Social and Family Development, the second keynote speaker at the ECC 2020. There are many things that adults can do to cope with life stressors and build resilience.

WHAT’S THE FIRST STEP TO DEALING WITH STRESS?

Practise self-awareness. Do you know when you’re stressed? How does your body react to stress, for example, do you develop recurring headaches or gastro-intestinal problems? Do you have a tendency to lose your temper with close ones or binge eat? Feelings of tiredness, incompetence and detachment are indicators of burnout, too.

WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF SELF-CARE?

Self-care requires deliberate action. Maintain a personal life outside of work and engage in leisure activities. Bring an emergency self-care kit to preschool that contains some of

your favourite items such as a perfume or aromatherapy scent, or a family picture to remind you of your loved ones. Recognise when you’ve hit your limit and say “no” when you have to.

HOW CAN POSITIVE FEELINGS BE INVOKED IN CHALLENGING TIMES?

Learn to laugh at things and at yourself. Count your blessings and be grateful. Engage in things that increase pleasure and mastery. Pleasures include simple things like taking a bath, going for a walk or petting your dog. Mastery refers to the things you’re good at, such as baking or doing craftwork.

WHAT IS “COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING”?

It means being aware of what you say to yourself in your mind. Move away from self-blame and instead focus on your strengths. Recall a time when you did well and how it felt to receive the accolade you had hoped for. Reframe failures as opportunities for growth, and celebrate successes. Give yourself a pat on the back and reward yourself. Be kind to yourself constantly. And finally, develop self-efficacy — the belief that “I can do it”. ●

GET SOCIAL

Being in a caring community also helps with mental wellbeing, said Ms Ng. She provided some tips:

- Develop healthy intimate and family relationships, and connect regularly.
- Establish close relationships at work and outside of work, where you can express emotions related to your work experience.
- Identify sources of support whom you can turn to for advice.
- Practise good communication and conflict resolution.

“**Be aware of what’s going on in your body. Take a step back and a time-out for yourself, or a mini time-out if you cannot leave the room. Listen to music or make yourself a cup of tea. Savour those brief moments of calm.**

MS VIVIENNE NG

KIDS SHOW THEY CARE

AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF COVID-19, THIS YEAR'S 'START SMALL DREAM BIG' MOVEMENT TOOK ON GREATER SIGNIFICANCE.

Despite challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, this year's 'Start Small Dream Big' (SSDB) movement recorded its highest participation to date, said President Halimah Yacob in a video that was aired during the Early Childhood Conference 2020. More than 53,000 children from 950 preschools, with support from parents and community partners, embarked on community projects that were aligned with the SSDB 2020

theme, 'A Caring and Inclusive Home for All'. Due to social distancing measures, many of the projects were carried out in creative ways. These included virtual charity events, remote visits, video chats and home-based performances in appreciation of frontliners and unsung heroes in the community, such as healthcare workers and cleaners. Other projects raised awareness of the importance of practising good personal and public hygiene habits. *Beanstalk* highlights two projects.



“ Thank you children for showing that not only adults can show children the way, but children can also take the lead. No one can do everything, but everyone can do something.

PRESIDENT HALIMAH YACOB

LITTLE WONDERS MONTESSORI CHILDCARE @ REMAJA

➤ **WHAT THEY DID** This is the first time the centre is participating in SSDB. As part of the Belanja-A-Meal project initiated by the Bukit Batok East Zone 2 Residents' Committee, children and parents from the centre donated old newspapers, magazines, cardboard boxes, as well as used clothing and electronic goods, to buy meals for needy residents staying in Block 265 Bukit Batok.

➔ The project raised a total of \$500, which was used to buy 146 meals at the hawkker centre for the needy. "Children were initially puzzled as to why some people aren't able to have three meals a day. Through the project, they came to understand that there are people who are less fortunate who need help," says Teacher Ms Leah Therese Cielos.



➔ To raise money, the children collected and sold recyclable items to a *karang guni* uncle. They also brought home *sambal* quail eggs which they had cooked with the help of their teachers, and asked their parents for a small donation in exchange.

SSDB was launched in 2015 and started with **150 PRESCHOOLS**

In 2020, participation has grown six times to **950 PRESCHOOLS**

CHERIE HEARTS @ CHARLTON

➤ **WHAT THEY DID** Although children could not visit their 'grandpas' and 'grandmas' in the community like they used to, the centre was determined to continue supporting the vulnerable elderly and people with disabilities through the current crisis. Its solution was to hold an online charity auction.

➔ Children's artworks were displayed in the centre and auctioned to their families virtually. A total of \$3,988 was raised from parents' bids. "The children learnt that even though they are small, they can do great things. It has been a fruitful service learning journey for them," says Assistant Principal Ms Eugenie Deany Diepenhorst.



➔ The proceeds from the auction were used to buy items such as biscuits, milk powder and towels for the staff and residents of TOUCH Senior Activity Centre, Moonlight Home for the Aged and Handicapped, Society for the Aged Sick, and SPD (formerly Society for the Physically Disabled).

“ We must help the elderly and people with disabilities so that they can always have food they like and things they need.

LAREN LIOW, 6

➔ Over a period of seven weeks, the children used recyclable materials and fresh produce from the preschool garden to create paintings and craftworks.



“ A child is never too young to engage in community service. It instils the spirit of giving and upholds values such as kindness, empathy and generosity.

MDM LOW WEI YEE, mother of Trudy Lee, K1



JOIN US NEXT YEAR!

Help us make SSDB 2021 the biggest one yet! Let's continue to make a meaningful difference in society! Visit www.startsmalldreambig.sg for more stories from our SSDB centres.

