

# TRANSFORM PRACTICES FOR QUALITY PAR EXCELLENCE

RAISING THE QUALITY AND COMPETENCIES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS.



ECDA's Chief Executive, Mr Tan Chee Wee (centre), and Minister of State for Social and Family Development, Ms Sun Xueling (on his left), with ECDA Awards winners

The science of how children learn, applying child development theories to practices, and shifting away from a teacher-directed mindset to embrace child-centred approaches were key strands at the Early Childhood Celebrations & Conference (ECCC) 2023, themed 'Learning How Children Learn, Transforming Practices Together'. More than 1,000 educators attended the event, which was held on 27 and 28 October 2023 at Suntec Singapore Convention & Exhibition Centre.

Through keynote presentations and concurrent workshops, educators gained multiple perspectives on how to design curricula and environments that



Getting the ball rolling, literally, for the celebrations on Day 2 of ECCC 2023

engage children with diverse interests and abilities. A celebratory mood was also in the air, as ECDA rang in its 10th anniversary and celebrated three signature events — the 'Start Small Dream Big' (SSDB) Finale, the Singapore Preschool Accreditation Framework (SPARK) Certificate Presentation Ceremony, and the ECDA Awards for Early Childhood Excellence (ECDA Awards) Ceremony.



## VIEWS AND NEWS

In her keynote speech, Associate Professor Cathrine Neilsen-Hewett from the University of Wollongong, Australia, discussed how children's experiences and interactions in the first five years of life are critical to their future well-being and capacity for successful participation in society, with EC educators playing a crucial role as "brain architects" (page 4).

The second keynote speaker, Professor Tan Oon Seng from Nanyang Technological University, offered further insights into how children learn. Sharing the honeycomb model he developed, Prof Tan addressed the psychology of emotions, the power of habits, and other elements essential for nurturing the early years (page 5).

Mr Masagos Zulkifli, Minister for Social and Family Development, announced key changes for the EC sector. These included launching the Early Years Development Framework (EYDF) 2023; developing a Quality Teaching Tool based on evidence-based pedagogical practices; and ensuring educators have protected time to support their well-being and professional development (page 8). "Centres must value professional development so that educators can continue to grow and deepen their practice," said Mr Masagos.

## EXPANDING KNOWLEDGE AND RESOURCE BASE

With 35 concurrent workshops, educators had the opportunity to network and engage in small-group presentations and discussions. The workshops covered a range of topics such as practices to strengthen home-preschool-community partnerships, social-emotional learning and outdoor play (page 6).

Minister Masagos Zulkifli announced key changes for the EC sector



Children exploring giant playground structures at the exhibition's ECDA booth

EC educators flocked to the exhibition zone comprising 18 booths, including a special showcase delineating ECDA's progress with the sector over the past 10 years. At the other booths, partners such as National Parks Board, Mandai Wildlife Group and National Library Board provided teasers of their programmes and resources, which educators could integrate into the children's classroom and learning experiences.

The first day of ECCC 2023 closed with a plenary session on the launch of EYDF 2023. Ms Melissa Goh-Karszen, Senior Lecturer, Early Childhood Education Programme, Singapore University of Social Sciences, moderated a panel discussion on key changes in the updated framework and how educators can apply it to transform their early years practices. Panellists included the two keynote speakers, Assoc Prof Neilsen-Hewett and Prof Tan; Ms Caroline Seng, Director, Professional Development & Standards, ECDA; Ms Cynthia Tan, Curriculum Specialist, NTUC First Campus; and Ms Lotus Lai, Cluster Principal, Agape Little Uni.



## QUALITY STANDARDS AND PROFESSIONAL EXCELLENCE

This year, ECDA Awards were given out to 24 exemplary EC and early intervention (EI) educators, centre leaders and preschools by Ms Sun Xueling, Minister of State for Social and Family Development.

In her welcome remarks, Ms Sun noted that the EC sector has



ECDA's Chief Executive, Mr Tan Chee Wee (centre), and Minister of State for Education and Manpower, Ms Gan Siow Huang (on his left), with some of the newly SPARK-certified centres



The ECDA Awards display zone at the exhibition hall

grown and achieved much over the last decade through the concerted effort of educators, families and community partners. She also highlighted how good progress has been made in uplifting children who require additional support.

"The EC experience is just the beginning of a wonderful story, impacting and setting the stage for our children's future. I thank all educators for the extraordinary work you have done and will continue to do," said Ms Sun.

At the SPARK Certificate Presentation Ceremony, Ms Gan Siow Huang, Minister of State for Education and Manpower, congratulated all 127 preschools that were awarded SPARK Certification. Out of these, 25 centres achieved SPARK Certification (Commendation) status. This brings the total number of SPARK-certified preschools to 1,052, representing more than 50 per cent of existing preschools.

## COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Children gave a special performance to commemorate the SSDB 2023

Finale. Into its ninth edition, SSDB seeks to inculcate positive values such as kindness, compassion and respect in young children through community projects.

This year's movement, themed 'Many Helping Hands, Caring for Everyone', saw 77,000 children from 1,130 preschools volunteer in projects supported by 28 community partners. The children contributed 2.7 million hours of community service and raised over \$316,000 for charity, on top of other in-kind donations.



Cheering for fellow educators

## EXTENDED HIGHLIGHTS

- See the full list of ECDA Awards winners and their showcase videos at [go.gov.sg/2023-ecda-awards-recipients](https://go.gov.sg/2023-ecda-awards-recipients).
- See the full list of SPARK-certified centres at [www.ecda.gov.sg/sparkinfo/iamSPARKCertified](https://www.ecda.gov.sg/sparkinfo/iamSPARKCertified).
- Watch the SSDB 2023 Finale video at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDT7POzV7ao](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDT7POzV7ao).



ECCC 2023 panellists discussing the revised EYDF (from left): Ms Melissa Goh-Karssen (moderator), Ms Caroline Seng, Assoc Prof Cathrine Neilsen-Hewett, Prof Tan Oon Seng, Ms Cynthia Tan and Ms Lotus Lai

### TIP FOR TEACHERS

Talking to families is not the only way educators can nurture the home-preschool partnership. Assoc Prof Neilsen-Hewett suggests sharing photographs of preschool activities with parents via online platforms. Parents can use these photos to ask children how their day went. She explains, "It empowers the child's voice and supports oral language development. It fosters rich connections between children and parents. And it still makes the connection between home and preschool."

about the different contexts which children are exposed to because those are literally shaping their brains. EC educators are key levers in shaping children's brains. They play a critical role in creating rich and responsive environments while ensuring children feel safe and secure.

### WHAT ARE SOME POSITIVE EXPERIENCES THAT EC EDUCATORS NEED TO PROVIDE FOR YOUNG CHILDREN TO OPTIMISE THEIR BRAIN DEVELOPMENT?

Two of the strongest predictors of success are oral language skills and self-regulatory skills, which include control of behaviours and executive functioning. To create rich play experiences that foster those skills, educators can:

- Support opportunities for rich conversation, including reading stories and singing songs.
- Encourage children to persist in the face of challenges and solve problems.
- Provide experiences where children can demonstrate curiosity, explore, and ask questions.

“Executive functioning skills, self-regulatory capacity and oral language ability are what really set children up for success.”

**ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR CATHRINE NEILSEN-HEWETT**, Academic Director of the Early Years, School of Education, University of Wollongong, Australia



# LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

**ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR CATHRINE NEILSEN-HEWETT DELVES INTO THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF EFFECTIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN SETTING YOUNG CHILDREN UP FOR SUCCESS.**

### HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE "SUCCESS" FOR CHILDREN?

Success is relative, and certainly, there's a cultural lens when we talk about success. But essentially, success is linked to children's social and emotional well-being as well as their cognitive capacity.

From an **adjustment perspective**, it encompasses children's capacities to adapt to their environment, form functional and responsive relationships, and integrate socially with their peers, neighbours and family.

From a **developmental perspective**, we look at characteristics predictive of success. By the end of the preschool years, are children able to communicate their needs and wants? Are they able to demonstrate developmentally appropriate social and emotional maturity? Can they self-regulate? We also look at cognitive skills, such as numeracy and literacy ability.

### WHY ARE THE FIRST FIVE YEARS OF A CHILD'S LIFE SO CRUCIAL IN ACHIEVING THESE SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES?

The brain develops faster during the first five years than at any other time in our lifespan. So, if children are exposed to rich and responsive contexts and meaningful relationships, they develop rich neural pathways in their brain that set them up for success and learning.

### YOU REFER TO EC EDUCATORS AS "BRAIN ARCHITECTS". CAN YOU ELABORATE?

Our genes give us a kind of blueprint of how we are going to turn out. But how we ultimately turn out depends on the quality of our environments, and the quality of the relationships in those environments, in the first five years of life. We need to think

# LEARNING MAP

**PROFESSOR TAN OON SENG USES HIS 'HONEYCOMB MODEL' TO EXPLAIN HOW EARLY LEARNERS LEARN BEST.**

According to Prof Tan, there are six macro-level factors underpinning effective EC development. These interconnected factors can be arranged to form a hexagonal grid — like the honeycomb structure after which his model is named.



“The emotional centre of the brain is closely intertwined with its cognitive and learning centres. Thus, it is always important to connect before we correct.”

**PROFESSOR TAN OON SENG**, Dean, Special Projects and Centre Director, Singapore Centre for Character & Citizenship Education, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University

### 1 UNDERSTAND THE ECONOMICS.

It is most cost-effective to invest in the early years than at any later time. By some estimates or previous international research, every \$1 invested in the early years yields a return of \$2 to \$17. This is achieved through maximising skills and abilities, reducing social costs, and increasing the nation's productivity.

### 2 APPRECIATE EQUITY ISSUES.

Lack of quality EC care and education affects disadvantaged children disproportionately. If left unaddressed, gaps in life outcomes will only widen as they grow older. It is crucial that we uplift the bottom rungs of society so that no child is left behind.

### 3 EMBRACE THE ESSENCE.

Foundations laid during the early years make a huge difference for a person's development and ability to flourish in the future. EC education should not be seen merely as a desire, but as a prerogative for setting children on the right path. The essence is about letting children enjoy their childhood and nurturing character dispositions.

### 4 BUILD THE SCIENCE AND ART OF EC EDUCATION.

EC education is grounded in structure and learning objectives,

yet also influenced by the child's feelings and opinions. The curriculum and pedagogy should be holistic. This means encouraging child-directed play and exploration, while mediating children's experiences towards desired outcomes.

### 5 EMPOWER EDUCATORS.

Educators need to be equipped with up-to-date knowledge on EC learning and be proficient designers of the learning environment. Supportive systems and policies should be in place to hone their professional development as well as manage their workload and burnout risks. At sector level, the EC profession needs to be accorded the recognition it deserves.

### 6 KNOW THE ECOLOGY.

A child exists in an ecosystem where different environments contribute to their development. Home and preschool are where children spend most of their time. Hence, close communication between parents and educators is important to ensure consistency and continuity in the child's learning and development across contexts.



### POINTS OF INTEREST

Other takeaways from Prof Tan's talk.

#### > Emotions influence human actions, learning and behaviours.

Ensuring young children are well-regulated, happy and excited during learning is crucial for learning effectiveness and motivation. One of the biggest factors is a supportive and positive relationship, such as with their teachers.

#### > Power of habits versus novelty.

Our brains learn via two systems: patterning (habits and repeated experiences), and inquiry (novel objects and experiences). Rules and routines help children know what to expect and feel safe, understand appropriate boundaries, and learn to control their behaviours. Ambiguity and novelty help children learn new things. A balanced approach is key. For example, learning how to tie shoelaces (a motor skill) benefits more from habits and repetition, while novel experiences are required to develop problem-solving skills.



# WORKSHOP HIGHLIGHTS



## USING ASSETS-BASED APPROACH FOR A MORE EFFECTIVE HOME-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP WITH DISADVANTAGED FAMILIES

Children from disadvantaged families need intensive support. However, educators may find it challenging to build positive relationships with parents. In this workshop, participants learned how the assets-based approach offers a solution. Co-presenters Ms Juliet Tanuwira, Education & Development Lead at South Central Community Family Service Centre (SCCFSC), and her colleague, Mr Chan Xian Jie, share more.

### > CHALLENGES FACED BY FAMILIES

- **Work demands and time.** Parents risk losing income when they miss work to attend parent-teacher meetings. Some employers do not offer childcare leave. Consequently, parents may experience difficulties balancing work and family responsibilities.
- **Cumulative effect.** Challenges often have a domino effect. For instance, when one child falls ill, other children in the family may become ill as well. This creates a cycle of health-related issues and absenteeism, impacting the family's well-being.
- **Physical and mental health.** Many parents struggle with their own health due to adverse childhood experiences, or a lack of social and extended family support.

### > HOW TO DRIVE IMPROVEMENT

The assets-based approach aims to empower families and communities.

- Rather than merely helping or donating resources to disadvantaged families, **recognise the strengths and resources** they possess. This approach does not focus on deficiencies. Instead, it views families as resilient and capable of addressing challenges.
- **Seek community champions** within the local neighbourhood who can be role models and promote effective practices to others. Emphasising the strengths and resources within families and communities leads to more sustainable solutions.



(Above and below) SCCFSC runs activities for preschool-aged children at its centre, creating an informal setting to observe them and share developmental concerns with educators and families



### > TIPS FOR EDUCATORS

Switch to the assets-based approach with these strategies.

- **Expanding perspectives.** Instead of focusing solely on children, embrace a holistic view that considers the child within the context of their family and community. This broader perspective recognises the assets within families, and their capacity to support their children's development.
- **Practical interaction.** Start conversations by asking parents how they are doing. It shows a genuine concern for the family's well-being. Share and celebrate small milestones achieved by the child with the family. This creates positive reinforcement and a sense of accomplishment. Work with parents to address challenges arising in a child's learning or behaviour. Set realistic goals and encourage progress in small, manageable steps.



Workshop participants learning how to use the Anger Volcano activity to improve children's self-regulation skills

## WAGGA®: A RESOURCE FACILITATING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING WITH CHILDREN

Social-emotional learning (SEL) enables children to acquire knowledge and skills to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, have empathy for others, establish and maintain friendships and relationships, and make good decisions. Children with such competencies are able to stay calm during frustrating situations, and less likely to engage in challenging behaviours.

In this workshop, participants picked up strategies on how to weave SEL into the preschool curriculum using the Wagga book series. Developed by a team of occupational therapists and psychologists from the Department of Child Development at KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH-DCD), the Wagga stories help children build core SEL competencies — namely social awareness, self-regulation and problem-solving skills. Ms Eunice Lee, a Senior Psychologist at KKH-DCD who led the workshop, elaborates.



Introducing KKH-DCD's Wagga book series for children

### > LESSONS IN THE STORY

Wagga is a cute monster who often does not understand how to play fair, work with others, or calm down when angry. As the stories develop, Wagga learns to problem-solve and uses his newly acquired skills to achieve desirable outcomes.

Educators can read the Wagga books and ask children to reflect on the character's behaviour. Suitable for ages four and above, these stories have a local flavour to help children identify with the situations Wagga encounters. The books can also be used in one-on-one sessions for children who need additional support.

### > EXPLORE WITH ACTIVITIES

A few of the stories contain follow-up, hands-on learning activities. For example, in *Wagga Learns to Cool Down*, a big picture of an 'Anger Volcano' with different colour levels is provided. Educators read out a scenario, then children indicate how angry they would be by writing their names on the corresponding volcano level. From this, they learn that individuals can react differently when facing similar situations. Educators and children can also discuss ways to regulate their emotions.

The Wagga books are available at [eresources.nlb.gov.sg](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg).

## Play In Nature

Playgrounds usually have swings, slides and other man-made structures. The nature playgrounds set up by the National Parks Board (NParks), however, capitalise on natural elements such as rocks, sand and trees. This was the topic of a joint workshop by NParks and the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS), 'Creating Meaningful Play and Learning Experiences for Children at the Nature Playgardens'.

Research has shown that nature-rich settings help children feel relaxed, happy and free to imagine. In an unstructured environment like a nature playground, children are empowered to take charge of their learning and use items such as sticks and leaves to explore and create new play ideas.

Lead presenter Dr Sum Chee Wah, Associate Professor and Head, Master of Early Childhood Education Programme, SUSS, shares some tips for educators when organising a field trip to a playgarden:

- > Take advantage of the unique characteristics found in nature. Instead of taking a lesson plan designed for the classroom outdoors, consider what playgarden elements are present to support children's holistic development.
- > Encourage children to select natural materials for their play and decide how they want to play with them.
- > Collaborate and co-learn with the children. Scaffold their understanding by asking questions such as "What do you think will happen if ...?" or "How do you know that ...?".

For a full list of NParks' nature playgardens, visit [www.nparks.gov.sg/gardens-parks-and-nature/nature-playgardens](http://www.nparks.gov.sg/gardens-parks-and-nature/nature-playgardens).

