

**34th Session of the
Committee on the Convention on the Rights of the Child**

**Address by the Singapore Delegation
led by Mr Chan Soo Sen
Minister of State
Ministry of Education and
Ministry of Community Development and Sports**

26 September 2003

Introduction (by Mr Chan Soo Sen)

Good morning,
Mr Chairman,
Distinguished Members of the Committee on the Rights of the Child,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

2 I am very pleased to be here to present Singapore's State Party Report on the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

3 Before I begin, allow me to introduce members of the Singapore delegation:

From the Ministry of Community Development and Sports, we have

Ms Yeoh Chee Yan Deputy Secretary

Miss Ang Bee Lian Director of Social Welfare and Director of Rehabilitation and Protection Division

Ms Seah Yang Hee Assistant Director, Rehabilitation and Protection Division

Ms Heng San San Senior Child Welfare Officer, Rehabilitation and Protection Division

From the Ministry of Education,

Tang Tuck Weng Director, Planning Division

From the Ministry of Home Affairs,

Anthony Tan 2 Deputy Director, Policy & Operations Division

From the Ministry of Health,

Dr Frances Chia Mei Ling Head, School Health Service Division

From the Attorney-General's Chambers,

Miss Sharon Ong State Counsel

With us also is an NGO representative,

Mr Alfred Tan Executive Director of Singapore Children's Society

4 Together with my fellow delegates, I look forward to a fruitful discussion with the Committee.

Introduction (By Mr Chan Soo Sen)

5 Mr Chairman Sir, I will be delivering Singapore's statement on how we have fulfilled our obligations under the Convention. We will share with the Committee, in some detail and through examples, how we are advancing the interests of children in our small island city-state. **My statement broadly mirrors the structure of our State Party Report.**

6 **Specifically, I will touch on :**

- **our strong commitment in fulfilling the vision of a world fit for children through the Convention on the Rights of the Child and ensuring a safe, secure and nurturing environment for children,**
- **how our legislation protects the best interests of children,**
- **how children in Singapore learn to live in a multi-racial and multi-religious society,**
- **our economic and social progress in terms of housing, health and education for children.**
- **how we implement and promote the Convention, and**
- **civil rights and freedoms**

After my statement, I will be inviting my fellow delegates to share on their own areas of expertise following the structure of the initial report. Depending on your preference, Mr Chairman, we **will be glad to pause for discussion after each specific segment.**

Our Commitment to the Convention

7 Mr Chairman, Singapore strongly supports the spirit and objectives of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. We are glad to join the many countries of the world who are signatories to this Convention, and to share the universal vision of a world that is safe, secure and nurturing of children. Our accession to the Convention signals our commitment to uphold the rights and best interests of children in Singapore. We also seek to develop in our children, a sense of their social responsibilities, as we believe that rights must be accompanied by civic responsibility.

8 Singapore has made significant progress in policies and services to further the well-being and development of our children. We have done this not because of any international laws, but because ours is a society which loves and values children. As a nation without any natural resources, people are our only asset. The well being of our children is the well being of our future.

9 When Singapore acceded to the Convention in 1995, much care was taken to examine our laws vis-à-vis the principles of the Convention. Our reservations and declarations were made in areas where they are required by our particular national circumstances and social context. We believe that we can best serve and safeguard the rights and interests of our children if our nation, community, and family continue to grow from strength to strength. However, our legal reservations in no way impede vigorous and committed action on the part of the Singapore government and society to ensure that the spirit and substance of the Convention is upheld, and the best interests of our children are served.

10 After we became a signatory to the Convention, we formed an **Inter-Ministry Committee (or IMC for short) on the Convention on the Rights of the Child**. The Committee comprises representatives from various government agencies with policies that affect children – including:

- Ministry of Law
- Ministry of Health
- Ministry of Education
- Ministry of Home Affairs
- Ministry of Community Development and Sports
- Ministry of Manpower
- Ministry of Information and the Arts
- Ministry of National Development
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Attorney General's Chambers, and
- Ministry of Defence

11 While the responsibility and resources to advance the interests of children in the respective areas of education, health, social service and housing lies with the various governmental agencies, **the IMC provides an inter-agency platform**

for children's issues to be deliberated where coordination is required. It monitors our progress against the articles in the Convention and undertakes regular review of our reservations and declarations.

12 I believe that the facts clearly show that children's rights and interests in Singapore are respected, protected and propagated and that their well-being continues to progress year on year. Our legislation, policies, programmes, social values and practices as well as the partnership we enjoy between the public, people and private sectors - all work together to achieve this. Nonetheless, let me assure the Committee that we will continue to review our legislative provisions regularly and study how we can more fully comply with the articles, bearing in mind our national concerns and local context.

13 Every Singaporean matters and children are particularly precious. They are our future. Thus, we seek to create an environment where the public, people and private sectors work together to ensure their safety and well-being, and which offers them ample opportunities to develop their potential to the full. **Singapore does not hesitate to invest in the development of children. This year, at least 2.1% of our GDP is allocated for expenditure on programmes for children.** This works out to be in excess of 3,250 million Singapore dollars (or about 1,846 million US dollars).

Living Harmoniously in A Diverse Society

14 Mr Chairman, Singapore is a small island city-state off the tip of peninsular Malaysia. With a population of about 4.1 million on some 680 square kilometres of land, we are one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Some 77% of Singaporeans are of Chinese descent, 14% are Malay, 8% are Indian and 1% are of other extractions¹. **We are a plural and increasingly diverse society, a nation of many races, many languages, many religions – all living close together. Social cohesion, racial and religious harmony, education, development and the well-being of our people are just as critical as good government and economic vitality to our national survival.**

15 Our children today mix freely and happily with children of other races. In a recent national survey, 99% of Singaporeans said that they were happy for their children to play with children of other races and 96% supported people of different races living in the same neighbourhood². There are no tensions or strife along racial or ethnic lines. Children in Singapore are taught that this state of affairs should not be taken for granted. Through history and civic lessons, they learn about the racial riots shortly after independence. They learn the importance of understanding and respecting different races, cultures and religion. In school, they celebrate this diversity during Racial Harmony Day every year.

¹ Source: Census of Population 2000, Department of Statistics

² Source: Survey on the Attitude of Singaporeans 2002

16 **Everyday, schoolchildren say the national pledge, where they undertake to be, and I quote, “one united people, regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society, based on justice and equality, so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation.”** They grow up alongside each other respecting each other’s culture and practices but understanding the need for racial and religious harmony as well as national unity. **We have learned to value this harmony, especially in the midst of global concerns about terrorism.**

Economic and Social Progress

17 Mr Chairman, Singapore is a young nation. Since independence from British colonial rule in 1965, in the span of 38 years, Singapore has grown from a poor under-developed nation to an industrial nation, and is now seeking to establish itself as a knowledge-based economy as we cross into the new millennium.

18 Please allow me to give you a few snapshots of how the well-being of our children has progressed during this time.

(a) Affordable housing

19 **In many ways, the provision of affordable public housing is the first step to the eradication of children living in poverty. In Singapore, 86 % of the population today live in public housing. 93 % of those in public housing own their flats with the remaining in rental flats. Home ownership was only 29% in 1970. The success of our housing programme has meant that children and young persons do not have to resort to the streets for shelter and face the attendant risks and problems.**

(b) Access to education

20 **We have equal access to education for males and females of all races. Primary education is free in Singapore for all Singapore children and both male and female attendance in school is close to 100%. By paying close attention to the individual capabilities of children and catering to their different learning paces, we have successfully reduced drop-out rates and raised the educational attainment of our students.**

- **Before 1980, only 58% of our Primary 1 cohort completed secondary school. This figure rose to 92% in 2002.**

- **Students are also better prepared for education beyond the secondary level. Today, 8 out of 10 students go on to post-secondary education, compared to 2 out of 10 in 1980.**

These achievements are close to the educational norms of other developed countries.

21 This year, we promulgated the Compulsory Education Act. Under the Act, a citizen above the age of 6 years residing in Singapore shall attend regularly as a pupil in a national primary school. A Compulsory Education Board has been set up to administer the Act. Let me share with you what we aim to achieve in and through education. For us, education has two functions: it develops the individual and educates the citizen. These two roles of education reinforce and complement each other.

22 Our objectives in providing a holistic education for each child is articulated in a reference called the Desired Outcomes of Education. Knowing what we want allows us to assess how well our education system is doing. We have a plan and also a system of assessing our schools in achieving these desired outcomes of our education. *{We have given members of the Committee, a copy of this.}*

(c) Access to basic health care

23 Another priority in our social development is health services. There is access to health services at all stages of life. Over the years, we have allocated an increasing budget to the preventive aspects of health, with children being the main beneficiaries. I am proud that our investment in health care has borne good results for children.

- In the 1960s, infant mortality at birth is 31 out of every 1,000 live births. Today, it is only 3 out of every 1,000 live births.
- **UNICEF's report on "The State of the World's Children" 2001, ranks Singapore first, together with Japan, Sweden and Switzerland, for the lowest under-5 mortality rate in the world.** In 1960, before Singapore gained independence, 40 out of every 1,000 children died under the age of five. We have made much progress in the survival rate of our children. Today, the figure has dropped to 4 out of every 1,000 and we are continuing to work at improving the survival rate of our children who are very precious resources to us.
- A child in Singapore today can expect to live to 75 years of age if he is a boy, and 80 years if she is a girl. This is a great leap from life expectancies at birth of 65 years in 1965.
- Dental health services are provided free to all children. In the 1970s, a 12-year-old child typically had 3 teeth that were either decayed, missing or filled

due to cavities. Nowadays, a 12-year-old child has better oral health, with just 1 tooth decayed, missing or filled. Our investment has paid off.

Addressing New Challenges, Meeting Changing Needs

24 Singapore's progress has created a different environment for children today, compared to 38 years ago. However, our families have remained relatively stable and intact. Divorce rate is still relatively low. Given that the family is the most important support structure for any child, the integrity of the Singapore family provides stability for a child to grow up in. As the family supports the child, we believe that the state should in turn support the family and hence we pay much attention to family life and work life harmony.

25 Today, the lives of Singaporean children are centred around their families, school work, sports and recreational activities. Compared to developing countries, our children are fortunate to grow up in a safe, stable and nurturing environment. But they face challenges of a different sort. Dual income parents are struggling to keep their jobs in the competitive global economy and hence are unable to spend much time with their kids. Children are growing up even faster than they were in my days. **The point is that the challenges children face are changing rapidly.** Like us, they are grappling with the impact of a fast-changing, inter-connected world and the benefits and the risks that this brings.

A Vision in line with the Principles of the Convention

26 Our aspiration for children in Singapore is for them to develop their full potential in all dimensions – intellectual, social, moral, emotional, physical, aesthetic, spiritual - to be well-rounded, fulfilled individuals and active citizens. Our vision is for them to grow up attuned to the globalised world, well equipped to face its exciting challenges, yet anchored with strong ties to their family, community and nation, imbued with a keen sense social responsibility and confidence in themselves.

27 Mr Chairman, we believe that **our vision and aspirations** for Singaporean children and our recognition of their fundamental needs are **aligned with the general principles of the Convention** – namely:

- non-discrimination
- best interests of the child,
- the right to life, survival and development, and
- respect for the child's views.

Role of NGOs and Partnerships

28 **Our approach to the social welfare and development of children is called the Many Helping Hands approach.** This approach involves concerned citizens, non-governmental organisations, corporations and families working in partnership with the government, each playing their part to further the best interests of children.

29 **We believe that every sector and level of society has a responsibility to help develop our children, particularly those in need. As the Chinese saying goes, (translated) “those who have resources, should give resources, those who have energy should give energy.”** Or, those with financial resources can donate to charities; those with energy can give service; and those with expertise can share their expertise. Each person gives according to his ability and according to his or her circumstances in life.

30 In Singapore, **we are fortunate to have a strong voluntary movement and one where the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) work in partnership with the government.** Each organisation reaches out to the segment of the population they know best and they focus on areas where they feel moved to contribute in.

31 Families and children can access social services readily in the community. Singapore is divided into 5 districts, each with a Community Development Council (or CDC) headed by a Mayor. The mandate of the CDC is to provide support at the community where it is convenient and accessible to families. Family Service Centres are accessible, neighbourhood-based social service centres. They provide help to families who run into problems. Each Centre is run by a voluntary welfare organisation and offers a range of family-related services under one roof.

32 **The government plays the role of providing the resources for infrastructure and service development. Government supports the community by providing the land and capital funding for facilities, we also provide funding for social services, the piloting of new programmes and for capability building measures, such as training and IT systems, to increase the effectiveness of service delivery.**

33 **In the area of child welfare and children’s services, a key agency in the many helping hands approach is the National Council of Social Service, an umbrella organization for the social service agencies.** It plays an important role in ensuring quality programmes and social services for children and families in Singapore. *{I understand the Committee had interviewed Ms Tina Hung and Mr Lim Siew Cheng in June this year.}*

34 **We have included in our delegation today, Mr Alfred Tan, Executive Director of the Singapore Children's Society, which is one of some 100**

children's agencies in Singapore that government works closely with. The Society has over 50 years of its service, pioneered new services, given government invaluable feedback and proposals and also jointly run services with government. It is an example of the partnerships that have been growing in Singapore to expand service delivery. *{I will now invite Mr Alfred Tan to share his perspective of the NGO-government partnership and some of the services that they provide. }*

An NGO's Perspective (by Mr Alfred Tan)

General Introduction

35 Singapore Children's Society is very glad to be part of this delegation. Although we are an independent voluntary welfare organization (or NGO), we believe we do play a critical part in supporting the country in meeting our commitment of the Convention on the Rights of the child. As part of the country's "many helping hands" approach, we are able to mobilize people at the ground to support our services for children.

Our Organisation

36 As a Voluntary Welfare Organisation, we are governed by a Board that comprises mainly professionals and businessmen, who volunteer their expertise and bring with them their objectivity in management of our services. Although we get Government's funding on capital costs (90%) and program costs (50%), we do maintain very large degree of independence in our operations.

Our Services

37 Our services for children can be categorized generally into Preventive, Community and Rehabilitative. I would now basically highlight some of our key services below:

1.1 Preventive

Our preventive services include a national help-line for children in distress, youth drop-in centres in secondary schools called project CABIN and early intervention program with primary schools for children at risk of abuse.

1.2 Community

We provide family service support directly to low income children and their families, we piloted and run a centre using music and drama therapy to engage youths at risk, vulnerable witness support program to assist children appearing in court and student care service for low income families.

1.3 Rehabilitative

We handle Beyond Parental Control statutory supervision casework by providing 12-month supervision support to the youths and their families for integration. We are also one of the most successful supervision agencies

for the Police Guidance program for first time child petty offenders through our 6-month support program. Our recidivism rate was 6.7%, compared to the national average of 14.6%.

38 We are also the leading research agency for social work concerning children. Our research work includes child abuse perception monographs and parenting styles.

39 In conclusion, we believe that it is imperative that we seek partnership with the Government whenever possible to maximize our reach to help children who are at risk. At the same time, we maintain sufficient independence to ensure that children do have an alternative platform to ensure that policies and system set in place do take their best interests into consideration.

Promoting and Implementing the Convention (By Mr Chan Soo Sen)

40 Mr Chairman, besides the Inter-Ministry Committee, we have **inter-agency networks at the service delivery level to ensure that there is a coordination among agencies yet flexibility in responding to the needs of children.** There are also formalised structures to draw together key players in specific subject matters. For example, the Inter-Ministry Committee on Youth Crime coordinates governmental and non-governmental efforts against youth crime and its prevention.

Statement on the “Best Interests of the Child”

41 Mr Chairman, Singapore’s efforts to implement the principles of the Convention is enshrined in a national Statement on the Best Interests of the Child. **The Statement translates the ideal of the Best Interests of the Child into operational principles so that there can be conscious reference to these principles in our strategic plans, policy decisions and service delivery.** *{We have given Mr Chairman and Committee members a copy each of the Statement.}* With the Statement as a reference, we will always remember that the 4 general principles of the Convention form the underlying premise for all actions and deliberations concerning children. The Statement was developed in consultation with the National Council of Social Service. Launched in 2002 at the Forum on the Best Interests of the Child, the Statement is now a common reference for most agencies that work with children.

Publicity on the Convention and its Principles

42 **As part of our obligations as a signatory state party, we have publicised the principles to adults and children ensuring that they**

appreciate the spirit of the Convention. The publicity measures are nationwide but also target government agencies and NGOs working with children as well as children themselves.

43 **In developing our initial state party report, we organised a forum with agencies and NGOs working with children to discuss the first draft and to take in their views before we finalised the report. Likewise, we intend to consult stakeholders when we develop our subsequent state party reports.**

Forum on the Best Interests of the Child

44 **The annual Forum on the Best Interests of the Child is a collaboration between the Ministry of Community Development and Sports and an NGO, Save the Children Singapore.** The inaugural forum in 2002 brought together professionals, teachers, parents and young people to discuss the dreams and aspirations of children and youths in Singapore. **Children were actively involved in the programme:**

- A group of children voiced their thoughts about their dreams and aspirations through 3 short skits. These children were featured in the local newspapers following the event.
- There was also a panel discussion involving representatives from the National Youth Council, the Ministry of Community Development and Sports and two youth panelists. The youths shared about their aspirations and their life choices.
- During the question and answer session, one youth pointed out that the design of a skate park was not suited for avid skaters like himself. His views were noted by the National Youth Council, and he was subsequently invited to sit in a work group that looked at the re-designing of the skate park.

45 **The deliberations at the Forum sent a powerful message to all who were present that children's voices should be heard.** Through media coverage, this message also reached the Singapore community at large. The Forum on the Best Interests of the Child is one of the platforms through which we further sensitise professionals, parents, teachers and the general public on the need to encourage children's participatory rights. In next year's forum, we plan to involve children in organising the event and planning the topics for discussion.

46 **In reaching out to children,** we are mindful that we need to help children understand both their rights, and their accompanying responsibilities. We have therefore chosen to engage students in developing two plays about their dreams and concerns. **These two plays, which have interactive segments to engage children in discussion on the principles of the Convention, are now making their rounds to the various schools.**

(We have distributed some of the material documenting these efforts in the folders given to members of the Committee.)

Civil Rights and Freedoms

47 The Convention advocates for civil rights and freedoms of children. **Mr Chairman, the civil rights and freedoms of children in Singapore is provided for in the Singapore Constitution.** Every citizen of Singapore, including children, has the freedom of speech and expression, to profess, practise and propagate his religion and to freedom of association and assembly. These rights are applied within the boundaries permitted in the interest of public safety, order, health and morals, and within the constraints of Singapore's geographical size, population density and its resources.

48 Articles 12 and 13 of the Convention are concerned with the child's right to express his or her opinion freely. **Mr Chairman, Singapore recognises that the voices of children and youths should be heard.** The Singapore government's approach to decision-making is an open and consultative one. Since becoming a signatory to the Convention, the views of children are being increasingly sought for decisions that concern them. To give a few examples:

- In the recent review of Junior Colleges, students were consulted on proposed changes and their views helped to refine policy proposals.
- Schools have suggestions schemes, dialogues, journal writing and forums for pupils to express their views. Student counsellors are elected to represent the students' views in their schools. Students have been involved in setting some school rules and designing school uniform.
- The annual Pre-University Seminar brings together students from junior colleges, public sector officials and private sector executives to discuss the concerns of youths in Singapore. These students are given a voice and assured of a listening ear by high-level decision-makers in the public and private sectors. This year, the seminar was attended by more than 500 students from junior colleges and centralised institutes.
- In 2001, the Deputy Prime Minister hosted a discussion with a group of youths on matters close to their hearts. This discussion was broadcast over the media.

Mr Chairman, with your permission, I would like to invite Ms Sharon Ong to talk briefly on how our legislation protects the best interests of children in Singapore.

Our Legislation Protects the Best Interests of Children (by Ms Sharon Ong)

49 Mr Chairman, we recognise the importance of having in place a strong legislative framework to protect the rights of our children. **In Singapore, the principle of the best interests of the child is reflected in the relevant domestic legislation. These laws and practices protect the best interests of children, and we regularly review our legislation.**

50 Let me illustrate this by briefly touching on some of the major pieces of legislation which protect the rights of children. Our legal protection for children touches on a myriad of areas, ranging from child care to education; adoption and custody. These laws protect the welfare of children; confer on them rights and safeguard these rights.

51 The **Children and Young Persons Act** is, by its very title, a dedicated piece of legislation which consolidates the law relating to children and young persons. Ill-treatment of a child or young person is **criminalised**, as is sexual exploitation and trafficking of children. This piece of legislation also confers on the Director of Social Welfare the role of **protector of the child**, as well as the statutory power to remove a child or young person to a place of safety for his or her protection and welfare. The constitution, jurisdiction, procedure, and powers of the **Juvenile Court** are also provided for under the Act. Core principles such as providing that every court shall have regard to the welfare of the child or young person who is brought before it; prohibiting the association of children and young persons with adult offenders by, *inter alia*, the setting up of special places of detention for children and young persons and approved homes and approved schools for the care and rehabilitation of children and young persons to be sent there; restricting the publication of information relating to proceedings involving children and young persons; and restricting the punishment of children and young persons save for certain grave offences, are all contained in the Children and Young Persons Act.

52 The **Criminal Procedure Code** recognises that children who are in conflict with the law should, over and above the legal protection accorded to the adult accused or offender, be given special legal protection in the criminal justice system. For example, it protects the **right to life** of a child by stipulating that children under the age of 18 cannot be sentenced to death. There is also specific provision stating that the criminal court may deal with a youthful offender in the manner provided by the Children and Young Persons Act, notwithstanding that the said youthful offender is convicted of an offence punishable by fine or imprisonment or both. Like the **Evidence Act**, the Criminal Procedure Code also accords **special protection and privilege to child witnesses** in judicial hearings.

53 The **Women's Charter** recognises the wishes of the child as an integral part of the Court's decision in **custody proceedings**. It also has in place safeguards against children contracting into **marriage** against their will and safeguards for those who are below the minimum legal age of 18. It protects

female children from offences relating to **prostitution**, and offers protection to girls in need of **refuge**. These specific **offences** are in addition to the range of offences prescribed in the **Penal Code**, for example, causing injury to the unborn child, incest and statutory rape.

54 Both the **Adoption of Children Act** and the **Guardianship of Infants Act**, which provide for the adoption and the administration of any property, custody and upbringing of the children respectively, place paramount consideration on the welfare of the child.

55 The **Child Care Centres Act** provide for the control, licensing and inspection of child care centres to safeguard the well-being of children, and the **Employment Act** stipulates the stringent conditions to protect children and young persons who work.

56 As demonstrated above, the core tenets of the Convention are reflected in our domestic legislation. In addition, Singapore adopts an integrated approach to address children's rights and issues. Besides the legislative protection guaranteed to our children, national policies that translate the principles of the Convention into practice are formulated and reviewed regularly by the respective agencies to ensure their relevance. The third-prong of this integrated approach is through service delivery channels. Here, Government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) work in a coordinated fashion to deliver responsive service tailored to the needs of children. The Inter-Ministry Committee regularly meets, seeks feedback and reviews the legislation and policies to ensure continued compliance with the Convention.

Family is the Basic Foundation of Society (By Ms Yeoh Chee Yan)

57 **Mr Chairman, the family is the foundation of Singapore society. We believe that the family is the best source of the love, care and support that all children need.** Families, and parents in particular, play an important role in helping their children acquire positive values and a sense of social responsibility. They are the key to a secure and happy childhood.

58 The Singapore family is essentially strong. **Regardless of cultural background, Singapore families place a lot of emphasis on the care and development of their children. Both parents have joint responsibility for the upbringing of children.**

Changes in the Family Institution

59 **However, as in many developed countries, the family in Singapore is changing. Families are now smaller.** The average number of children born to ever-married females declined from 4.0 in 1970 to 2.5 in year 2000.³ Nuclear families are now the norm and the average family size is 4. Smaller families mean that more attention can be paid to each child, although this trend has other demographic and social implications.

Support for Families

60 **Modern living places stresses on families.** Unlike in the past where the extended family was available to help shoulder the care responsibilities be it for a child or older person, today nuclear families and dual-income parents need a lot more support.

61 **There is a range of family-focused support services at the community level to help parents in child-raising:**

- We have affordable child care centres and student care centres across the island. These are very useful for working parents.
- The 3rd Child Maternity Leave scheme, Baby Bonus scheme and childcare subsidies provide practical financial support for parents.
- There is a national network of family service centres that are easily accessible to all families. These centres provide counselling and support services for families with problems, whether marital problems or parenting issues.
- Considerable resources are channeled to community-run family life education programmes, to strengthen marriages and enable effective parenting.
- There is a growing emphasis on work-life balance in Singapore. The civil service takes the lead in implementing work-life initiatives to help Singaporeans balance their career and family responsibilities. Many employers in the people and private sectors are also following suit.

³ Source: Census of Population 2000, Department of Statistics

Children who Need Special Protection (By Ms Ang Bee Lian)

62 **While we do our best to support families in their parenting responsibilities, there are occasions where families are unable to care for their children or when a child needs special protection or rehabilitation. In such situations, a coordinated inter-agency approach is taken to ensure that the interests of the children are protected. The approach in rehabilitating young persons is a restorative one.**

63 **Special protection for children is provided for in Singapore's legislation.** The Children and Young Persons Act allows for the removal of an abused or neglected child to a place of safety. It also governs the interventions with children and young persons who commit offences or are beyond parental control. The Women's Charter protects girls against sexual exploitation.

64 **When it comes to protection for children, we are clear that their safety is the primary and most important consideration.** Singapore exacts high standards on its child protection service to safeguard the interests of children. The National Standards for the Protection of Children makes transparent the framework for the management of child protection. It establishes a common understanding of the roles and responsibilities of individuals and organisations and ensures quick response and accurate intervention for children who need protection. {We have provided copies of the Standards to the Committee for information.}

65 Interventions for children and youths in conflict with the law are provided for in the Children and Young Person's Act. **Singapore's juvenile justice system emphasises restorative justice, rehabilitation and reintegration of the child back to the family and society. It is important that children receive the best intervention possible. Where appropriate, these children are diverted from entering the formal juvenile justice system. They are often placed on community-based rehabilitation programmes.** Institutional rehabilitation is a last resort when all available community-based options are not suitable.

Basic Health and Welfare (By Dr Frances Chia)

Affordable and Accessible Health Care

66 In Singapore, **children's basic health care is well-looked after**. National health promotion and disease prevention programmes spearheaded by the Ministry of Health are supported by all sectors. Today, Singapore children have access to affordable quality health care. Excellent neonatal and antenatal care and immunization programmes have ensured high survival rates of infants

67 **Primary, secondary and tertiary healthcare are easily accessible across our island state. There is a comprehensive public and private health care infrastructure to meet the inpatient and outpatient needs of Singaporean children. Four decades ago, our public health concerns for children were childhood diseases such as infections like measles, gastroenteritis, tuberculosis and parasite infections. Today, from the time they are born, all children are given vaccinations against diseases such as meningitis, tuberculosis, measles, polio and rubella.**

68 **The public health concerns of today's children mirror those of other developed countries. Obesity and myopia are two of such concerns. The School Health Service provides health surveillance to identify students with health problems and refer them for appropriate management. The School Health Service also puts in place health education programmes to help students develop health lifestyles. Allow me to share our efforts against obesity and myopia.**

Fighting Obesity

- Since 1992, obese students can go through a Trim-And-Fit programme where they are guided through exercises and proper diet. This programme is available for students from primary schools to pre-university levels. The students are counselled on proper nutrition, healthy eating habits and making exercise a daily affair to achieve a healthy lifestyle.
- The Health Promotion Board rolls out health education and health promotion programmes that complement the Trim-And-Fit programme. Amongst other things, the Board gives out the **CHERISH Award (Championing Efforts Resulting in Improved School Health)** to recognise schools which have made good progress in health promotion amongst students and school staff.

National Myopia Prevention Programme

- The National Myopia Prevention Programme is a new programme aimed at slowing down the rising prevalence of myopia among children in Singapore. The Programme comprises:
 - vision screening for children in kindergartens and childcare centres;

- enhancing annual vision screening in schools with close follow-up of students with myopia;
- working closely with the schools and preschools to promote good vision care;
- the setting up of a myopia registry to improve the monitoring of children with myopia, and
- public education messages to encourage good vision care

Managing the SARS Outbreak

69 Six months ago, Singapore was fighting the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome or SARS. **The safety of our children in schools, child care centres and other facilities was a prime focus of our containment efforts. Public education messages** on preventive measures for children were widely disseminated in child-friendly language. *{We have provided the Committee with our SARS-related educational materials for your information.}*

70 **Regular temperature checks and strict hygiene standards** were instituted in child care centres and schools to protect against the spread of SARS. **Health declaration** forms had to be submitted by staff in these facilities and by parents to ensure that children at these facilities had not been to SARS-affected areas or been in contact with individuals with SARS. Each child now has a **thermometer and has been taught the proper measures to follow. Measures are in place to protect our children should SARS surface again.**

Whole-Child Development (By Mr Tang Tuck Weng)

71 **Singapore believes in and invests heavily in education for the whole-person development of our children. We want Singaporean children to acquire not just academic knowledge and thinking skills, but also cultural values, social responsibility and lifeskills.** These are articulated in our Desired Outcomes of Education which committee members have been given a set of.

Improved Education Progression Rates

72 **Our education system strives to develop and harnesses the talents and abilities of every child. Ability-driven education emphasizes learning at a child's own pace and ability.** We identify the talents and abilities of students and develop educational programmes to cater to different needs, abilities and aptitudes.

73 In this way, we have reduced drop-out rates and successfully raised the educational attainment of our students. In 1980, 2 out of 10 students proceeded to post-secondary education; the figure has increased to 8 out of 10 students today.

74 Our students also do well by most international comparisons.

- In the 1999 Third International Maths and Science Study, our students came in first in mathematics and second in science.
- More recently, the 2001 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study ranked our Primary 4 students' English reading literacy 15th out of 35 countries (even though English is not our mother tongue). Singapore students who spoke English at home fared better than native English-speaking countries like England, US and New Zealand, and about 15 percent of Singapore students also did well enough to meet the top 10 percent international benchmark.

75 **Allow me to also share on concrete measures to enhance the development opportunities for our children beyond the academic areas in line with our philosophy of ability-driven education. .**

Programmes to develop Students' All-Round Potential

76 There are Elective Programmes in Language, Art and Music where students with the aptitude and interest in these areas can pursue them to a higher level.

77 **We are setting up specialised independent schools catering for students with talents in sports, maths and science, and possibly the arts.**

- The Sports School will open its doors in 2004. It is one of the milestones for Singapore in meeting the best interests of children. Those who excel in sports

can now realise their potential in sports without giving up their formal education. The School is a co-educational, residential boarding school and will offer top-class facilities, training and full sports science support in eight sports : Football, Swimming, Badminton, Table-tennis, Sailing, Bowling, Athletics and Netball. Each sport will have its own academy in the School and will be staffed by a head coach, one or two other assistant coaches, a general manager and a team of sports scientists.

- The National University of Singapore is also in the process of setting up an NUS High School that will provide a 6-year education from Sec 1 to JC2 catering for students who are talented in mathematics and science.

Character Development and Values Education

78 **To ensure that our children develop into all-rounded individuals, with good character, strong moral and national values, we have introduced Co-Curricular Activity programmes and Character Development programmes.** Though various interesting activities, students have opportunities to build sense of belonging to the community and nation, enhance racial harmony, be exposed to enterprise and develop their social and interpersonal skills. Students also learn to contribute to social causes and help those less fortunate by participating in the Community Involvement Programme.

Early Intervention for Disadvantaged Children

79 **Mr Chairman, the welfare and long term interest of children in Singapore is a priority.** We believe that **early and appropriate intervention is critical in helping children from disadvantaged families.** Hence we emphasize and invest in preventive health care and early intervention.

80 Singapore believes that **education is an important enabler for children to break out of the cycle of disadvantage.** As part of our policies on the **social safety net, special programmes are in place to help children from low income families to access a range of educational opportunities.** Under the Financial Assistance Scheme for Childcare (CFAC) and the Kindergarten Financial Assistance Scheme (KiFAS) administered by the Government, increased resources are being channeled to ensure that pre-school children from all homes, particularly low income families, are ready for school.

81 An early intervention programme, called Healthy Start now identifies very young children from families at risk. Under the programme, they are linked up with dedicated social service agencies to ensure that the parents of the children are given specific help to access community resources to minimize disadvantage of their children.

82 Children from lower-income families can access primary health care easily as they receive financial help through a Medical Endowment Fund which serves as a safety net for those who are unable to pay for medical care. In the case of education, apart from free primary education for Singaporean children, those from lower-income families also have access to study grants and bursaries, subsidized or free tuition, free textbooks and school allowances.

Early Intervention for Children with Special Needs

83 **Early intervention is also critical for children with special needs, so as to enable them to maximise their potential.** As part of these efforts, the Ministry of Health committed 17.5 million Singapore dollars (or 10 million US dollars) this year for a new Child Development Programme for children with developmental problems. Child development clinics will be set up in 2 conveniently located polyclinics to provide early detection of developmental problems. Early intervention and therapy will then be extended to these children to maximize the rehabilitative potential of these children.

84 The government will be spending another 24 million Singapore dollars (or 13.6 million US dollars) over the next five years on upstream programmes for children with disabilities. We want to give them the best chance to maximize their potential and to lead life as independently as possible. These programmes will include early intervention programmes for children with special needs aged 0-6 years and Integrated Childcare Programme for children aged 2-6 years.

85 Under the Integrated Childcare Programme, assistance is given to childcare centres to equip their staff and the centres to take in children with special needs. This developmental programme enables these children to attend the same childcare centres as other children and interact with them. This will facilitate their social interaction with the rest of the community. .

Special Education

86 The government works hand in hand with parents and the community to better co-ordinate efforts to help children with special needs. Under this “Many Helping Hands” approach, MOE supports special education as follows:

a. For special children who are able to cope with mainstream schools, MOE has incorporated special facilities and additional resources in our national schools to facilitate their integration into national schools ;

b. To cater to children who are not able to benefit from mainstream schools, Ministry of Education, together with the National Council of Social Service

(NCSS)⁴, helps Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs) in setting up special education schools.

c. Schools that provide special education (SPED) are funded at up to four times the recurrent cost of primary education.

d. Ministry of Education provides 90% of the capital funding for the construction of purpose-built SPED school buildings, renovation works and the five-yearly repair and repainting projects. The cost sharing formula serves to involve the community at large in looking after the welfare needs of the less fortunate members of our society.

⁴ NCSS is the national co-ordinating body for more than 290 Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs). NCSS' mission is to provide leadership and direction in social services, enhance the capabilities of VWOs, and promote strategic partnerships for social services.

Leisure, Culture and the Arts (By Ms Seah Yang Hee)

Culture, Heritage and the Arts

87 **Singapore is a nation with a rich and diverse cultural heritage. We encourage children to learn about their own cultural values and practices. We also encourage their appreciation of other cultures in Singapore.** Cultural and ethnic festivals are celebrated by children of all races in school. Appreciation for cultural and ethnic diversity and respect for different religious beliefs are woven into the school curricula and activities.

88 The Children's Discovery Gallery is an interactive gallery for children between the ages of 7 and 12 years. The Gallery encourages children to discover their cultural heritage through play, self-discovery and reflection. We also have a bus fitted with an exhibition on the myths and legends of Singapore that travels to schools and communities.

89 In the arts arena, the annual Singapore Arts Festival has performances suitable for the young so that they can enjoy the arts from an early age. A local theatre company, Act 3, holds an annual Children's First! Festival, bringing drama, puppetry, outdoor theatre and other creative programmes to children. The government supports arts for children through funding various productions and activities through the National Arts Council.

90 Children in Singapore have many choices when it comes to fun and play. Our children have free access to playgrounds, parks and other recreational facilities in our garden city. They enjoy going to the Botanic Gardens, the Bird Park and the Zoo. On weekends especially, you can find children and their families having a day out at the beach.

91 For recreation, children in Singapore enjoy traditional games as well as toys and electronic games. You can find children and youths playing sports such as badminton, basketball and table tennis at community sports facilities. There are a variety of television programmes in different languages for children including cartoons and educational programmes.

Access to Information

92 Today, children in Singapore are plugged into the global IT network. They are net-savvy and have **access to a wide range of information via the internet. We also encourage children to read widely.** The National Library Board organises the annual Asian Children's Festival to promote learning resources, programmes and products for the Asian child. This year, the National Library Board worked with hospitals, child psychologists and the sports council to create greater community awareness and support for the mental and physical health of the child, and introduced an annual award for inspiring children.

Conclusion (By Ms Yeoh Chee Yan)

93 **Mr Chairman, the profile of children in Singapore is changing, and in tandem, their needs are changing too. The Singapore government is mindful that it needs to continually review and chart new strategies to realise our vision for children, and that it needs to do so in partnership with all sectors in society. Singapore supports the Convention on the Rights of the Child and believes that the best interests of children should be considered in all matters that concern them.**

94 **Mr Chairman, since our accession in 1995, we have shown our commitment in implementing the Convention, and promoting its basic principles to children and adults. Our State Party Report outlining our efforts was submitted to the Committee in 2001. In our written replies, we have provided more data and updates to the report. Today's meeting has allowed us to share our perspective and to learn from the members of this Committee.**

95 **Mr Chairman, in explaining our reservations and declarations, we have tried to be frank about the areas where our national concerns and situation require that we depart from the Convention. In some areas we hope we can agree to disagree, in others, we acknowledge that there is room to further children's rights in Singapore. In any case, we undertake to regularly review our reservations. I hope we have been able to share Singapore's concrete progress in meeting the rights and furthering the well-being of children and show that we uphold the objectives and principles of the Convention. The Singapore government is committed to ensuring that our style of governance, legislation, policies, programmes will meet the changing needs of a new generation of children. We recognise that all of us can and must do more in this ongoing journey.**

96 **Attuned to the world, yet anchored by strong ties to the family, community and nation. Confident of themselves, but also compassionate and alive to their social responsibilities. This is Singapore's vision for her new generation of children and youth. But most important of all, we want children to grow up happy, to enjoy their childhood.**

97 **We would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to share our experience and learn from your comments so that we can improve on our efforts to implement the Convention and join with other countries in creating a world fit for children.**

Thank you.