

Press 'Play'

This year's Early Childhood Conference 2014 was imbued with a playful tone, as a reminder to educators and parents of how important play is to a child's incredible early years.

DAY 1
19 Sep 2014



The opening performance by Crestar Education Group set a lively tone to the ECC 2014

E DUCATORS FROM CHILD care centres and kindergartens made up the bulk of a long line of visitors eager to get inside the main hall at MAX Atria @ Singapore EXPO, where the Early Childhood Conference (ECC) 2014 was held. The two-day conference themed "The Incredible Early Years: Supporting Young Children's Development", had a sign-up rate of over 1,500 educators and parents.

On day one, the marching band of children that accompanied the arrival of the Guest-of-Honour, Minister for Social and Family Development and Second Minister for Defence Mr Chan Chun Sing, set the tone for a lively conference. Guests and participants were invited to beat along to the music with handmade percussion instruments that were in their goodie bags. The instruments were fashioned from recycled items such as chopsticks and tin cans by pre-school children as well as parents from various kindergartens and centres.



Mr Chan Chun Sing with the marching band from Crestar Education Group

PHOTO BY MARK LEE

will in turn affect their remuneration and career progression. Citing that being in the EC sector is the most popular choice of profession in Finland, Mr Chan also expressed hope that in time to come, the EC profession in Singapore will command greater respect from parents and society as a whole.

Following this, the spotlight turned to Professor Lasse Lipponen, Director of Education at the University of Helsinki. Interspersing his keynote address with videos featuring innovative EC research experiments, Prof Lipponen spoke primarily of the preciousness of childhood, and the need to see a child as who he or she is at the present moment, and not who he or she is about to become (for more details, turn to page 5).

After lunch, SPARK certificates were presented to 120 centres and kindergartens with good classroom practices. SPARK (Singapore Pre-school Accreditation Framework), serves as a guide for parents to identify good quality pre-schools which have been assessed by ECDA.



Mr Chan making his rounds at the Exhibition section

The playful atmosphere segued into one of celebration when 13 centres and six educators were lauded at the ECDA Awards for Excellence in Early Childhood Development 2014 presentation ceremony (for more details turn to page 14).

In his opening speech, Mr Chan announced initiatives to develop structured career pathways in the Early Childhood (EC) sector which take into consideration EC professionals' skills instead of just qualifications, which



Mr Chan with the ECDA Awards winners

PHOTOS BY SW LEO

The Box City Project, tagged as "a fringe activity", was undoubtedly the most popular attraction. The showcase featured over 200 playful structures made from recycled boxes by children from 57 child care centres and kindergartens.





Ms Kiran Shah opened day two with a captivating story

DAY 2
20 Sep 2014



Dr Lee Tung Jean, CEO, ECDA; Ms Chan Lai Fung, Permanent Secretary (Education), MOE; Ms Ong Toon Hui, Deputy Secretary, MSF; and Ms Koh Li-Na, Asst CEO, ECDA, enjoying the interactive story telling session



Having fun at National Heritage Board's Memory in a Box booth

A captivating and interactive storytelling session by Ms Kiran Shah, co-founder of Asian Storytelling Network, kick-started day two of the ECC. She shared the story of *The Stone Soup*, which is a classic tale that teaches the value of sharing and working together — an important reminder for educators and parents of the need to seed these values in the early years. Sportingly joining in the activity was Guest-of-Honour, Senior Minister of State, Ministry of Law and Ministry of Education, Ms Indraneel Rajah. In her address, Ms Indraneel shared some findings from Singapore's first national early childhood parenting study conducted recently. The findings were encouraging as parents in Singapore are knowledgeable about child development, she said.

Ms Indraneel also announced new initiatives to provide parents and EC professionals with more support and resources to nurture pre-school children.

There to provide more of such support for parents was Dr Chong Shang Chee, Head

and Consultant in the Child Development Unit, Division of Development and Behavioural Pediatrics at Khoo Teck Puat-National University Children's Medical Institute. Dr Chong emphasised the importance of providing positive experiences, interactions and environments for a child in his or her early years (for more details, turn to Page 6).

As with Day One, the afternoon was mainly for workshopping. The workshops were all structured to impart knowledge and skills to educators and parents on how to engage young children and support their learning (turn to page 7 for details).

Especially popular were the fringe activities and interactive display booths at the Exhibition Section. These included the Box City Project — a display of over 200 structures made out of recycled cardboard by children from over 50 centres. Ms Rodora Caimol Saria, teacher-in-charge of the project for her centre Pasir Panjang Hill Church Kindergarten, said that participating in the project has allowed the effective use of curriculum time. "Using tissue boxes, masking tapes, glue and paint, the children worked in small groups to communicate ideas and express their creative thoughts and feelings. To see the enthusiasm and joy in their faces when doing this hands-on activity was priceless!"

Besides the Box City Project, other fringe activities included the National Heritage Board's Memory in a Box for visitors to learn about Singapore's heritage and culture. At the Wildlife Reserves Singapore's booth, visitors could touch insects brought by staff of the zoo. Centres who received their ECDA Awards also set up exhibition booths to showcase some of the inspiring programmes conducted in their schools. ♥

PHOTOS BY SW LEO

KEY POINTS

For a summary of the speeches and announcements made by Guest-of-Honour, Minister for Social and Family Development and Second Minister for Defence Mr Chan Chun Sing; and Senior Minister of State, Ministry of Law and Ministry of Education Ms Indraneel Rajah, turn to page 8.



Prof Lasse taking questions from the audience with Dr Jane Ching-Kwan as the moderator

IF THERE WAS a misconception that Professor Lasse Lipponen emphatically debunked, it would be the one that young children are incompetent and empty vessels that need to be filled. The keynote speaker at ECDA's Early Childhood Conference (ECC) this year, Prof Lipponen, who is Director of Education in the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Helsinki, said well-regarded research have produced evidence that human beings are biologically wired and culturally attuned to learn even from birth.

Stressing the point that parents and educators need to engage a young child, he cited a well-known experiment called "The Still Face" conducted in 1975 by Dr Ed Tronik, a professor

of psychology at the University of Massachusetts. Results from this experiment show that a neglected child tends to find it difficult to think clearly, control his or her emotions and to form healthy social relationships. Interaction with other human beings even at a young age is therefore, crucial.

WE NEED TO REINVENT PLAY IF WE WANT TO CULTIVATE PEOPLE WHO ARE IMAGINATIVE AND CAN IMPROVISE.

/// PROFESSOR LASSE LIPPONEN

This led Prof Lipponen to his next point — the importance of socio-emotional development. "However, social skills that will enable a child to manage everyday problems, to find the right words when interacting with other people, and understanding other people's responses and emotions, require nurturing," he said. Another cornerstone of the Finnish EC education, revealed Prof Lasse, is 'play'.

What's your definition of 'play'?

Play to me is make-believe or what I call 'pretend play'. 'Make-believe play' is initiated and designed by children while 'purposeful play' is designed by a teacher. We need to reinvent play if we want to cultivate people who are imaginative and can improvise, and that's what 'make-believe play' is all about. Creativity cannot be taught.

In your opinion, should the EC sector in Singapore adopt the Finnish system and place less focus on academic achievements?

I believe that each country has its own system to fit its culture and to serve its society. The Finnish EC education system is entirely ours [and] not borrowed from another place. The system serves our purpose in Finland, but just because it works for us, it might not do so well in other countries.

Do you think Singapore has an EC system that works for its people?

From being at this conference so far, I can see that there's a collective commitment to improve the EC sector. I have this impression that Singaporeans do understand that the early years is the most important phase of a human life. ♥

"Reinvent play"

Professor Lasse Lipponen debunked common perceptions about a child's early years and stressed the importance of 'play' in his keynote address.



Professor Lasse Lipponen, Director of Education in the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Helsinki



Dr Chong Shang Chee,
Head Consultant,
Child Development Unit,
Khoo Teck Puat-National
University Children's
Medical Institute

"A Time-sensitive Period"

What happens in a child's early years is most important, says Dr Chong Shang Chee.

A child's early years are "a time-sensitive period" in a child's development — and during this time, parents should focus on nurturing their relationship with the child and create a responsive environment for him or her.

A child who is emotionally secure learns best, said Dr Chong Shang Chee, Head and Consultant for the Child Development Unit, Division of Development and Behavioural Paediatrics at the Khoo Teck Puat-National University Children's Medical Institute.

To further enhance a child's learning and development, he or she needs to have positive relationships, said Dr Chong. Parents therefore need to make themselves emotionally available to understand their children's emotional needs. Only then can parents help their children in learning through positive experiences with their children, and adopt an effective parenting style that fits the child's temperaments, she said.

Given our culture where the young are expected to 'fall in line', are parents less willing to shape their parenting style to fit each child as you've suggested?

I should clarify that parenting-to-the-fit, that is adopting a parenting style that is customised to the child's temperaments, doesn't mean no boundaries, no expectations, and no discipline. But before setting boundaries or expectations, know your child's inherent strengths

KNOW YOUR CHILD'S INHERENT STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES.

//DR CHONG SHANG CHEE

and weaknesses. Without this understanding, you might be dishing out a one-size-fits-all style of parenting, which is ineffective for the child and as a result, can be frustrating for yourself.

How is knowing the child's temperament helpful for parents?

If you know and understand the child's temperament, you can implement some simple things like modifying expectations, environments, what you say and do to achieve your desired

outcome. For example, a child who is non-adaptable requires our understanding that we need to give him or her choices and warn him or her about changes in plans. It's best also to not force him or her to adapt too quickly to specific activities in school. In this way, you can also potentially reduce negative escalations which can include tantrums and meltdowns. And to do this, you can't just be physically available; you have to make an emotional connection through talking, reasoning and doing positive and enjoyable things together with your child.

Can we change a child's temperament?

Temperament remains fairly constant over time. The way we discipline may modify behaviours, but does not inherently change the way a child reacts or behaves to new situations or under stress. Research also shows temperament constructs are not affected by gender. We should also support temperament differences at home and in classrooms, in order to enhance learning and emotional capacities and resilience. ♥



Examining earthworms in the workshop conducted by Science Centre Singapore



OVER 50 CONCURRENT workshop sessions designed for Early Childhood (EC) educators and parents were conducted as part of the Early Childhood Conference 2014. Tables were turned in the workshop sessions dedicated to EC professionals as educators became students. Especially those sessions which involved hands-on activities and even "toys" to play with such as in Ms Peggy Zee's "Math Adventures: An Interactive Mathematical Way to Learning Maths". The participants clearly enjoyed using playing cards, puzzle pieces as well as building blocks to solve mathematical problems.

"I believe that being able to touch varying textures and see colours will help a child understand mathematical concepts in a more dynamic manner," said Ms Zee, an EC consultant. Thrilled to impart what she had learned to her colleagues was Ms Suri Yati Sulaiman, Centre Supervisor from PCF Sparkletots @ Woodlands. "I am sure that the children will enjoy their math class better with the use of these 'toys' instead of just doing worksheets," said Ms Suri. "Attending the ECC has been an enriching experience."

The atmosphere in "Bringing the Garden into Your Classroom - Explore and Discover With The Little Scientists in Your Class!" was as bustling. EC educators gathered around circular tables peering and poking into soil-filled boxes of earthworms. Conducted by

THE WORKSHOP HAS PROVIDED ME WITH VARIOUS TECHNIQUES TO TEACH AND BE AN EXAMPLE TO MY CHILD.

//PARENT PARTICIPANT

educators from Science Centre Singapore, the interactive workshop encouraged educators to nurture a child's curiosity. "Educators should remember that their role is to facilitate the child's learning and discovery, not dominate the learning process," advised Ms Ng Mei Bao, Senior Science Educator, who co-conducted the workshop.

The workshops for parents were not any less invigorating.

With parents being increasingly concerned that their child be effectively bilingual, Ms Hou Jing's workshop "Creating A Bi-Lingual Language Friendly Home Environment For Pre-Schoolers" was full. Her message to parents was clear: Language proficiency is best nurtured within the home environment and starts with the parents. As one parent noted, "Parents are a child's primary role models. The workshop has provided me with various techniques to teach and be an example to my child, as challenging as it may be."

Another powerful workshop for new parents was conducted by Ms Puspa Sivan, an EC Development and Education Consultant and Training Specialist, titled "Providing Meaningful Experiences for the Optimal Development of Infants and Toddlers". Ms

Puspa asserted that parents need to be more involved in taking care of their infant no matter how busy they may be. "Having a child requires some sacrifice, so be present and bond with your child — don't wait." ♥

ATTENDING THE ECC HAS BEEN AN ENRICHING EXPERIENCE.

//MS SURI YATI SULAIMAN

At the Workshops

EC educators learned how to inject fun into lessons while parents picked up tips from taking care of infants to raising a bi-lingual child.



Ms Peggy Zee (third from right) with participants

PHOTOS BY SW LEO

For access to keynote and concurrent session presentation slides, please visit the BROWSE events & media gallery section of www.growatbeanstalk.sg