



Ms Zhao plans lessons based on children's interests and needs



Ms Zhao engaging in water play activities with pre-schoolers

Ms Zhao Yilin, 34, recently celebrated a decade of working in the EC sector. Since 2010, she has been a Chinese Language Teacher at The Ascension Kindergarten, where she also mentors colleagues at the Nursery 1 level.

Learn more about her at <https://youtu.be/MQmNKmUrsAw>.

# PARTNERSHIPS WITH A DIFFERENCE

THE 2017 ECDA AWARDS' OUTSTANDING EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADER MS GILLIAN NEO TAKES THE INITIATIVE TO REACH OUT TO PARENTS AND THE COMMUNITY.

Partnerships with families and the community have a positive influence on young children's learning, development and well-being. That is why Ms Gillian Neo, Principal of My First Skool @ Blk 209 Ang Mo Kio since 2011, believes that strong relationships with different stakeholders are important for quality pre-school experiences and improving outcomes for children. "Part of my job is to help parents understand that both educators and parents need to work together to support our children. Educators, too, need to understand that parents have their children's best interests at heart. They want to be assured that their children are healthy, safe and learning well," says Gillian, 31.

Her pre-school enjoys a strong rapport with parents, and some of them have come together to form a Parent Support Group. "We create opportunities for parents to bond with their children, and for teachers to interact with the parents through field trips and celebrations," says Gillian. "When parents have a good relationship with educators and acknowledge their professionalism, the educators feel affirmed and motivated to give their best."

## STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY TIES

Besides the two-way partnership between educators and parents, Gillian also sees the community as a valuable learning resource. For example, she collaborated with "Auntie Margaret", a retired horticulturalist who lives at Block 209, as well as other residents in the neighbourhood, to set up a community garden outside the pre-school in 2014. The garden serves as an outdoor classroom for children to learn about nature.

Gillian is especially passionate about giving children from disadvantaged or at-risk backgrounds a head start in life. The Centre for Promoting Alternatives to Violence (PAVE) conducts workshops for educators at her centre, so that they can spot signs of domestic abuse in children and take the relevant steps to address this. She also works closely with the Ang Mo Kio Family Service Centre to take in children from low-income families and, if needed, engages volunteers to bring them to and from pre-school. "Different community agencies have niche expertise which they can contribute to improve the lives of children and families. Through our community engagement, we can target our



efforts to support families in need," explains Gillian.

On winning the ECDA Outstanding Early Childhood Leader Award, Gillian says, "I am humbled and happy to be recognised in this way. I hope I can inspire other centre leaders to similarly value and embrace a programme that is family and community friendly." ♥



Ms Neo teaching pre-schoolers about nature at a community garden outside her centre

## WHAT IT TAKES TO LEAD WITH A HEART

- ▶ **DEVELOP GOOD PEOPLE SKILLS.** Make time to listen and talk to parents. Let them feel heard and respected.
- ▶ **INSPIRE YOUR STAFF.** Educators, too, need a morale lift from time to time. Encourage them. Affirm them. Celebrate their successes, both big and small.
- ▶ **DO YOUR BEST.** It is not how much experience you have that matters, but doing what is right for children, families and the community.

Find out more about Gillian's philosophy and leadership approach at <https://youtu.be/bqcZxHUOMHM>.

# A LIFELONG JOURNEY OF PROFESSIONALISM

LEARNING NEVER STOPS FOR BOTH CHILDREN AND EDUCATORS, SAYS 2017 ECDA AWARDS' OUTSTANDING EARLY CHILDHOOD (EC) EDUCARER, MS ZHAO YILIN.



### What is your philosophy on working with toddlers?

Children have an innate sense of wonder and curiosity, yet every child is different. As educators, we must create a loving and secure environment that caters to the children's varying needs. More importantly, the children have opened my eyes to see things from their perspective. They show me the importance of never losing that sense of wonder and curiosity, and that we never stop learning as educators.

### What is the biggest challenge you have had to overcome so far?

In Singapore, not many children speak Mandarin at home. As a Chinese educator, I have to think about how to modify my teaching methods to provide the children with a meaningful learning experience. By observing how the children interact at play and in class, I find I am better able to plan activities which are closely attuned to their needs and personalities.

### Moving forward, what do you aspire to achieve?

A supportive teaching environment is important for professional development. Winning the Outstanding EC Educator Award has given me the confidence to continue mentoring and guiding other Nursery 1 Chinese language teachers at my centre. Each week, we come together to discuss and review our lessons and pedagogies. Through such sharing and bouncing of ideas, we become more mindful of the children's developmental stages, the challenges they face, as well as the quality of our teaching.

Being an EC educator has given me the confidence as a first-time mother to a 19-month-old, and helped me to understand not only the perspectives of a child and educator, but that of a parent's.

Ms Zhao Yilin

### How can parents support toddlers' thinking at home?

It is important for parents with children aged two to three years to help them build a positive outlook. A child's psychological development is critical at this age. When toddlers have a positive mindset, they are better equipped to explore, learn and make sense of the world around them. Parents need to set a good example by role-modelling optimism and resilience, and make time to do fun and meaningful things with their children. Play and do things together such as visiting places of interest, having walks in the park, and reading books, to build healthy bonds with your children. ♥

