

## Who is Here for Me: Substitute Child Care in Singapore

Kaili Chen Zhang\*

Department of Education, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong, China

\*Corresponding author: Kaili Chen Zhang, Faculty of Education, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong, China, Tel: (852)-3442-7845; E-mail: kailichenzhang@gmail.com

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### Abstract

To describe the current status of substitute care services for young children in Singapore, this article highlights the country's overall structure of the existing alternate care service system, cultural and societal perspectives about early childhood care and education, and unique features of the service delivery system. Challenges to enhance the quality of substitute child care services and future possibilities in Singapore are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Substitute care services; Young children; Singapore

### Introduction

Singapore, a small, densely populated island country situated in South East Asia, has been recognized as one of the most affluent and stable countries in the world [1]. Since 1965 when Singapore separated from Malaysia to become an independent and sovereign state, this city-state has achieved significant developments in education. Today, the country's rigorous education system has been widely recognized. Singapore has become one of the most literate countries in the world: the literacy rate of the population aged 15 and over reached 96.4% in 2012 [2]. Singapore has also been listed as one of the top-performing countries in secondary mathematics and science, and many of the nation's textbooks have become increasingly popular in other countries [3,4]. Singaporean students' outstanding educational achievements have become the pride of the country.

Singapore's economy has also experienced rapid economic development. Between 1965 and 2013, Singapore's per capita gross domestic product (GDP) grew from \$1,310 to \$68,541. Over the last 5 years from 2008 to 2013, the median monthly household income from work of resident employed households rose by 11 percent, and was \$7870 in 2013 [5].

Nevertheless, Singapore also faces challenges in the area of nurturing and educating its children who are often described as the future of the nation [6]. For instance, statistics have shown that common problems presented by young people include stressful life events and interpersonal relationship issues. Examples of such include unemployment, stress with studies or work, financial worries, family life, struggles with social interactions and feelings of loneliness [7,8]. Ho et al. maintained that the increasing number of young suicides, attempted suicides and self-wounding cases just reflects the tip of the iceberg of stress young people suffer. This dark side to the nation's growing prosperity cannot be neglected.

Just like many other countries in the world, in Singapore the workforce participation for mothers has increased in recent years. According to Singapore's Ministry of Manpower, in 2012 about 51 percent of all Singaporean women are now engaged in the workforce, and this number is on the rise [9]. Another trend is that individual

employees are working longer hours, resulting in an increase in the combined working hours of parents [7].

Therefore, though it is generally agreed that care provided by parents/guardians in the early years of a child is the best way to lay a good foundation for a child's life, staying at home to look after one's own children is not an option that everyone can take. For parents who both work, they have to consider sending their young children to substitute care services. When both parents are at work (and/or are working long hours), the number of latchkey children (home alone after school) and children brought up by foreign domestic workers have increased significantly. Furthermore, single-parenthood in Singapore is also on the rise. Between 1980 and 2013, the general divorce rate for women rose from 3.8 to 7.2 for every 1000 married resident females aged 20 years and over [5]. As a result, the number of young children raised by single parents has increased dramatically becoming a worrying phenomenon [7]. Though the effects on children of having both parents (or single parents) in paid employment very much depend on parents' working circumstances, generally speaking, these trends have increased the likelihood of children attending child care.

These special challenges Singapore is facing suggest that the issue of providing education and services for young children should be examined more closely. To describe the current status of alternate care services for young children in Singapore, this article highlights the country's overall structure of early childhood care and education service system, cultural and societal perspectives about early childhood care and education, and unique features of the service delivery system. Challenges to enhance the quality of substitute child care services and future possibilities in Singapore are also discussed.

In the light of the local context, substitute or alternate care is operationally defined as care provided by caregivers (e.g., nannies, grandparents or maids) or agencies such as a day care centre for children instead of parents or guardians. Young children refers to infants and children under 6, (i.e., children of primary school age).

### The overall structure of child care services in Singapore

A typical child in undergoes at least 10 years of compulsory education which comprises 6 years of primary education and 4 years of secondary education. Although preschool education is not mandatory,

the majority of children below the age of seven attend some kind of preschool facility. Presently, in Singapore, a range of early childhood care and education programmes and services to support young children are underway. There are infant care services which cater to children aged two months to 18 months. These centres provide full day and half-day care programme for infants and toddlers. More formal preschool education in Singapore, which was established in the 1960s, ranges from full- and half-day childcare centres to two- to four-hour kindergarten programs for children aged between 18 months to six years. In general, preschool education in Singapore provides for children ages three to six up to four years of preschool which are commonly known as nursery 1 (N1), nursery 2 (N1), kindergarten 1 (K1) and kindergarten 2 (K2), respectively. Children who are under 3 are in pre-nursery classes. The minimum staff-child ratio is 1:8 for children 18-30 months old, 1:12 for 30 months to 3 years, 1:15 for 3-4 years, and 1:25 for 4-7 years. The first year of formal schooling is called Primary One and begins in the January of the year they turn seven. Academic qualifications are highly valued in Singapore, and the typical school-going child in is tested regularly with examinations when he or she starts school.

Presently, in Singapore, there are many advocacy efforts to reach out to young children whose parents are not able to look after them at home. Currently there is a range of different settings where young children receive care. These options include child care centres, neighbourhood babysitters, live-in maids, and relatives. But what is a quality child care centre? And how does one choose a substitute child care service if the parents/guardians are not able to look after their own children? In the sections that follow, unique features of each type of the childcare services in Singapore will be briefly presented.

### Child care centres

In Singapore, the Early Childhood and Development Agency [10] serve as the regulatory and developmental authority for the early childhood sector, overseeing all aspects of children's development below the age of six, across both kindergartens and child care centres. ECDA was officially launched in 2013, and is operated under the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) [10]. ECDA's key responsibilities are to: (a) oversee measures to raise quality standards of early childhood programmes, including regulation, quality assurance, and the provision of early childhood development resources; (b) facilitate the training and continuing professional development of early childhood professionals; (c) master-plan for infrastructure and manpower resources to support the early childhood sector; (d) provide subsidies and grants to keep quality pre-school programmes affordable, especially for low and middle income families, and (e) conduct public education and outreach to raise parents' awareness and support for their children's development [11].

Most child care centres in Singapore are housed in the "void decks" (ground floors of apartment buildings) of public housing provided by the Housing Development Board (HDB), as well as private residential estates and commercial premises. The fees charged for full-day care vary from S\$400 to more than S\$1200 per month. The qualifications of teachers range from three General Certificate of Education (GCE) "O" level passes to degree holders. Some centres may have native speakers of English and Mandarin among their staff.

Some child centres offer flexi-care programmes which are also called "drop-off points". In this case, instead of offering fixed half or full day programmes, these drop-off points allow children to come for a few hours a day when needed. Emergency child care can be arranged

for children who attend half-day school. They would stay on for the other half of the day at a fixed fee. This is for situations when the parent is unable to leave work in time, or has been irrevocably delayed in picking up the child.

There are also franchised child care centres where operations and curriculum are "standardised." They are usually launched based on the success and reputation of the first child care centre. Many of these centres are established by overseas organisations such as "Montessori" and "Steiner" schools in the United States and Europe. But unlike a clothing or fast food franchises, which are often based on tangible products, child care centres are providing a service and one thing that cannot be standardised is the service provider, therefore, in many cases, a franchised child care centre is not the same as the original.

The Singapore Government is in favour of child care centres. While there is a levy on employing a maid to look after young children, parents are given subsidies for placing young children in child care centres. On the negative side, child care centres do have some disadvantages. For example, though many teachers are devoted to the children and try their best to develop them, it is difficult for child care centres to be sensitive to any particular child's needs because they are dealing with a group of children. Little flexibility is allowed because group activities must be kept structured and organised. Children in child care centres also tend to experience more bouts of coughs and colds as germs and viruses pass from child to child. Late pickup of children from the centres also cost parents and often upset young children as they see the rest of the class leaving the centre. Furthermore, child care centres often have high staff turnover which is not conducive to the development of children [12,13].

### Neighborhood babysitters and nannies

Babysitters are usually older women from the neighbourhood where care is provided within the person's (sitter's) home. Though these sitters often have little or no formal education, their age could be an advantage in that they have experience in handling children. Other plus points of babysitters are the homelike environment and the convenience because of the tendency to choose someone living in the same neighbourhood as the parents. The adult-child ratio is probably lower than that in a child care centre.

Some parents hire a nanny because they believe in undivided attention for their children in the familiar and safe environment of their own homes, personalised and customised care in daily routines, flexibility in schedule and more control on exposure to virus and germs. Parents find nannies through advertisements and word-of-mouth recommendations. Other alternatives include websites such Find a Nanny which has lists of both caregivers seeking placement and families seeking caregivers, or agencies which offer flexible childcare and eldercare arrangements. Though some newer nannies are trained by organisations, most nannies are not formally qualified.

Most of the time, however, all that neighbourhood babysitters and nannies provide is physical care. There is no planned program for the children except lots of television. Parents may not know much about the potential caregiver's backgrounds, medical history, or values and philosophy of child development. Furthermore, unlike child care centres, neighbourhood babysitters are not supervised or licensed by the government.

## Live-in maids

Throughout metropolitan cities in Asia, live-in maids are very common in wealthy homes. But appears particularly reliant on its 200,000-plus maids. Compared to their American counterparts, Singaporean parents are more in need of maids.

Having a live-in maid has the home ground advantage of familiarity and availability of toys. But being in a familiar environment may not make up for the absence of a parent who is totally committed to the child. A maid probably does not have the same love that a mother has for her own child. A maid may not allow the child to explore or be creative because she does not want to create more work for herself. The issue is duty versus relationship.

Many maids are young girls with little or no experience or education in child development. Often the maid's stint with the employer could be the first time she is away from her own family, friends, and her country. She is now living in a strange land where the people speak a strange language. There are some who adjust very well and are committed to the parents and families for whom they work, but often the maid's problems become the employer's problems. But parents start with little knowledge except what is stated in her bio data.

Another disadvantage is that a maid may not have the commitment and discipline to follow through consistently. Often children quickly realise a maid's lack of power to give instructions and may challenge the maid's authority to discipline them. In addition, often young children do not fully understand the reasons of their care arrangements but they understand who the main care-giver is. It is natural for a child to be close to the maid. This often results in a love triangle of mother-child-maid and the inevitable jealousy and guilt the mother feels on seeing how close the child is with the maid.

## Relatives

Due to close relationships in the extended families (especially in an Asian culture like Singapore), grandparents in Singapore are often deemed as more committed to the children compared with paid help and many parents prefer to have their children taken care by grandparents. Grandparents make handy child care providers, especially when they reside nearby. So do grand-aunties and grand-uncles and other relatives. Compared to other substitute care-givers, their genuine love for the child makes them trusty caregivers. Relatives also provide familiarity and stability for the child. However, there is a tendency for relatives, especially grandparents to be lenient with the children entrusted to them. Also, they may raise the children in their own ways and religion, ways that parents may not agree with. In this case, it is hard for parents to dictate their preferences as they are often afraid of souring the relationship (especially with in-laws). Moreover, parents are dependent on them to look after their children.

It is very common for Singaporean parents to rush to send the children to relatives' homes before they go to work in the morning. In the evenings, parents pick up the children before heading for home. By the time parents reach home, it is time for bed. The next morning, the cycle repeats itself. Consequently, some parents become "weekend parents", leaving their children at their relatives' place during the weekdays and bringing the children home on weekends only.

## Challenges and opportunities: A look to the future:

The sections above present the range of different settings in which young children are provided care. These options include child care centres, neighbourhood babysitters, live-in maids, and relatives.

Generally speaking, though early childhood care and education in Singapore has achieved significant development in the recent years, Singapore still has some way to go in its provisions of alternate care services for young children. There are certainly many challenges, as well as opportunities, which lie ahead in terms of how education and services can be improved to better serve young children with special needs in Singapore.

## Challenges

As indicated earlier, in Singapore early childhood education is not compulsory.

There are children from poor families who cannot afford quality care and education when the parents have to leave for work. The need to increase the availability of quality child care is critical. Another challenge is that children with special needs are not well supported by child care centres as they are legally mandated to do so. In spite of the significant role of early interventions in the life of children with special needs, the Singapore government has not supported early childhood and special education to the same extent as it has mainstream primary and secondary education. Very few child care centres have integrated programs that accept both typical children and those with special needs.

Last but not least, in Singapore's examination-oriented education system, even at the kindergarten level, the emphasis on academic achievement is strong. As a result, in Singapore, parents' expectations of academic performance are often very high, and schools parents regard as successful and desirable are the ones which focus on preparing children with academic skills they need before entering into primary schools. In addition, in order to have a high percentage of students who are high achieving and "undemanding", schools "have to" brush away children with disabilities.

In addition, the current provision of substitute child care services are lacking in overall direction. There could be a greater level of central coordination of services.

Last but not least, if parents, caregivers and policymakers are to understand standards of quality, they must first understand the development of attachment, the effects of early separations, parent characteristics and family circumstances that may contribute to insecurity, and the potential benefits of secure attachment to a caregiver.

## Future possibilities

To support families with young children, the government should look for ways to help modern parents find solutions to balance career with family. For example, flexible working hours for parents of young children should be encouraged; there is a great need of family-friendly employers in .

Support for young children with special needs is also needed. Substitute care services providers should look for ways to include and support children with special needs. One possibility for creating support and training for the teachers is for child care centres to collaborate with other preschools that practise inclusion and learn

from them. Use of special schools in Singapore as a resource is definitely valuable and constructive as teachers can learn different strategies of intervention and accommodations in teaching children with special needs.

## Conclusion

Whatever alternate child care is chosen, it is impossible to pay anyone enough to get her to do what parents will do for free out of love and commitment. It is too much to ask of anyone other than the child's own parents to give him a healthy self-image, a moral standard and a zest for life. While child care service can be arranged or purchased, parenting cannot be delegated.

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