

Priority pre-school enrolment among moves to aid needy families



Ms Fatin Nabilah Omar, a single mother of three, got help from ComLink to complete a nursing course, and job support from the Employment and Employability Institute. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE



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SINGAPORE - More early intervention centres and fee subsidies for children with developmental needs, and priority enrolment for children from lower-income households at some pre-schools, are among the moves announced by the Ministry of Social and Family Development on Friday to uplift needy families and give their children a good start in life.

1. ComLink to integrate common functions across programmes

Community Link (ComLink), which supports families with children living in rental housing, has been expanded nationwide to cover 21 social service office towns.

Since November 2022, all families with children who moved into rental flats have automatically been offered ComLink support under the ComLink Rental Scheme.

To enhance the ComLink programme, common functions such as outreach, befriending, and case support will be streamlined across multiple programmes, such as KidStart, the Uplift Community Network and Project Dian@M3.

Social service officers will partner volunteer befrienders to act as consistent touchpoints to help each family develop an action plan across programmes by different agencies.

Since August 2022, 60 ComLink families in Jalan Besar have benefited from this enhanced approach, which will be rolled out progressively to more families.

More than 2,400 volunteers have been recruited to support ComLink. This allows families to build rapport with befrienders and get more convenient and better coordinated support to meet their needs in various areas, such as health, education and employment.



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Programmes under ComLink will include reading and numeracy programmes for young children; sports, coding and financial literacy workshops for youth; and medical services for adults.

On Friday, Minister for Social and Family Development Masagos Zulkifli said in Parliament that the hope is for all families to build resilience and confidence in their future.

“In short, we want all families to achieve the three ‘S’es: stability, self-reliance and social mobility,” he said, describing a society where families are strong and have the means to weather the ups and downs in life, where they have a strong sense of ownership, and can aspire for their children to have a better future.

Ms Fatin Nabilah Omar, a single mother of three, got help from ComLink to complete a nursing course, and job support from the Employment and Employability Institute.

The 32-year-old lives with her children, aged three, 12 and 14, in a two-room public rental flat in Boon Lay.

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She works as a server at weddings on an ad hoc basis, and is interviewing for another part-time job in retail.

“(The ComLink befriender) supports me to not just sit at home and wait, but also put in effort to apply for jobs,” she said.

She hopes to work in the food and beverage sector, and eventually start a small F&B business of her own.

Referring to her befriender, Ms Fatin said: “She gives me emotional and financial support, checks in on me and asks how I’m doing. Having someone to talk to feels so nice – even though we’re not related, we’re close like family.”

Her befriender, who is a Nanyang Technological University undergraduate, visits her monthly and sends her information on tuition and enrichment programmes her children can attend.

Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Social and Family Development Eric Chua said there are 760 volunteer benders working with 3,500 families today.

2. Priority enrolment for children from lower-income families at anchor operator pre-schools

The Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) has worked with anchor operator pre-schools to prioritise children from families with a gross monthly household income of \$3,000 and below for enrolment in childcare programmes from Jan 1, 2023.

Families with an income between \$3,001 and \$6,000 are also given priority in pre-school enrolment.

Parents can now indicate their monthly household income on ECDA’s Preschool Search Portal, which will allow anchor operator pre-schools to identify eligible children when parents indicate interest in their centres.

Minister of State for Social and Family Development Sun Xueling said more needs to be done to close the pre-school enrolment gap between children from lower-income households and their peers.

“We hope that with a facilitated enrolment process, parents from lower-income families will work with us and help to enrol their children into pre-school by age three,” she said.

“Beyond pre-school enrolment, we also recognise that children from lower-income families may need more support to attend pre-school regularly,” she added.

KidStart practitioners will work with pre-schools to address barriers to regular attendance for children in the KidStart programme.

Ms Sun also noted that 22,000 more full-day pre-school places will be created over the next two years, out of which 7,000 will be for infant care and playgroup programmes.

The number of qualified infant educators here has tripled from 2,100 in 2017 to 6,400 in 2022, she added.

3. KidStart to be expanded

KidStart, which has supported more than 6,200 children aged six and below from lower-income families, will be extended to Jalan Besar, Toa Payoh, Sengkang, Hougang and Serangoon in the coming year.

The programme, which was introduced in 2016 to guide lower-income parents to support their young children’s development, will support 80 per cent of eligible children born from 2023 onwards, up from the current 20 per cent.

KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital (KKH) and the National University Hospital (NUH) will identify eligible parents and encourage them to sign up at the antenatal stage. A multidisciplinary team of practitioners will support more expectant mothers in their physical and mental health.

Man, who has a 14-month-old daughter, Elena, enrolled in the KidStart programme when she was pregnant. ST PHOTO: RYAN

Ms Too Xing Man, 19, enrolled in the KidStart programme when she was pregnant, at NUH's recommendation.

"I wasn't ready to have a baby. I was afraid I wouldn't have much knowledge of motherhood," she said. "But (NUH staff) assured me that KidStart would provide enough support."

KidStart worked with the Thye Hua Kwan Family Service Centre to help her get her home ready for the baby – for instance, by putting in a floor mat and safety gate.

Her 14-month-old daughter Elena is attending infant care, and Ms Too's parents take care of the girl when Ms Too is at work as a McDonald's service crew member.

A KidStart practitioner visits her monthly to guide her on early childhood development, and to check in on Elena's growth. The family also receives milk powder, diapers and fresh produce from the community.

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4. 1,400 more early intervention places for children with developmental needs

Children aged below seven with developmental needs, and who require medium to high levels of early intervention support, can receive more timely intervention with the addition of 1,400 early intervention places over the next two years.

More centres will be set up to offer the Early Intervention Programme for Infants and Children (Eipic) or the Enhanced Pilot for Private Intervention Providers (PPIP) programme.

Two early intervention centres will open in Fernvale Woods and Bukit Batok by end-2023, with around 300 new Eipic places. Another 300 new Eipic places will be at new sites. The number of PPIP places will also triple over the next two years, from 400 to 1,200 spots by March 2024.

There are currently 21 early intervention centres providing the Eipic, and 16 private early intervention centres offering the PPIP programme.

5. More subsidies for children with developmental needs

From July 1, ECDA will introduce caps on the maximum amount that families will pay for the PPIP programme. A middle-income family can expect to pay around \$190 per month for the PPIP after subsidies, less than half of the \$450 they are paying today.

Additionally, ECDA plans to implement the Inclusive Support Programme in more pre-schools from 2026. The programme allows children aged three to six who require medium levels of early intervention to attend pre-schools that also provide early intervention services, instead of having to shuttle between pre-schools and early intervention centres.

Cost savings in early childhood intervention programme - PPIP*

Income tier (household monthly income per capita)	Current median out-of-pocket expenses after subsidies (including 8% GST)**	Maximum out-of-pocket expenses from July 1 (including 8% GST)**	Savings per month
Tier 1 \$0 - \$1,000	\$280	\$11	\$269
Tier 2 \$1,001 - \$1,400	\$336	\$76	\$260
Tier 3 \$1,401 - \$1,800	\$392	\$119	\$273
Tier 4 \$1,801 - \$2,300	\$448	\$194	\$254
Tier 5 \$2,301 - \$2,800	\$560	\$324	\$236
Tier 6 \$2,801 - \$3,500	\$728	\$410	\$318
Tier 7 \$3,501 - \$4,600	\$896	\$508	\$388
Tier 8 \$4,600+	\$1,120	\$659	\$461

*Enhanced Pilot for Private Intervention Providers programme

**Eight-hour to less than 11-hour programmes

NOTE: Figures have been rounded to the nearest dollar.

Table: STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS • Source: MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

The increase in places will serve 80 per cent of children with developmental needs requiring medium to high levels of early intervention support by 2027, up from 60 per cent today.

Jenny (not her real name) found that her three-year-old son might have developmental needs when his pre-school teachers said he often played alone and did not interact with other children.

The housewife, who has another twin boy, took him to KKH where, after a series of assessments, he was diagnosed with autism.

He was put on the wait list for an Epic spot, but his parents decided to enrol him at The Skilt Centre, a private early intervention centre, due to the shorter wait time.

“I wanted to put him in school as soon as possible,” said Jenny.

Six months on, the boy has picked up social skills such as making eye contact and greeting his peers.

“Now his teachers are saying he can take instructions better, plays with his classmates – at home he used to refuse to talk, but now he talks more and even sings,” said Jenny.

On Friday, Mr Masagos said the Government will leave no one behind. But it cannot do this alone, he added.

“We need a coordinated ecosystem of partners. Key programmes such as ComLink and KidStart will involve community partners, and help low-income families, including our Malay/Muslim families, achieve stability, self-reliance and social mobility.”

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