

## **Every Child's Journey Begins with H.O.M.E**

**by Ms Azlinah Arif and Ms Syafiqah Sulaiman**

Family plays a very important role in nurturing a child.. The family members' ability to create and sustain a conducive environment determines how a child develops socially and psychologically. Every moment, including the early stages of a child's life, matters as interactions during the formative years offer a critical window of opportunity to instil values, shape the trajectory of a child's holistic development, mould their character, and build a foundation for their future. For children to achieve their full potential, it is critical to address their essential needs across areas such as health nutrition, care, and protection. They should be protected from harm and be provided with a sense of security, opportunities for early learning, and responsive caregiving – like talking, singing, and playing – with parents and caregivers who love them. Each child needs love, care, and proper support and services, regardless of who the parental figures are in their life – parents, grandparents, relatives, or siblings, to nourish their growth and succeed in life.

When family members give time to create and forge memories together, engage in quality interactions, spark conversations on issues, motivate and inspire children to have dreams, children can show positive development. The investment in such relationships build strong social and emotional strengths that children will rely on throughout their lives. Children continuously need a good education, a pleasant environment for development and learning, and supportive services for their well-being to achieve success in life. The provision of such conditions is made possible with the support from within the family and the community at large.

### **Parenting through H.O.M.E – Hope, Opportunities, Motivation, Environment**

As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child. Parents need support in their parenting journey. Parenting requires a set of skills, and the journey of parenthood begins at home. Home is a place where family members can find **hope** especially in the darkest of days. Parents or caregivers can help to create **opportunities** to help children overcome challenges in life. With support and continuous **motivation** from their network of support, parents can continue to inspire their children to go out into the world to achieve greatness despite the ups and downs of life. Home provides an **environment** that is filled with love and care to help us conquer our dreams.

Having reliable caregivers, be it parents, grandparents or relatives, matter for children. Consistent and responsive caregiving in an enriching environment can build and foster resilience and self-esteem in children. In his opening address at the 2022 Fostering Seminar, Minister for Family and Social Development, Mr Masagos Zulkifli Masagos Mohamad highlighted that families nurture resilience in children when they are showered with love and care.<sup>1</sup> He believed that when they become adults, they would be able to contribute to the community with care and love just like what their families had done for them. This in turn will strengthen our social cohesion.

The pandemic has brought upon waves of challenges for everyone, especially families. Parents are struggling to balance work, childcare, and self-care while keeping financial worries under control. To mitigate this, there are measures to support vulnerable segments of the society at both the national and community levels.<sup>2</sup> A major impact of the pandemic was that parents went through the loss or the reduction of a stable income which in turn led to the challenges of paying bills in a timely manner and being able to put food on the table for their families.<sup>3</sup> Parents shared that some children found it challenging to be motivated during the pandemic. They had to adjust to new routines such as learning from home which affected social interaction with their friends and teachers. Parents recognised the need to support their young children. Parents offered to work alongside their children while they complete their homework when they were not in the mood to do so.

As one of the Focus Area 1 programmes under the M<sup>3</sup> collaboration, KMM@CommunityCentre aims to equip parents with skills to mediate their child's learning in basic numeracy concepts and encourage parents to be more involved in their children's early

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Social and Family Development (2022, 13 Aug). *Opening Address by Mr Masagos Zulkifli, Minister for Social and Family Development, and Second Minister for Health at Fostering Seminar*. <https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/Pages/Opening-Address-by-Mr-Masagos-Zulkifli-Minister-for-Social-and-Family-Development-for-Fostering-Seminar.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Channel News Asia (2020, 25 Aug). *MSF to Strengthen Social Safety Nets Ensuring 'No Singaporean is Left Behind' amid COVID-19: Masagos Zulkifli*. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/covid-19-msf-strengthen-social-safety-nets-masagos-zulkifli-631096>

<sup>3</sup> Chen, X. (2021). Nutrition, Family Stress and Preschool Children's Behaviour Problems. *Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study Research Brief, 3*. [https://fass.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2021/06/Research-Brief\\_3\\_Jun-2021.pdf](https://fass.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2021/06/Research-Brief_3_Jun-2021.pdf).

childhood education.<sup>4</sup> As parents learn these mediated learning skills, they become empowered and learn to appreciate their child's learning style. Having this knowledge could help parents to create meaningful conversations with school personnel, thus creating stronger home-school partnerships. The safe management measures set by the government to curb the spread of COVID-19 had a direct impact on how Yayasan MENDAKI organised and conducted the early learning programme. As the programme could not be conducted onsite, Yayasan MENDAKI promptly adjusted and conceptualised "eKMM", a programme which is delivered through an online video-conferencing platform. The capabilities of KMM facilitators are enhanced to equip them with a new set of digital skills to engage both parents and children during the delivery of eKMM sessions.

Families experience a steep learning curve when it comes to navigating online platforms especially for the child's learning during the pandemic. Home-based learning is one of the key measures that was put in place during the circuit breaker period in Singapore.<sup>5</sup> The use of online video platforms had become a new norm. Parents have to learn basic digital skills, how to manage cyber-related risks in order to enable them to better navigate the Internet in their children's digital world and learn the features of the video conferencing platforms. These skills are useful for parents to equip themselves with the confidence to support home-based learning (HBL), a strategy designed to aid in the learning of students at home. Another prominent public education platform to promote learning through play, 'PlayFEST', was pivoted online and programme materials were delivered to the families' doorstep where they could safely participate in the activities from the comfort of their homes. Although the activities were conducted online, there were opportunities for families to bond during the learning process and for their children to develop their communication and social skills. More importantly, it raised the level of awareness in parents on the importance of play and its role in the holistic development of young children.

The development of early critical thinking and reasoning skills were encouraged through these activities which provided parents with ideas in setting up a stimulating and appropriate learning environment at home by using everyday items. The two abovementioned

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<sup>4</sup> Taken from M<sup>3</sup> official website: <https://www.m3.gov.sg/focus-areas/marriage-parenthood-and-early-childhood/>

<sup>5</sup> Blog Post | Home-based learning in Singapore | Silver Lining for Learning (2020, May 15).

<https://silverliningforlearning.org/home-based-learning-in-singapore/>

programmes are centred around the child for their healthy development. This child-centred approach is aligned with the results from a recent study on child-centredness activities.<sup>6</sup> Tan and Rao concluded that having a child-centred approach in the early childhood education framework could be helpful in encouraging the child's school readiness. This highlights the importance of play on social and motor skills development in children, especially so in the home setting with their parents.

From the analysis of the pre and post perception surveys submitted by parents who attended eKMM in 2020-2021, it was reported that there was an increase in parents' confidence level in being their children's learning companions. They showed more confidence in assisting their children and were aware of the availability of all the resources they could find at home. Parents recognised the importance of early exposure to Mathematics and basic numeracy skills. The pursuit for learning was not hindered by the multi-faceted challenges that families faced during the pandemic. Mdm Solihah Yakinawati Binte Yahya, a KMM beneficiary, shared her experience of the programme, "My husband and I benefited from KMM because we got to bond as a family and other parents shared their stories which helped us to manage our children well".

Yayasan MENDAKI works with partners to curate learning opportunities through a series of developmental non-academic programmes to support a pre-schooler holistically and to nurture a strong foundation in them. These programmes will help to build 21<sup>st</sup> century skills such as collaboration, communication, and critical thinking in children and in turn contribute towards the child's better character development and readiness for school. Some examples of such developmental activities include coding, STEAM-related workshops, speech and drama activities, and learning journeys. Some of these programmes such as junior coding, junior scientist and even virtual learning journeys were also made available online to ensure that there will not be any abrupt interruption to their learning.

Dr Mohamad Maliki Osman, Second Minister for Education called for more consistent efforts to strengthen family bonds by having like-minded parents come together to exchange

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<sup>6</sup> Tan, C. T., & Rao, N. (2017). How do Children Learn? Beliefs and Practices Reported by Kindergarten Teachers in Singapore. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education*, 11, 81-112.

tips and parenting lessons with one another. He added that with the ever-growing support for parents, he hopes that children will grow into resilient and strong adults.<sup>7</sup>

### **Enhancing Collaboration**

As an educational partner, Yayasan MENDAKI facilitates continuous learning at home and offers end-to-end educational support to the community at different stages of life by strengthening families with a focus on their capabilities and strengths. Collaborations with partners such as National Library Board (NLB) and Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS) allowed us to share knowledge on the key strategies to support families in early childhood development and the knowledge gained could be utilised to design programmes and initiatives on the best practices to support parents with preschool-aged children. Yayasan MENDAKI will continue to work with our partners to champion for more upstream efforts so that young children can have a good start in life, especially for those from disadvantaged families.

Subject-matter experts and volunteers are community assets who champion the cause of education and lifelong learning. Together with Yayasan MENDAKI and other partners, knowledge and ideas are shared to build a better future for the community. Initiatives such as the School Ready Campaign, for example, promotes the importance of early learning and highlights the availability of a series of publications and resources that are developed for the targeted group. Valuable input from subject-matter experts and the identification of channels of engagement with the targeted group lead to better awareness in the community on the importance of early childhood and available resources. (Annex of identified publications by Yayasan MENDAKI)

In Yayasan MENDAKI, we believe that a healthy ecosystem of support is needed to support and maximise young children's learning, and this begins at home. Parental involvement is crucial. The Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG LEADS) found that factors such as positive parental control (e.g., setting boundaries, enforcing rules) and parents acting as positive role models could help in facilitating a child's ability to exercise self-control

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<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Education (2022, 18 Sep). *Speech by Dr Maliki Osman, Second Minister for Education for Bapa Sepanjang Hayat "Dads' Role in Education" Forum at Lifelong Learning Institute.*

[https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/speeches/20220918-speech-by-dr-maliki-osman-second-minister-for-education-for-bapa-sepanjang-hayat-dads-role-in-education-forum-at-lifelong-learning-institute.](https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/speeches/20220918-speech-by-dr-maliki-osman-second-minister-for-education-for-bapa-sepanjang-hayat-dads-role-in-education-forum-at-lifelong-learning-institute)

in daily lives and regulate their behaviours.<sup>8</sup> This can eventually lead to achieving better self-regulation as the child grows older. There should be aspirations and expectations of parents on their child's abilities by empowering parents to be their children's first teacher, nurturer, and partner. This is a key strategy that will help young children to have a strong foundation for their schooling years and for life. As an education partner in this journey, we hope to facilitate strong home-school-community partnerships to create and sustain a conducive learning and enriching home environment to support a child's healthy development and achieve our vision of building a community of success.

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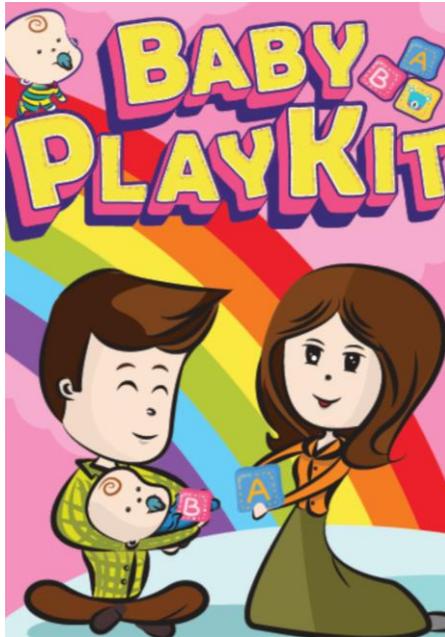
<sup>8</sup> Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG LEADS), Centre for Family and Population Research, National University of Singapore. <https://fass.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/spleads/>

**Annex**

1. One of School Ready's publications & learning resources: My Early Adventures



2. MENDAKI Baby PlayKit



Website: <https://www.mendaki.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/MENDAKI-Baby-Playkit-Corporate-Website.pdf>

Video: [https://youtu.be/\\_v81mM1tfs0](https://youtu.be/_v81mM1tfs0)

3. PlayKit: A starter pack filled with activities to encourage bonding between parents and children aged 0-6 years old.



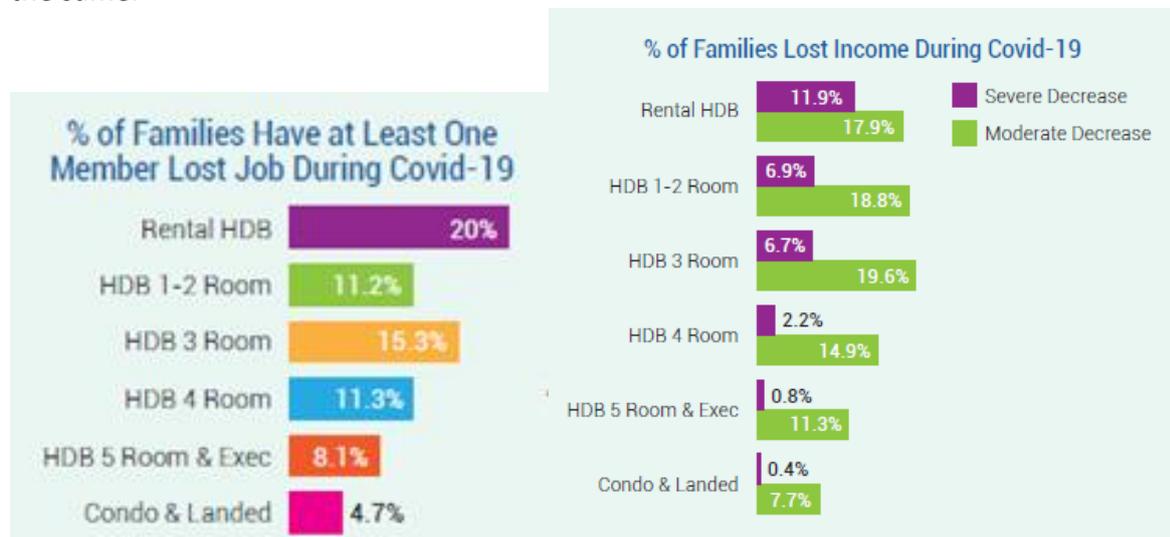
4. My Tinker Kit: contains three individual sets of educational games such as rainbow optics box, Strawbees sculptures and various cardboard building kits.



## Did You Know Section for DD Azlinah and EO Syafiqah Sulaiman

Covid-19 Impacts (out of 5,000 families in Singapore<sup>9</sup>):

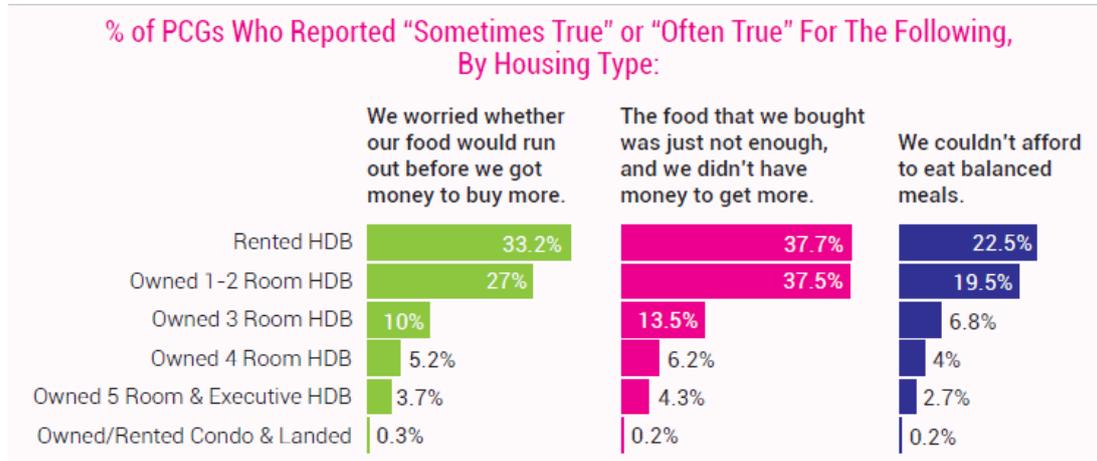
- 20% of those living in rental HDBs had someone in their households lost a job, while 4.7% of those in condo and landed properties reported the same.
- 2.4% of households had severe decrease in family income, and 13.1% had moderate decrease in income.
- About 18% of families living in the rental HDBs had a moderate decrease in family income, whereas 7.7% of those living in condominiums and landed properties experienced moderate decrease in family income.
- Almost 12% of those living in the rental units had a severe decrease in family income, whereas 0.4% of those living in condominiums and landed properties reported experiencing the same.



<sup>9</sup> National University of Singapore. (2022). Singapore Longitudinal EARly Development Study Research Update Issue 5 [Data set]. [https://fass.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2022/06/005-Research-Update-Issue-5-June-2022\\_opt-1.pdf](https://fass.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2022/06/005-Research-Update-Issue-5-June-2022_opt-1.pdf)

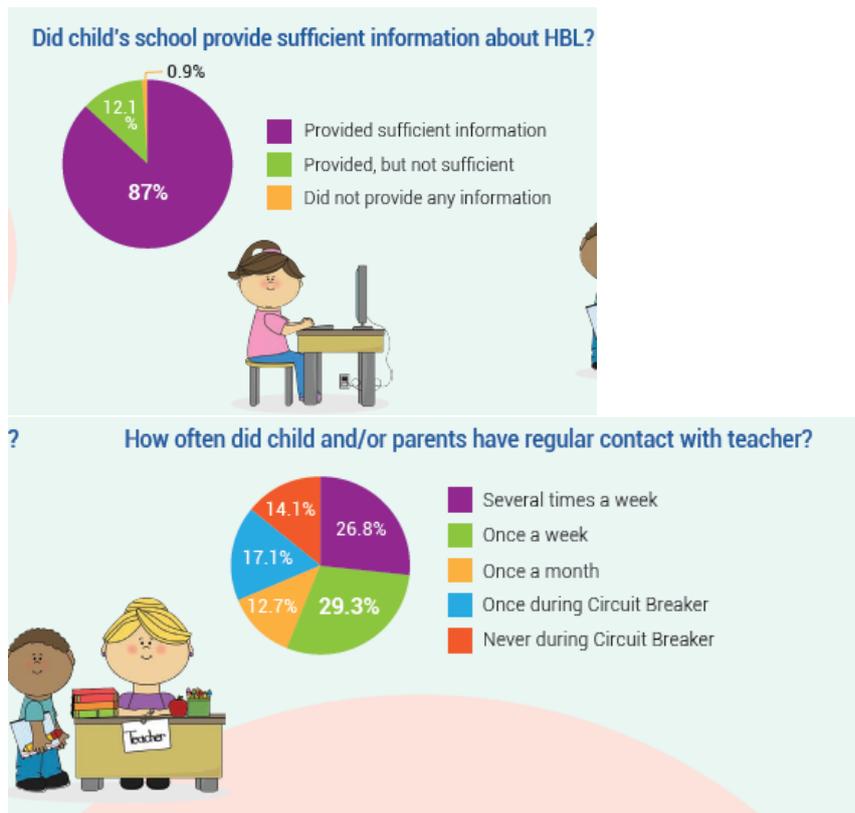
Food Insecurity (out of 5,000 families in Singapore)<sup>10</sup>:

- Most children have sufficient food to eat, but about 38% of households in rented HDBs and 1-2 room flats reported not having enough food and did not have money to get more.
- About 14% in rented HDB and 1-2 room flats reported child not eating enough food.



<sup>10</sup> National University of Singapore. (2021). Singapore Longitudinal EARly Development Study Research Update Issue 3 [Data set]. [https://fass.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2021/01/003a-Research-Update-3\\_Online\\_26012021\\_opt.pdf](https://fass.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2021/01/003a-Research-Update-3_Online_26012021_opt.pdf)

Home-Based Learning (out of 5,000 families in Singapore)<sup>11</sup>:



<sup>11</sup> National University of Singapore. (2022). Singapore Longitudinal EARly Development Study Research Update Issue 5 [Data set]. [https://fass.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2022/06/005-Research-Update\\_Issue-5\\_June-2022\\_opt-1.pdf](https://fass.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2022/06/005-Research-Update_Issue-5_June-2022_opt-1.pdf)