

## Child Care – Singapore Style

by Bonnie and Roger Neugebauer

During a recent visit to Singapore, we were thrilled to have the opportunity to tour a sampling of child care centers. Even in our visits to just five centers, we were amazed at the great variety in programming approaches and creative solutions to delivering quality in different settings.

Make no mistake about it — child care in Singapore is serious business. In a nation with a population of 2.8 million, there are 550 full-day child care centers in operation with many more part-day preschools. There are centers nearly every ten blocks in residential areas! And the government is an active partner in the child care system. The Ministry of Community Development provides a \$150 per month subsidy per child for up to three children in full-day programs. Public support is designed to support economic growth and to encourage families to have more than two children.

To get a flavor of child care in Singapore, here are snapshots of the centers we visited . . .

### **Sparkletots Child Care Centre** **Jenny Koh, Director**

We visited two of the 14 Sparkletots centers — one on the first floor of a housing complex and one in a nearby community center. All Sparkletots centers are operated by the PAP Community Foundation, an arm of the People's Action Party, the ruling political party in Singapore. In all, PAP operates 24 child care centers (full-day care for children 18 months to 6 years), 315 kindergartens (part-day programs

for 4, 5, and 6 year olds), 22 before and after-school programs (for children 7 to 14 years old), and one intergenerational program (serving children, teens, and the elderly). PAP serves nearly 80,000 families in its child care centers and kindergartens.

Jenny Koh is director of three Sparkletots centers, including the two that we visited. Both were boisterous, joyous places where children were actively engaged in a wide range of activities. In one classroom, the children started spontaneously singing nursery rhymes to entertain us and then sang faster and faster to keep us from moving on to the next room.

The mission of the PAP preschool initiative is to support low-income families. As a result, the fees of parents attending the Sparkletots centers are kept low. Not surprisingly, there is a long waiting list for both centers, each of which serve about 80 children divided into rooms serving 20 children.

The goal of the Sparkletots centers is “to provide quality child care services and facilities for the progress of the child’s development physically, intellectually, socially, and emotionally.” The program offers “language development, music and movement, science, story telling, number experience, arts and crafts, outdoor play, and shared book reading.”

### **Pat’s Schoolhouse** **Patricia Koh Lee Leng,** **Principal/Owner** **Josephine Keng, School Administrator**

In 1988, Patricia Koh started Pat’s Schoolhouse with two kindergarten students. Twelve years later, these two students have followed successful academic paths (both are now doing exceptionally well at the collegiate level) and Pat’s Schoolhouse has expanded to eight sites serving over 1,000 children. Over the years, more than 8,000 children have attended Pat’s Schoolhouse, many of whom have excelled in academic work.

Before opening her school, Patricia already had a long and diverse career in early education. She had been a kindergarten teacher, a principal, a researcher, a lecturer, and head of the Early Childhood Department at the Institute for Education in Singapore. Along the way, she managed to complete a Master of Arts degree in child development at the University of London. All of this experience convinced Patricia of the extreme importance of the early years in children’s development, and motivated her to start her own school.

The Pat’s Schoolhouse site we visited serves nearly 200 children, divided into four age groups and located in several buildings on the school grounds. The curriculum in place strongly emphasizes academic preparation. The environment of the school provides for a wide diversity of learning, play, and social opportunities. Clearly the children were happily and enthusiastically engaged.

Pat’s program is featured on the cover of this issue to represent all early childhood programs in Singapore. Along with many happy students, the

picture includes Pat (right), Josephine Keng (left), the school administrator of the school we were visiting, and Julia Teo (front), the manager of curriculum and training.

**The Children's Learning Centre**  
**Nanyang Poly University**  
**Kelly Hor, Director**

A relative newcomer to the Singapore scene is the Learning Vision Group (LVG), formed in 1995 as a strategic business alliance of seven early childhood organizations. LVG now operates 15 child care centers serving over 1,200 children and a variety of enrichment programs (offering computer, speech, and drama programs, for example) serving over 400 children.

While in Singapore, we met a number of the key staff from LVG. June Rusdon, with ten years of experience in the child care industry, leads LVG as executive director. (Not only did June represent LVG well, but she also served as the tireless bus driver on our all day center visits.) June is assisted by director Rabi-atul-Adawiah, operations manager Ng Lai Yoong, and curriculum consultant Dr. Lily Wong.

We toured one LVG program, the Children's Learning Centre at Nanyang Technological University directed by Kelly Hor. This is a worksite center serving 145 children of employees and students at the University, one of eight employer centers managed by LVG. This beautiful center was designed for child care by LVG.

Included at the center is a training center where LVG teachers can come for training every Saturday. LVG's commitment to training is such that last year it won the national award for staff development along with such distinguished company as Raffles Hotel.

**St. Joseph's Church Kindergarten**

**Elizabeth Tan, Principal**

In 1985, Elizabeth Tan, an 18 year veteran kindergarten teacher, opened a kindergarten program for St. Joseph's Church. Today, the kindergarten serves 200 children in the morning and 200 in the afternoon in four ten-week sessions. Mrs. Tan still serves as principal of the school and also serves as an officer in OMEP-Singapore.

The kindergarten is located on the spacious, park-like, church grounds. Like many Singapore programs, it operates outdoors as much as indoors. Art and other activities are set up on outside patios, which are nearly always in use by independently and actively engaged children.

The kindergarten operates with strong parent support. For example, one parent, writing in the school's newsletter, observed, "As we step into the new millenium, we can be assured that at St. Joseph's our little ones are being given a strong foundation to enable them to look forward to their future confidently."

Based on this strong community of support, Mrs. Tan is leading St. Joseph's Church in a campaign to raise \$3 million to replace the current facility. Her goal is to have the new facility in operation by 2003. Plans call for the new facility, which will serve 300 children per session, to be built on land adjacent to the current school so that the program can remain open throughout the construction period.

**Hasanah Kindergarten**

**Maimunah A. Rahman, Director**

The last center we visited in Singapore was also very interesting. Hasanah Kindergarten is operated on the third

floor of the Hasanah Mosque. While full-day child care cannot be provided in mosques, leaders of the Muslim faith in Singapore have recognized the importance of the early years. As a result, 24 mosques, including Hasanah, now offer preschool programs.

The Muslim programs are supported by early childhood consultant Sadimah Salimah, who heads the recently formed Muslim Preschool Association in Singapore. The Hasanah Kindergarten is overseen by a voluntary Mosque Management Board. Day-to-day operations are supervised by principal Maimunah Bte Abdul Rahman.

The Hasanah program started in 1988. It offers four three-hour sessions per day. Several years ago, Hasanah served over 300 children per day, but the neighborhood has been changing, and now 198 are enrolled.

With "Children are Allah's trust to us" serving as the philosophy of the Hasanah Kindergarten, its primary goal is the inculcation of the Islamic faith. While much of the curriculum is designed with the activity areas of a typical early childhood program including a computer classroom, integrated into the curriculum are elements of Islamic religious knowledge. Classes are taught in English and Malay on alternating days. On Saturdays, separate classes in Arabic language studies are offered.