

Speech by CS at Symposium on Early Childhood Intervention (English only) (with photos/video)

Following is the speech by the Chief Secretary for Administration, Mr Matthew Cheung Kin-chung, at the Symposium on Early Childhood Intervention hosted by the Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong (BGCA) today (March 29):

Dr Roy Chung (President of the BGCA), Dr Ng Yin-ming (Chairman of the Executive Committee of the BGCA), council members of the BGCA, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to join you all here today. I would like first to express my deep gratitude to the Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong for organising this meaningful and timely Symposium and to warmly welcome all overseas speakers and participants from different sectors and disciplines to share the latest trends, policies and possible cross-sector, cross-discipline collaboration on early child development and intervention.

The theme of this Symposium is "Nurture the Early Years for a Stronger Foundation and Better Tomorrow", which echoes well with the children policy of the current-term Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government.

We believe that children are the future and hope of our society. Early stage development is of paramount importance because it is the period in life when the brain develops most rapidly and has high capacity for change and thus it is the best time to lay the foundation for health and well-being throughout life. A continuum of care is therefore needed to safeguard and maximise children's development outcomes. In addition, early childhood education also plays a crucial role in children's all-round development and life-long learning.

Maternal and Child Health Services

The Family Health Service (FHS) established under the Department of Health provides a comprehensive range of health promotion and disease prevention services for children from birth to 5 years and women at or below 64 years of age. Maternal Health Service (Antenatal and Postnatal), Family Planning Service, Cervical Cancer Screening Service, Woman Health Service and Child Health Service are delivered by FHS. These services are provided by a dedicated team of medical and nursing professionals and supporting staff, through a network of Maternal and Child Health Centres and Woman Health Centres.

Hong Kong's maternal mortality ratio (MMR) is among the best in the world. In 2015, the figure for MMR was only 1.6 per 100 000 registered live

births, as compared with the average of 14 per 100 000 live births among the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries. In 2017, Hong Kong's MMR was 1.8 per 100 000 registered live births. Quality and accessible maternal health services are delivered by health professionals in both public and private sectors.

Public maternal health services are provided free of charge to Hong Kong residents by eight birthing hospitals of the Hospital Authority and Maternal and Child Health Centres under a comprehensive antenatal shared-care programme to monitor the whole process of pregnancy. The programme includes antenatal health assessment, check-ups, relevant investigations and health advice. Pregnant women with high risk factors or suspected to have antenatal problems will be referred to the Obstetric Department of Hospital Authority for follow-up, management, and delivery care.

After delivery, mothers are provided with postnatal physical check-ups, advice on breastfeeding, child care and contraception by public hospitals or Maternal and Child Health Centres. Mothers with postnatal mood or adjustment problems are given counselling and provided with support from specialists or social services as appropriate.

Over 90 per cent of newborns of local mothers register with Maternal and Child Health Centres each year for child health services. The service is provided free of charge to eligible children in Hong Kong. The components of the child health service include immunisation, health and developmental surveillance, as well as parenting.

To ensure timely identification and referral of children with health or developmental problems to relevant public health units, health care professionals work in partnership with parents and caregivers to monitor children on an ongoing basis. This component of child health service includes physical examination of the newborn child, monitoring of the child's growth parameters and nutrition, newborn hearing screening for children who did not receive the screening test at the birthing hospitals, preschool vision screening, and developmental surveillance conducted at scheduled ages. In addition, pre-primary teachers, with parental consent, can also refer children with suspected physical, developmental or behavioural problems to Maternal and Child Health Centres for preliminary assessment.

Parenting programmes are also provided by Maternal and Child Health Centres to equip parents of children with necessary knowledge and skills, including anticipatory guidance on child development, childcare, breastfeeding and nutrition and more during the antenatal period and throughout the preschool years of children. For parents of children with early signs of behavioural problems or those who encounter difficulties in parenting, a group training programme on positive parenting skills is offered.

To identify at an early stage various health and social needs of children aged 0 to 5, the HKSAR Government has introduced the cross-bureau and cross-department Comprehensive Child Development Service. It is a joint

effort of the Labour and Welfare Bureau, Education Bureau, Department of Health, Hospital Authority and Social Welfare Department and their frontline service units to help identify at-risk pregnant women, including teenage mothers, mothers with substance misuse and mental health problems, mothers with postnatal depression, families with psychosocial needs, and pre-primary children with health, developmental and behavioural problems. Needy children and families identified are referred to relevant service units for appropriate health or social services.

Services for Pre-school Children

To enable pre-school children with special needs to receive necessary training early in their prime learning period, the Government launched a Pilot Scheme in November 2015 to provide Onsite Pre-school Rehabilitation Services to children attending kindergartens or kindergarten-cum-child care centres through inter-disciplinary service teams co-ordinated by non-governmental organisations.

The inter-disciplinary service teams comprising occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech therapists, psychologists, social workers and special child care workers are tasked to provide early intervention service for children and offer professional advice and support to kindergarten teachers, child care workers and parents.

Given the positive results of the Pilot Scheme and full recognition by parents and kindergartens teachers, the Onsite Pre-school Rehabilitation Services have been regularised since October 2018 with the number of service places increased from about 3 000 to about 5 000, which will be further increased to 7 000 in October 2019.

To identify at an early stage and to provide assistance to pre-primary children and their families with welfare needs, the HKSAR Government has allocated HK\$990 million from the Lotteries Fund to launch a three-year pilot scheme to provide social work services in phases for about 150 000 pre-primary children and their families in subsidised or aided child care centres, kindergartens and kindergarten-cum-child care centres. The first phase of services was launched last month (February 2019).

Furthermore, the Budget for 2019/20 announced last month proposed to allocate an additional funding of about HK\$156 million from 2019-20 onwards to increase the level of subsidy for services provided by child care centres to alleviate parents' financial burden, improve the manning ratio of qualified child care workers in day and residential child care centres and enhance training to improve service quality, and provide in phases about 400 additional aided standalone child care centre places to provide long full-day child care services for children aged below 3.

We also believe that quality kindergarten education fosters in children an inquisitive mind, inculcates in them an interest in learning and exploration, promotes their balanced development and develops their healthy self-concept and confidence. To this end, the current-term Government has

implemented the new kindergarten education policy starting from the 2017/18 school year with a substantial increase in government funding to enhance teachers' remuneration, reduce parents' financial burden and improve the quality of teaching.

A professional development framework for kindergarten teachers has also been developed to provide more structured in-service training for them. The purpose is to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary for fostering a supportive and motivating environment, as well as applying evidence-based intervention strategies. We also encourage collaboration between tertiary education institutions and non-governmental organisations to jointly provide programmes on professional development for teachers. We are glad to note that positive feedback has been received from teacher participants.

Parents also play a vital role in children's learning. To promote parent education and home-school co-operation, starting from the 2019/20 school year, the HKSAR Government will increase recurrent funding by about HK\$30 million so that additional resources can be provided to federations of parent-teacher associations and parent-teacher associations of schools for organising more community-based and school-based parent education programmes or activities.

Ladies and gentlemen, as you can see, child development tops the policy agenda of the current-term HKSAR Government. Indeed, the government set up Hong Kong's first-ever high-level Commission on Children last year to co-ordinate holistically government and community efforts in protecting and enhancing the well-being of children throughout their various stages of growth. This advisory body is chaired by myself as the Chief Secretary for Administration and comprises both senior officials and knowledgeable non-official members.

I would like to close by thanking the Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong again for their relentless efforts in promoting early childhood care and education for children and families in Hong Kong for over 80 years. Today's Symposium offers a valuable platform for scholars, practitioners and policymakers to share views and insights on effective intervention for optimal development of young children. I wish all of you a fruitful discussion and our overseas speakers and participants an enjoyable stay in Hong Kong. Thank you.

