

Parents laud subsidies for childcare

Govt move will ease financial burden, given recent fee hikes by operators

By JANICE TAI

AS PHOTO frame makers, Madam Shen Boon Keow, 46, and her husband, 50, bring home a total of \$2,000 every month.

Unable to afford a maid, they had to send their six-year-old son to a childcare centre, though its \$330 monthly fees eat up a chunk of their finances. To cut expenses, they rarely venture out on weekends, preferring the pocket-friendly mode of watching TV at home.

But with the Government's latest move of giving more subsidies to make childcare services more affordable for lower- and middle-income families, they will soon pay just \$3 a month from April.

On the other end of the spectrum are middle-income families like Mr Adrian Tan's. With a monthly household income of \$7,000, the sales engineer is able to quite comfortably fork out some \$700 every month in childcare fees for his two children aged six and four. Yet the 37-year-old still feels the pinch from the rising costs of living and cuts back on enrichment programmes for them.

"When we go swimming, my son would ask me if he could go for lessons as he is still using a float. I told him maybe when he is older when we have more savings," said Mr Tan, who will now save \$200 when the additional subsidies kick in. He intends to enrol his children for lessons.

Families with five or more members - including more than two dependants - who bust the \$7,500 household income criterion can still apply for subsidies based on their per capita income. If it is \$1,875 and below, they may still receive them.

Childcare operators that The Straits Times spoke to say the move is timely, given the recent childcare fee hikes. Over the last two to three years, there have been fee increases ranging from \$50 to \$400.

"Rental fees and teachers' sala-

ries have shot up, so the centres have to increase the fees to stay viable," said Ms Lurvin Lee-Yuen, director of childcare chain Just Kids Learning Place.

She added that the latest subsidies will reduce the incidence of low-income families sending their children to school late, resulting in possible learning loss.

"Parents with many children tend to either delay sending them to childcare or they send them for a shorter-hour programme to save money... They may lose out in areas like social skills if they are left at home with grandparents."

Madam Nurasitin Md Shamhudi, 29, sent three of her children to infant-care programmes when they were just 18 months old but when one more came along, she could no longer afford to do so. Her youngest child attended childcare only at four years old. "My household income was \$2,500 then and sending four of them to childcare ate up about half of that, so we had no choice."

The subsidies have tipped the balance for parents previously hesitating to send their children to childcare services. "We struggle to put food on the table so we were cautious. But now I am definitely sending my twin boys there so that they can learn and mingle with others," said Madam Faridah Markalee, 28, whose household income is \$1,500.

Though parents and childcare operators welcomed the added financial help, they hope more can be done to raise the quality of childcare. Acting Minister for Social and Family Development Chan Chun Sing said yesterday that the ministry will be looking into the training of teachers.

Said Mr Francis Ng, founder of childcare centre chain Carpe Diem: "Besides training teachers, we need to embark on research and development to enhance the curriculum and foster a culture where operators can discuss and share these resources."

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FUNDING LESSONS
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Mr Adrian Tan with his daughter Brigitte, four, and son Matthew, six, who both study at the YWCA Outram Child Development Centre. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

Less risk of fee increases as new subsidy is tiered: Minister

THE Government will keep a watchful eye on operators of childcare centres to ensure they do not raise fees in the wake of the higher subsidies being offered to parents.

Acting Minister for Social and Family Development Chan Chun Sing made the pledge yesterday, in a move to assure parents who had complained about such a tendency among the operators.

He also said it was less likely to happen this time because the new subsidy

system is tiered. "The risk will be much higher if we applied a universal subsidy across the board... (Now) we are focusing the help on lower- to middle-income families and the risk of childcare operators raising prices universally is mitigated."

Mr Chan added that the Government can keep prices competitive by having more centres and roping in more anchor operators to raise the number of teachers and quality of childcare.

In addition, his ministry is encouraging operators to site childcare centres where there is greater demand, preferably where people live, where they work, and where their grandparents live.

Recently, the Government said it would set up a statutory board to oversee the sector, give better training to teachers, and rope in more anchor operators.

Details of how these operators can be involved will be released in the second

quarter of the year, he added.

Childcare operators said yesterday that higher subsidies do not mean higher fees.

Ms Sandy Koh, manager of YWCA's (Young Women's Christian Association) 10 childcare centres, said a fee hike is unlikely unless costs soar beyond the fees charged.

Its last hike was in 2010, when fees for nursery programmes went up by \$130 to \$690, and those for kindergarten by \$120 to \$630.

JESSICA CHEAM

ENHANCED INFANT AND CHILDCARE SUBSIDIES

Monthly household income	Full-Day Childcare Programme					Full-Day Infant-care Programme				
	Basic subsidy	Additional subsidy	Max total subsidy	Max % additional subsidy	Minimum co-payment by parents	Basic subsidy	Additional subsidy	Max total subsidy	Max % additional subsidy	Minimum co-payment by parents
\$2,500 and below	\$300	\$440	\$740	99%	\$3	\$600	\$540	\$1,140	99%	\$60
\$2,501 - \$3,000		\$400	\$700	98%	\$6		\$500	\$1,100	98%	\$100
\$3,001 - \$3,500		\$370	\$670	90%	\$32		\$470	\$1,070	90%	\$130
\$3,501 - \$4,000		\$310	\$610	80%	\$63		\$410	\$1,010	80%	\$190
\$4,001 - \$4,500		\$220	\$520	70%	\$95		\$320	\$920	70%	\$280
\$4,501 - \$7,500		\$100	\$400	50%	\$215		\$200	\$800	50%	\$400
Above \$7,500		\$0	\$300	NA	NA		\$0	\$600	NA	NA

Source: MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

Who qualifies for the additional subsidy?

- A mother working 56 hours or more per month with a Singapore citizen child can apply.
- Large families can choose to have their household income calculated on a per capita basis, so they qualify for a higher subsidy.

- Half-day and flexi-care programmes will receive pro-rated subsidies based on hours of care per week.
- Parents are required to pay a minimum co-payment amount depending on their income.

ST GRAPHICS