



# PROFESSIONAL EXCELLENCE

**THE FIRST-EVER VIRTUAL ECDA AWARDS 2020 WAS NO LESS JUBILANT THAN PAST EDITIONS.**

**T**he ECDA Awards for Excellence in Early Childhood Development 2020, a key event for the early childhood (EC) fraternity, went virtual on 28 November 2020. Themed 'Unity in Purpose: Celebrating Our Early Childhood Professionals', the ceremony honoured a total of 25 exemplary preschool educators and centres for their professional excellence in EC care and education.

Mr Masagos Zulkifli, Minister for Social and Family Development and Second Minister for Health, congratulated the Awards recipients at the start of the ceremony. "Winning the Awards is the beginning and not the end of your early childhood professional journey. I hope you will continue to deepen your expertise and find innovative ways to enrich our children's learning experiences," he said.

Those who tuned in to the ceremony also heard from two ECDA Awards judges: Dr Dora Chen, Associate Professor and Head, Early Childhood Education Programme, Singapore University of Social Sciences; and Ms Tham Foong Chue, Campus Head, School of Humanities & Social Sciences, National Institute

of Early Childhood Development (Ngee Ann Polytechnic). Both judges have served on the judging panel in the last couple of years.

Dr Chen noted that EC professionals now place greater emphasis on delivering a child-centric curriculum in their centres. She also found that teachers are more critically reflective of their teaching practices. Likewise, Ms Tham observed that teachers these days are more confident, which has a positive impact on children's achievements, attitudes and social-emotional growth. Most of all, she was heartened by their passion and collective aspiration to further uplift the EC fraternity. ●



Janice Ong, the 2019 ECDA Outstanding Early Childhood Educator, in conversation with Minister Masagos Zulkifli during the ECDA Awards 2020 virtual ceremony.



Visit [www.ECDAawards2020.com](http://www.ECDAawards2020.com) for the full list of ECDA Awards 2020 winners.

## THE JUDGES WEIGH IN

**WHAT QUALITIES DEFINE AN ECDA AWARD WINNER?**

**Ms Tham Foong Chue:**

I once came across a meaningful quote: "A teacher who loves teaching teaches children to love learning." Children can sense a teacher's enthusiasm. They will be motivated to learn when they see that their teachers are happy interacting with them.



**Dr Dora Chen:** Intrinsic motivation is important.

Teachers should think critically about their practices and seek out professional development opportunities, so that they can give their best to children. Once they see children engaging with them on a deeper level, it will fuel their energy and passion to go on.



**WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR THE EC FRATERNITY?**

**Dr Chen:** Be open and flexible to new ideas. And be intentional in all this — do not lose sight of the children.

**Ms Tham:** The ECDA Awards is not the be-all and end-all, but rather a key milestone for you to develop and expand your competencies. Think about how you can contribute to your centre and the wider EC fraternity.



Children in Ms Chia's class are encouraged to ask questions

# EMPOWERING CHILDREN

**FOR OUTSTANDING EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EILEEN CHIA, A GOOD EDUCATOR IS ONE WHO LISTENS TO CHILDREN AND BECOMES A PARTNER IN THEIR LEARNING EXPERIENCE.**

**M**s Eileen Chia sees her role as a guide rather than a teacher in the child's learning journey. "I believe that when educators continue to find enjoyment in learning and value the learning process that children undergo, they are better able to guide young learners to seek answers, try out solutions and take ownership of their learning," says the Little Skool-House By-The-Vista teacher.

may not be in the standard lexicon of a kindergartener, but Ms Chia was surprised with the way the children drew connections between 'natural' and nature, as well as nature and 'environment', during the preschool's Earth Day celebrations. "When we see children as competent learners, it becomes a part of our daily conversations to explore a larger vocabulary," she notes.

### LET THE CHILD LEAD

The preschool's teaching culture of facilitating rather than providing answers empowers children to take charge of their learning. Ms Chia explains, "Supporting a child's inquiry involves creating the drive in children to ask questions, take risks in learning and engage in self-reflection." For instance, when children were learning about water resources, they drew a class mural to propose solutions that could help keep the waters clean, and came up with short messages on what could be done to conserve water. ●

### PERCEPTIONS SHAPE CONVERSATIONS

Adults' perception of children's abilities affects their interactions with them, she observes. "If we view children as competent learners, we will intentionally create opportunities for them to engage in meaningful conversations. Prompts such as 'Tell us more about what you noticed' or questions like 'Why do you think this happens?' help children articulate their perspectives. This reinforces the message that their opinions matter."

It also means that one should not assume what is too complex for a child to understand. For example, the phrase "natural environment"



Watch Ms Chia's winner showcase video at [youtu.be/EwPnWnFJuA4](https://youtu.be/EwPnWnFJuA4) or visit [www.ECDAawards2020.com](http://www.ECDAawards2020.com).



Let children figure out simple calculations like how much change is due

## TAKE IT AWAY, KIDS!

Ms Chia's three tips to develop children's sense of agency and autonomy.

- **Offer Choices**  
Invite children to take part in decision-making. It sends the message that they are capable of making choices. Involve children in planning for the family weekend. Have a "dress yourself" day where children can pick out an outfit of their choice.
- **Respect the Process and Struggle**  
Take a step back, and allow children the time and space to problem-solve on their own. Help them by redefining the problem (e.g. "You've spilled the milk but it's all right, it was an accident") and acknowledge their frustrations. Then allow them to work through the process of finding a solution and fixing it.
- **Give Responsibility**  
Let children care for their belongings and take on simple chores at home. A good place to start is to involve them in packing their school bags. Older children can create a checklist of items they need for the next day. Younger children can take charge of a specific item like water bottles or diapers.

# DRIVING FORCE

**OUTSTANDING EDUCARER FARHANA BINTE MOHAMED HASSAN CONSTANTLY STRIVES TO BETTER THE ENVIRONMENT FOR INFANTS' HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT.**



Ms Farhana took the initiative to create an outdoor sensory path that includes elements such as this Water Wall

**A**s a senior infant educarer at PCF Sparkletots @ Pioneer Blk 987D, Ms Farhana Binte Mohamed Hassan's interactions with children are guided by her belief that children are curious and capable. "We need to believe in them and create a safe environment where they can explore their interests and strengths. This will increase their confidence and stimulate the development of self-help skills," she explains.

Both educators and parents need to uphold this view of children as capable individuals with the potential to learn and develop. Ms Farhana gives the example of continuing to hold the bottle or a sippy cup for a child during milk feeds, instead of giving him the opportunity to try it for himself.

"When an infant reaches 5 or 6 months old, or when he shows an interest in wanting to hold his own milk bottle, let him. Guide him when he needs assistance. This is a basic self-help skill that an infant can learn to master, if given the opportunity," says the mother of three.

### RESOURCEFUL THINKING

Not wanting the children to miss out on learning opportunities at the height of COVID-19, Ms Farhana used easily-sourced materials to create an outdoor sensory path within the centre's grounds. At the percussion area, for instance, children can bang on empty tins. They can doodle with water and a paintbrush on the water board. Elsewhere along the path, they can walk on carpet grass and touch natural items such as rocks and wood.



Watch Ms Farhana's winner showcase video at [www.ECDAawards2020.com](http://www.ECDAawards2020.com). Look out for the opening of nominations for the 2021 ECDA Awards. Find out more at [bit.ly/ECDAawards](http://bit.ly/ECDAawards).

## TIPS FOR PARENTS



How to engage your infant at home.

- **Read or explore** a book with your baby every day. Be animated while talking and use descriptive language such as "look at this blue bus".
- Organise **hands-on activities** such as playing with playdough, building blocks or engaging in water play.
- Encourage **independence** when opportunities arise, such as letting your child hold a sippy cup or a spoon so he can learn how to feed himself.

This way, infants can experience sensory play and still remain safe. "At this young age, they are exploring and discovering through their five senses," says Ms Farhana on the importance of sensory play for early brain development. "We want our children to continue to have a variety of play experiences. This stimulates curiosity and sparks the confidence to explore."

### IT STARTS WITH RESPECT

Ms Farhana believes that every child is unique and special as they come from different backgrounds and environments. Hence, educators should make an effort to understand each child. Caregiving or routine tasks such as diapering present opportunities to get to know the child, read his behavioural cues and respond accordingly.

"Show respect to the infant by choosing a time for the diaper change when he is not focused on exploration. Wait for him to acknowledge your presence, then say, 'It's time for a diaper change,'" she suggests. "Talk to the child and describe what you are going to do. Pause to wait for his responses or gestures. This is a form of respectful and reciprocal interaction. It creates trust and rapport between you and the child, while developing his language and thinking skills." ●