

# Pre-schools step up to help families during pandemic

Parenting workshops, fee rebates and home-learning kits among initiatives

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As the Covid-19 pandemic drags on, several pre-schools are moving to help families in need.

NTUC First Campus (NFC) is starting a mental well-being initiative catering to low-income families from next year.

Ms Louisa Chng, NFC's chief child support officer, said it plans to engage a consultant to design the programme, that will include counselling sessions for parents.

The group will also be starting parenting workshops next year in health and nutrition, mental well-being and supporting children with developmental needs.

Its team of learning support educators will curate digital resources like videos and activities for parents to know how to help their children with learning needs at home.

These efforts build on NFC's existing work that has intensified due to Covid-19.

The group's child enabling executives – whose role is to support children and their needy families – have been even more active in supporting their emotional needs and connecting them to social services, said Ms Chng. "As a result of the rapport built with these families, many of them have reached out to our child enabling executives during this crucial period."

Ms Chng said NFC noticed a dip in attendance of children from needy families. Some 63 per cent and 51 per cent of them were in school in August and September respectively, down from 81 per cent in January and 74 per cent in April.

She said: "These children are the most vulnerable, therefore we track attendance very closely to ensure that we can work with community partners such as Family Service Centres and Child Protective Services to render support to these families when necessary."

To this end, NFC's Bright Horizons Fund has channelled about \$2.4 million this year to bridge the income and learning gaps made worse by the disruptions of the past two years. For instance, more than 4,200 children attending NTUC pre-schools have received a one-time top-up of \$400 to their Child Development Account (CDA) this year.

Nearly 3,000 families whose children are in NTUC pre-schools have also received sponsored NTUC membership, which allows them to benefit from financial and employment support.

Other pre-schools have also provided more financial support to families in need.

Global EduHub, which runs pre-schools Mulberry Learning and

Little Green House, has handed out more than \$120,000 in fee rebates to needy families under their care this year.

Ms Marini Khamis, senior director of the PAP Community Foundation's (PCF's) pre-school management division, said it will continue to help defray pre-school fees for those in need.

Under its PCF Enhanced Headstart Fund, eligible families pay monthly fees of no more than about \$5 for kindergarten, about \$10 for childcare and about \$100 for infant care. About 10,000 families benefit each year.

Apart from financial aid, EtonHouse Community Fund (ECF) has sent hundreds of home-learning kits and fun packs with books and learning materials to needy children in the past two years.

Ms Bipasha Minocha, group brand and marketing director of the EtonHouse Group, said the ECF has also provided children from over 200 families with 121 laptops and almost 200 Wi-Fi devices to access home-based learning and connect with social workers during this pandemic.

Last year, the ECF also partnered the Education Ministry and the Community Foundation of Singapore to top up the CDA of about 1,300 pre-schoolers.

The pandemic has been disruptive for Madam Zhu Su Qing, 36, and her husband, who are both hawker assistants.

Their monthly income was cut several times when they had to stop work – twice when their nine-year-old daughter's schoolmates tested positive for Covid-19, and another time when the owner of the hawker stall they work at contracted the virus.

Their youngest daughter, six, attends NFC's My First Skool centre in Boon Lay, and their older children are in primary school.

But with help from NFC, Madam Zhu said she does not worry about her daughter's school fees. She has also applied for sponsored NTUC membership and can get discounts when buying groceries.

"The school has helped us a lot. So I only worry about their homework and meals when no one is supervising them at home," she said.

NFC child enabling executive Syuhada Mohamed Hassan said most of the 35 to 40 families she helps face financial difficulties due to job losses, and they have trouble engaging children meaningfully at home without digital devices.

"Some of them worry (about their children getting Covid-19) but still need to send them to school because they need to work... But they also worry that when they're not in school, it affects their development and they're not getting the learning they need," she said.

"So it's a dilemma for them and that's where the stress comes in."

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## PARENTS' DILEMMA

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**NFC CHILD ENABLING EXECUTIVE SYUHADA MOHAMED HASSAN**, on families facing financial difficulties.