

# The Incredible early years

Parents Daniel Lum and Betty Ong as well as parents-to-be Raymond Toh and Jeannie Yeo marvel over a child's formative years while Charlotte Choy and Muhammad Fadly weigh in with their experiences as early childhood educators.

On Daniel: Cotton shirt, sweater & pants H&M On Betty: Silk dress & necklace Eclecticism On Clara & Heidi: Silk dress & Loafers Chateau De Sable On Charlotte: Dress Zara Toys The Better Toy Store Styling Lirong Hair & Make-up Manisa Tan, Brenda Lye & Ng Hui Min

## Daniel Lum

39, IT CONSULTANT AND HIS WIFE, BETTY ONG, 37, CUSTOMER SERVICE OFFICER WITH THEIR DAUGHTERS CLARA, 8, AND HEIDI, 5 (FORMER AND CURRENT STUDENTS OF MY FIRST SKOOL)



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Fadly

## Charlotte Choy

37, PRINCIPAL OF HAMPTON PRE-SCHOOL (MANAGED BY ETONHOUSE)



Some say from infant to the age of six are a child's 'wonder years'. Do you agree?

**Daniel:** For sure. Having seen Clara through that stage and now with Heidi in the middle of it, Betty and I witnessed — and are witnessing — the girls' many 'firsts', as well as a varied range of achievements in their language, actions and thought processes. It's an exciting time not just for them but for us as well.

**Jeannie:** I read that this is the time when a child absorbs the most, so it would be interesting and even magical to see when my child is at that stage. Raymond and I hope to provide our child with opportunities and freedom to explore and develop her interests, whatever these may be.

Charlotte and Fadly, as educators, do you see this 'magic' magnified in the classroom?

**Charlotte:** It's a fantastic time, definitely. At pre-school level, children's basic motor skills are already developed so they are always eager to do something and go somewhere. As educators, we leverage on this enthusiasm to help build their confidence. Children also start to understand that their actions affect one another, so it's the best time to impart moral values as this is when children are most receptive. However, we need to get past looking at children as just 'blank sheets of paper'. We need to remember that when a child enters pre-school, he or she brings his or her own experience, as much or as little as it is. The child's home environment and the people he or she is in close contact with have an impact on his or her behaviour. As educators, we need to understand where the child is coming from so as to manage his or her learning and development better.

**Fadly:** Children in this age range are like sponges. They grasp concepts quickly, increase their vocabulary easily and pick up math or other skills without much effort. It is awesome to witness how much they can learn. I notice this especially in my art classes where the kids use all five senses to express themselves creatively. Through art, they also pick up social skills like sharing art materials and respecting their friends' turns.

Parents, what then do you expect of your child's development during the pre-school phase?

**Betty:** We want Clara and Heidi to be able to socialise easily with other children and also with adults outside the family. The classroom or learning setting should facilitate this so they are not apprehensive about expressing themselves. We also see pre-school as an opportunity for

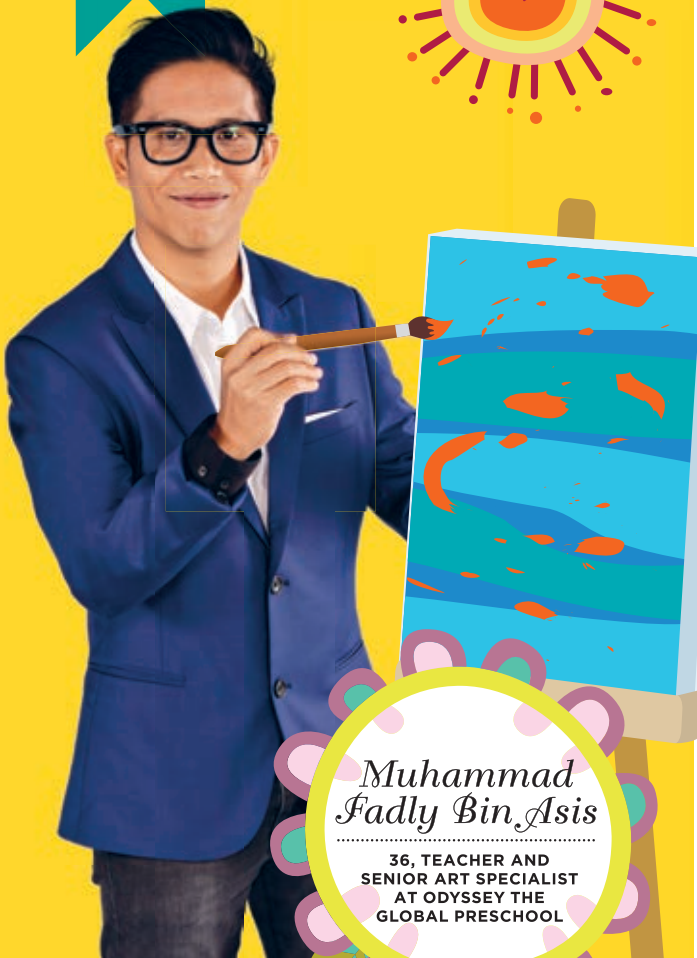
the children to hone their lifeskills such as basic hygiene, environmental awareness, sense of self and important motor skills before stepping into a more structured learning environment in primary school.

**Raymond:** Jeannie and I are not the *kiasu* type and don't have much expectations. I don't want to put too much pressure on my child or the pre-school. I believe a child should have as much fun as he or she can because these few years of 'no worries' are precious and hard to come by later on in life. I just hope that my child will be able to learn through fun and pick up good manners from good role models around her.

Daniel and Betty, were your expectations met — insofar as the pre-school was concerned — with Clara, and have your expectations changed with Heidi?

**Daniel:** Yes, they were sufficiently met. The pre-school Clara attended made the initial letting-go





**Muhammad Fadly Bin Asis**  
 36, TEACHER AND SENIOR ART SPECIALIST AT ODYSSEY THE GLOBAL PRESCHOOL

in art lessons because whatever work she brought home seemed to fall short of her parent's expectations. It was an uphill task for me to instill confidence back in her — a testament that teachers very much need the support of parents, so the child will not miss out.

**Charlotte:** Parents' expectations shift as their child grows. Parents with pre-school toddlers are usually concerned that basic needs like food, water and hygiene, are met. Parents of an older child will start to be increasingly concerned with academics and how the pre-school is preparing him or her for primary school. As educators, we recognise these concerns. It's been a challenge for the early childhood industry as a whole to provide that smooth transition from pre-school to primary school. It's not so simple because most pre-schools focus on purposeful play, whereas the primary school environment is more structured. At the end of the day, as Fadly says, we want to help develop a child who is keen on learning.

**An engaging lesson plan and teachers are crucial.**  
**Betty**

**Hampton Pre-School kids:** (from left) Emma Lee, 6, Nurul Alesha Wong Xuan Ting, 5 and Enya Lee, 5.



phase, although admittedly difficult for us, pretty smooth. Over time, we noticed Clara could be independent and go on about as a little person on her own, without shutting out the teachers and other children.

**Betty:** We had similar expectations when it was Heidi's turn. We were a little more prepared this time and having Clara already in the same pre-school made it a lot easier. Heidi was engrossed in her classroom activities even before her second day at pre-school was over! In that sense, I think an engaging lesson plan and teachers are crucial, and we are thankful the girls' pre-school provided both.

**Educators, what do you make of parents' expectations and do you expect the same from the children as well?**

**Fadly:** Parents naturally have expectations of their child and of the teachers. I hear these concerns and as a parent myself, I understand. Some parents do have too-high expectations of their child and as a result, put unnecessary pressure on him or her. For example, I have a girl in class who didn't want to participate

**What else should a pre-school provide and teach?**

**Jeannie:** Raymond and I honestly haven't thought this far ahead but if I have to say something, it would be that my child picks up social skills in school so that she can communicate easily, and with respect, with her friends as well as other people. As working parents however, affordability and convenience are important factors for us when picking a pre-school.

**Charlotte:** The good news is, there's been an increased emphasis on emotional and social development in early childhood education. Educators and parents need to let a child know that he or she can express what's needed without resorting to crying. At the same time, adults also need to understand that crying is a basic instinct for most children as a form of self-expression. So educators and parents need to help the child re-adjust so he or she will learn to use speech to communicate. Once a child can manage his or her emotions, social skills will come naturally.

**Has there been a change in the early childhood sector? If so, in what ways has it evolved to support these amazing years of a child's life?**

**Fadly:** The public is warming up to the idea of male pre-school teachers. When I first started seven years ago, many parents mistook me for the school's technician, IT personnel or photographer because I always have a camera slung over my shoulder. One parent was so worried, he actually came down to the school for the first time ever, just so he could check on me. We spoke and over time built a rapport. My passion in working with children, coupled with their child's excitement to come to my class, have helped me gain the parents' trust.

**Charlotte:** Mindsets are beginning to change. More industry players are beginning to see children as competent. For example, fewer parents are insisting that their child be kept away from scissors or other so-called dangerous objects. As educators and parents we need to reason and work with the child. It makes a world of difference

when we see children as competent beings just needing the right environment and guidance. Don't take away their opportunity to learn, don't take away their voice by being too overprotective.

**Daniel:** More parents, Betty and I included, are increasingly expecting quality educators but we also understand that to attract such teachers is difficult and to retain them, even harder. There should be recognition for such professionals. It would be wonderful if quality pre-school can be made more affordable so a good learning and development programme becomes a part of every child's educational journey, and not just something that's nice-to-have. ♥

**It makes a world of a difference when we see children as competent beings just needing the right environment and guidance.**  
**Charlotte**

**Raymond Toh**  
 27, PRISON OFFICER AND HIS WIFE (SEVEN MONTHS PREGNANT AT TIME OF INTERVIEW), JEANNIE YEO, 28, HR EXECUTIVE



(LEFT) On Muhammad Fadly: Cotton shirt & Jacket Black Barrett (RIGHT) On Jeannie: Silk dress, necklace & cuff Eclecticism On Raymond: Sweater & Pants COS