



Senior teacher Dorothy Tan teaching children at Ascension Kindergarten about body safety during a KidzLive: I Can Protect Myself programme class last month. The Ministry of Social and Family Development said last month that pre-school teachers are being encouraged to teach their pupils behaviour that promotes self and group safety. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

# Parents welcome move to teach pre-schoolers body safety

**Difficulty of bringing up topic, inexperience why some don't talk about it with kids**

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Political Correspondent

When asked if someone putting a hand on the front of his shorts was a "good" or "bad" touch, a pre-schooler insisted that it was "good" as his father and a friend of his father's had put their hands there before.

This prompted the facilitators of the body safety programme at the Singapore Children's Society (SCS) to find out more and it turned out that the adults had also touched the boy under his shorts.

The case, which happened a few years ago, was eventually referred to Child Protective Services, said Ms Lin Xiaoling, deputy director of the research and advocacy department at SCS.

While such incidents are few and far between, they underscore the importance of SCS' KidzLive: I Can Protect Myself programme, which aims to equip pre-schoolers with body safety knowledge through stories, songs and interactive activities, and prevent child sexual abuse.

This includes differentiating between good and bad touches, understanding the private parts of the body, and how to say no in an uncomfortable situation and tell a trusted adult about it.

Last month, the Ministry of Social and Family Development said pre-school teachers are being encouraged to teach their pupils behaviour that promotes self and group safety.

Training of current and new educators on this topic will also be a focus, in tandem with the SCS, which offers a course.

Parents said they recognised body safety as an important topic to be taught to their young children but said inexperience and the difficulty of bringing up the topic in an age-appropriate manner sometimes held them back.

Ms Aw Jia Hui, 34, an assistant manager at a university admissions department, said she had talked about it with her daughter

Audrey, then aged three, about three years ago. "When she was bathing, we would tell her which parts cannot be shown to others, or that people should not be allowed to touch certain areas unless permission is given."

It can be hard to explain things to children at that age, she said.

Likewise, IT manager Shirley Lam, 38, said her approach towards the issue was piecemeal, so she appreciated the programme at her son's pre-school, which is also easy for young children to understand. The school, PCF Sparkletots @ Punggol Central Block 208, invited parents to attend the KidzLive class virtually, so they could reinforce the messages later at home, said Ms Lam.

**MORE VULNERABLE**

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**MS LIN XIAOLING**, on how research has shown that younger children are more vulnerable to sexual abuse.

Eason, five, is now more conscious of body safety, and knows to shower with his door closed, for instance, she added.

The KidzLive programme, which started in 2001, was originally meant for lower primary pupils but was brought to pre-schools in 2011 when research showed that younger children are even more vulnerable to sexual abuse, said SCS' Ms Lin.

"There's a lot of stigma and secrecy in talking about child sexual abuse. So a lot of times, even when a parent knows it is happening, they may not report it," she added.

SCS has reached over 11,000 children directly. About 800 teachers have also been trained since 2017.

When asked why there is a nationwide push for this topic at this time, Minister of State for Social and Family Development Sun Xueling said that there has been an increase in inquiries about family violence as well as the number of child abuse cases investigated.

"We are deeply concerned about the incidence of child abuse cases... We recognise that for children, pre-schools and school play an important part (in increasing awareness of family violence)."

There were 261 child sexual abuse cases investigated by the authorities in 2020 – a 10-year high.

Big Love Child Protection Specialist Centre's senior social worker Mok Xue Ting added: "Pre-schoolers who are taught early that their bodies belong to them and that they have the right to decline touches will not be powerless in an unfortunate sexual abuse incident."

Going forward, there should be

more structure in engaging the parents on this topic, said former SCS chief and current National Council of Social Service social service fellow Alfred Tan.

"We can also consider stepping up resources to incorporate it more fully into sex education curriculum for primary school pupils."

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