

Child Care Services in Malaysia

by Madam Liew Sau Pheng

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-religious country with a population of more than 25 million people who live in the Peninsular and the States of Sabah and Sarawak on Borneo Island. It is a harmonious and peaceful nation comprised of Malays who are the ethnic majority followed by Chinese, Indians, Ibans, Kadazanduns, and other ethnic groups. These cultures have influenced each other, and thus has evolved a colourful and vibrant society which is truly Malaysian. The national language is Bahasa Malaysia; and English, the second language, is widely spoken. While Islam is the official religion and all Malays are Muslims; Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism have large followings among other ethnic groups.

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Although Malaysia is still a primary exporter of rubber, palm oil, timber, petroleum, and natural gas, manufacturing has quickly become the mainstay of its economy since 1987 and its earnings have superseded that of the agricultural sector. Since its independence, the nation has made great strides in education, enabling it to move fast into the Information Age in tandem with its vision 2020, which is to achieve developed status by that year. The country can now boast of a literacy rate of 94%. The Education Act of 1996 has evolved a National System of Education from a fragmented and diversified system of schooling to provide, inter alia, for a varied and comprehensive education that aims to fulfill Malaysia's needs and promote national unity through cultural, social, economic, and political development. It also provides for Bahasa Malaysia as the main medium of instruction — a national curriculum, common examinations, and free education to every child of school-going age for a period of 11 years. At the pre-school education level, the curriculum, facilities, and teacher training in the public and private schools were required to conform with the standards stipulated in this Act.

Being multi-ethnic, national unity is Malaysia's overriding goal in the formulation of all its socio-economic policies. The nation's ideology, known as Rukun Negara (1969), marks a significant milestone in its development as it forms the

basis for the consolidation of national unity and guides the direction of all political, economic, social, and cultural policies. Further to this, the National Development Plan (NDP) launched in 1991 directs the development of Malaysia's human resources in a holistic and integrated manner to produce citizens who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically balanced and harmonious based on a firm belief in and devotion to God.

In the Asia-Pacific Region, Malaysia has done exceedingly well in the health care of the nation's young children. Its health programmes have resulted in the steady decline of pre-natal, infant, and toddler mortality. Child immunization rates are high and more than 90% of all children have been immunized against BCG, DPT, and Polio and nearly 80% of them against measles. In terms of nutritional status, less than 5% of children are severely malnourished and the rest are in the normal range.

The population of Malaysia is relatively young with those in the 0-18 group accounting for about 40% of the overall population and about half of those are in the 0-6 age group. In the last quarter of a century, Malaysia has been experiencing rapid changes economically and socially. With the increasing education and employment opportunities for women, the proportion of women classified as "employee" shot up from 38.9% in 1970 to 62.91% in 1990. Women are



now prominent in the corporate and business sectors as well. This change has impacted the role of women in the family, creating an escalating demand for alternative care of young children. It was noted in 1998 that the number of children enrolled in pre-schools has increased significantly from 253,675 in 1995 to 281,397 in 1998; and the number of public child care centres has increased from a mere 47 centres catering to 1,880 children below 4 years old to 366 centres with a total of 12,749 in 1998.

In the early years of the nation's development, the extended family could still be depended on to fill the need for child care services. But with the unprecedented entry of women into the work force (a 1999 survey revealed that 70% of women with children under 6 years of age were in the labour force), a significant rural-urban migration as well as resettlement programmes engaging rural communities in land development and rehabilitation schemes, the nuclear family had become the norm.

As a consequence, more and more working parents were now dependent

on alternative care and their first choice is always the family (30.6%) and also themselves (14.6%) according to a 1998 study of "Childcare and Parenting Styles among Working Parents" conducted by the National Planning and Development Board. Among family members, grandparents

play an important role as care providers (60.4%) followed by other relatives (22.5%) and older siblings (17.1%) while neighbours and friends provided another 15% of the care. Domestic servants provided 6.6% and more than 70% were foreigners (Indonesians and Filipinas). Only 5.1% were in licensed child care centres and 18% of them were under supervision at public or religious schools. The rest, who could not afford centre-based child care, had to rely on unlicensed and unregulated child care centres or private individuals.

No information is available on what happens to children who did not attend child care or pre-school programmes. There are some parents (1.5%) whose children are sent away to stay with relatives for sustained periods of time and about 9% are "latch key" children who look after themselves while their parents work outside of the home.

Cognizant of the fact that early childhood development programmes are vital in preparing the nation's young to participate in nation building, the Malaysian Government has taken the

lead in planning for the provision of children's services; and essential legislation such as the Child Protection Act, the Child Care Centre Act 1984, the Education Act 1996 were put in place to safeguard the survival, protection, and development of children. There are two types of institutions that provide early childhood development programmes: the child care and development centres known as TASKAs, which cater to children 0-4 years, and the pre-schools or kindergartens for the 4-6 year olds known as TADIKAs or TABIKAs or, if run by the Islamic religious organisations, TASKIs. The former is licensed by the Social Welfare Department in the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development and the latter is licensed by the Education Department under the Ministry of Education.

The Child Care Centre is defined as any premises where four children or more in a household are cared for on a fee basis. Such centres are either classified as a home-based centre (with less than 10 children) or an Institutional Centre (looking after more than 10 children). Such centres offer child care services ranging from half-day to full-day. Currently, only 1,788 child care centres have been registered with the Social Welfare Department, and these are mainly run by private individuals and workplace-based care providers. This is a small number vis-à-vis the growing numbers of children who need the places.

In both types of programmes, only a small proportion of the total operators are registered. This is often due to the lack of compliance to legal requirements and weak enforcement. Even with the registered centres there is always the question of quality. There is still a large number of operators (or centre directors) who are not registered care providers, which means they and even most of their staff have not undergone the three week training (one of the

requirements that has to be fulfilled in acquiring a license) provided by the Licensing Authority in collaboration with the National Association of Registered Care providers or their State associations or with local institutions of higher learning.

Three child-related associations, the Association of Registered Care providers, the Association of Kindergartens, and the National Association of Early Childhood Care and Education (NAECCEM) work in close collaboration with the Social Welfare Department to move centre-based care from merely meeting minimum requirements to quality care and, subsequently, to accreditation. In recent years there is also the growing phenomenon of home-schooling in urban areas, but regulations have yet to be put in place to ascertain and monitor home-school early childhood and formal learning programmes.

The Pre-School or Kindergarten is a non-formal and flexible programme for young children aged 4-6 years. The registration and curriculum of such centres are governed by the Education Act of 1996. Pre-school education is conducted largely by the government, operating 81.6% of Pre-school programmes in 1995. Of these, 10.3% come under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education while 61.8% are run by the Community Development Division of the Ministry of Rural Development (KEMAS), the National Unity and Integration Department (9.5%), the State Religious Departments (TAKIS), Armed

Forces, Universities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and 18.4% are operated by private sector. All government pre-school teachers are trained under the Ministry of Education or its agencies. Public preschool programmes are free and fully funded by the government while private programmes charge fees.

Rising demand, as a result of the importance given to early childhood education and an increased public awareness, have led to the mushrooming or proliferation of pre-school centres all over the country, especially in urban areas. Many pre-school centres double as child care centres out of convenience to working parents. Private centres entice parents to send their children by offering “imported models” and commercialised child learning programmes that are expensive but may be unsound in terms of child development principles. In addition there is also a growing and urgent demand for after school care for children whose parents are both working, respite care for children with special needs, and taking caring of the caregivers (i.e., job benefits, rewards, or a good career opportunity for those who stay).

The Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development as well as the Ministry of Education are greatly concerned over the inadequacies in its early childhood programmes and are embarking on a strong and equal partnership to draw up policies and programmes to address them. Clearly evident is the need for “seamless coordination and coherence in policy and services for the 0-6 age group, as well as a systematic and integrated approach to policy development to meet the needs of children and families and local preferences” in line with the latest National Development Plan (the 9th Malaysia Plan), which has as its thrust the development of human capital.

“The Malaysian Government has set its priority on investing in the potential of its youngest citizens as the benefits are both compelling and self-evident.” It is an investment that offers outstanding returns — both in human and financial terms and IT now has the political will and the national resolve to do it in true “Malaysia Boleh!” style. Develop a Child, Develop a Nation!



MALAYSIAN HOST TEAM Standing left to right: Lilyana Abdul Latiff, Siti Jamilah Borhan, Michelle Wong, Madam Yap Kim Lan, Annie Leong, Lily Norlia Jaafar, Rozilah Ishak, Mazuin Dató Abdul Mutalib, Norziati Othman. Seated left to right: Judith Loh, Dató Napsiah Omar, Datin Radziah M Daud. Not shown: Madam Liew Sau Pheng and Anne Subashini.