

# THE STRAITS TIMES

## Investing in disadvantaged young children could pay off sevenfold in the future: Study



Since 2013, the Circle of Care programme has partnered 22 pre-schools and six primary schools. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO FILE PHOTO



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SINGAPORE - It takes, on average, \$20,000 over five years to get a child from a disadvantaged background to be on an equal footing with his more well-off peers. This is done through the combined efforts of social workers, pre-school educators, educational therapists and health specialists, who work on helping these children before they enter primary school.

This investment is likely to bear fruit later on, with a \$136,000 boost in these children's earning power over the 45 years they are likely to be in the workforce.

These were the findings of an independent study on Care Corner Singapore's decade-long Circle of Care (CoC) programme, conducted by local think-tank Research for Impact between July 2022 and July 2023.

The study also found that over 85 per cent of the 146 parents on the CoC programme agreed that their children have improved in their general academic, life and social skills after receiving CoC's services.

There was also evidence to suggest that the parents had gained motivation, confidence and ability to support their children in reaching the parents' aspirational outcomes.

But families which presented imminent risks such as family violence or child abuse were shown to benefit the least from the CoC programme, and to require a different response to ensure that the children remained safe while these risks are addressed.

These findings were revealed at Care Corner Singapore's Early Childhood Development Conference at Concorde Hotel on Nov 24.

Speaking at the event, Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Culture, Community and Youth Eric Chua said that the early years of a child's life are important for his development. But in many disadvantaged families, children may not have a conducive environment to do so.

"The gaps in development between them and their peers can widen over the years, unless something is done upstream to give them a better start," said Mr Chua, adding that children are an important place to start when strengthening social mobility.

Mr Chua, who is also Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Social and Family Development, said integrated support for disadvantaged families is another key factor to ensure that the assistance provided is effective.

"One organisation may interact with one family member, while another serves another family member, when in reality, their issues are inter-related. We need to work together as one, to ensure that families are supported optimally and in a consistent manner," he said, adding that these families may face complex and interlocking difficulties.

CoC began in March 2013 in partnership with the Lien Foundation, with Quantedge Foundation joining the scheme in 2018. It was meant to be an early intervention programme to help children from low-income families through holistic support from professionals from healthcare, social services and education. The programme aims to support children in their learning, health, and social and emotional well-being.

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Since 2013, CoC has partnered 22 pre-schools – operated by PCF Sparkletots, 7oaks Preschool, Presbyterian Preschool Services and MOE Kindergarten – and six primary schools. It has served more than 1,100 children and their families.

First, pre-schools identify children from lower-income families – that is, those with a per capita income of \$750 and below, or a household income of \$3,000 and below – and refer them to Care Corner Singapore to be enrolled in the CoC programme.

A social worker would then meet the family to understand their unique needs and challenges, before observing the child during lessons. This is followed by an assessment of the type of support needed for the child to close the inequality gap.

Medical professionals would then conduct various health screening tests for the child in the pre-school to detect potential issues in areas such as dental care, eyesight and reaching developmental milestones.

Care Corner staff also conduct life skills workshops for both the children and their parents at least once a year. Social workers would also visit the family at their home for personalised coaching sessions to help them use these skills in their home setting.

When the children are about to transition to primary school, parents would receive guidance as they go through the Primary 1 registration process. The children are also guided to regulate their emotions and settle into a routine as they make the leap from pre-school to primary school.

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One parent, Ms Sha, 36, who is a part-time helper at a pre-school, said that CoC helped her daughter, eight, who experienced speech and developmental delays, and provided her son, six, with support in brushing up his literacy and numeracy skills to better prepare him to enter Primary 1.

“I think I won’t be able to do this alone,” said Ms Sha, a mother of five children aged between six and 14, who declined to give her full name.

The CoC pilot programme will end in March 2024.

Ms Cherlynn Ang, manager of Care Corner Singapore’s CoC programme, told The Straits Times that the programme is looking to evolve in terms of how it can add value in the area of capability-building for workers and practitioners based on what it has learnt in the last 10 years.

“We have really hit the core objective of Circle of Care, and that is to get the national attention on early intervention on preventive developmental work,” said Ms Ang.

CoC was consulted in the nationwide roll-out of KidStart – a programme to provide upstream support for children from birth to six years old – and shaped the development of Health and Development Support in Pre-school Partnerships (Heads-Upp), a partnership with National University Hospital’s Child Development Unit to identify, assess and support children’s health and developmental needs early.

Ms Ang said Care Corner wants to equip practitioners to better understand the needs of families and young children.

“We will also be organising sharing platforms on the learnings of our research findings with leaders and practitioners from different sectors, so that they can come together to glean the insights and application in the first few months of 2024.”

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