

## **ENCOURAGING A FAMILY FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT IN SINGAPORE**

This paper highlights the need for and benefits of a supportive physical environment for families, and the approach taken by the Public Education Committee on Family (PEC) to address our families' needs.

### **FAMILY – A NATIONAL IMPERATIVE**

2 The Prime Minister, in his reply to the President's Address earlier this year<sup>1</sup>, highlighted declining fertility as one of his three national concerns **and that the government is committed to creating a total social environment conducive to marriage and family formation.**

### **PUBLIC EDUCATION COMMITTEE ON FAMILY**

3 The PEC<sup>2</sup> is a people sector committee formed in September 2000 to put in place a comprehensive public education programme on family. It was originally chaired by Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon, the then Senior Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Community Development and Sports (MCDS). Since 15 April 2002, Mr Chan Soo Sen, Minister of State, Prime Minister's Office and MCDS, has taken over the reins.

4 The PEC has identified 'Encouraging a Family Friendly Environment' as one of its key thrusts. A supportive physical environment, which caters to the convenience, safety and care-giving tasks of families, is a key component. Its Subgroup on Family Friendly Business Environment has been entrusted with this task of encouraging a higher provision of family friendly facilities, such as diaper changing stations, nursing rooms, child friendly toilets etc., at places frequented by families.

### **IMPORTANCE OF A FAMILY FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT TO FAMILIES**

5 In December 2000, the PEC sought feedback through various mediums<sup>3</sup> on the public's perceptions of the current provisions in the physical environment, and the types of family friendly facilities needed to cater to the needs of families.

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<sup>1</sup> Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong spoke at the Parliamentary Debate on the President's Address on 5 Apr 02 on Singapore's falling fertility problem.

<sup>2</sup> The PEC was formed to support and complement the initiatives of the Ministerial Committee on Marriage and Procreation (MC). At the 2000 National Day Rally, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong announced the formation of the MC to lead efforts in encouraging marriage, procreation and family togetherness. The MC is headed by Mr Lim Boon Heng, Minister (Prime Minister's Office) and assisted by Mr Lim Hng Kiang, Minister for Health and Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, Acting Minister for Community Development and Sports.

<sup>3</sup> These include the media, Feedback Unit, Family Service Centres, Centre for Fathering, Moms4Moms Club and many other interest groups

6 Feedback from the public pointed to the need to improve the family friendliness of our physical environment. Due to the general lack of family friendly facilities in commercial and public areas (e.g. shopping centres, eating places, places of interest and parks), parents especially those with infants / toddlers had often encountered difficulties when bringing their children out. Some comments from parents (see related newspaper articles in Annex A):

“Pro-family facilities, such as family/nursing rooms, as well as children’s toilets in many public libraries, restaurants and shopping malls, are often lacking.”

“Crowded lift, unfriendly staircases, bumpy pathways, lack of diaper-changing stations and seats in hawker centres which cannot be moved.”

“Junior toilets with low seats and basins for children are a rare bonus.”

“A friend of mine lamented that she was forced to hide under an escalator to breastfeed her baby!”

See Annex B for the list of facilities needed to facilitate the care-giving role of parents, and locations where these facilities are needed.

## **BENEFITS REAPED BY FAMILY FRIENDLY BUSINESSES**

7 Being family friendly gives businesses a competitive edge. Based on overseas experience, the benefits reaped by some family friendly businesses include the ability to attract family customers, increased length of stay, larger spending per visit, regular repeat business and increased profits.

8 The survey findings of a parents’ group<sup>4</sup> in Jersey, UK, for instance, showed that the family friendly establishments in Jersey were well-known and well used by parents and children of all ages. Another example is The Fort Shopping Park, a major shopping centre in Birmingham, UK. It is the first choice for many family shoppers because of its family friendly restaurants, and helpful and considerate staff.

## **APPROACH**

9 The PEC takes a “Many Helping Hands Approach” in addressing the needs of our families. It aims at engaging and involving the key partners of the various sectors in the community (e.g. the business, government and people sectors) in creating a supportive physical environment for families.

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<sup>4</sup> A group in Jersey, UK, established to inform the politicians and the community about the important issues concerning parents

## **Businesses and Service Providers**

10 Businesses and service providers play a crucial role in building a family friendly environment in Singapore. Recognising this, the PEC intends to conduct public education and publicity programmes to raise awareness and to encourage the provision of family friendly facilities. The specific proposals are:

- (i) Organise regular talks and dialogue sessions for the business sector to raise businesses' awareness on the need for and benefits of a family friendly environment.
- (ii) Disseminate information on family friendly environment through web sites and publications of relevant organisations, e.g. the Singapore Institute of Architects (SIA), Real Estates Developers' Association (REDAS), to raise awareness.
- (iii) Organise "Annual Family Friendly Shopping Centres Contest" to provide publicity for family friendly shopping centres as well as to provide the impetus for the less family friendly ones to follow suit.
- (iv) Rate family friendliness of eating places in Singapore to provide publicity for family friendly eateries as well as to provide the impetus for less family friendly ones to follow suit.

## **Government**

11 The government plays an equally important role in promoting a family friendly environment for the young and old. Considering that some businesses may have difficulties providing pro-family facilities at their premises, especially since "family friendly environment" is still a relatively new concept in Singapore, the government has to help these businesses.

12 As a first step, the Working Committee for the Review of the Code on Barrier Free Accessibility in Buildings and the MCDS have jointly developed a set of design guidelines for family friendly facilities. The guidelines list the types of facilities needed by families and serve as a guide for businesses interested in providing these facilities at their premises.

13 The guidelines have been included in the updated Code on Barrier-Free Accessibility in Buildings. The recommended family friendly facilities are (see Annex C details):

- (a) **Family room** with breastfeeding and diaper changing facilities, rest corner etc.
- (b) **Diaper changing stations** in both male and female toilets or in individual washrooms for disabled persons

- (c) **Child friendly toilets** - child sized water closet & wash basins, non-slip floor, child protection seats
- (d) **Children's play areas** with safety features (e.g. cushioned floor) and seating areas for parents
- (e) **Lockers for prams** and other heavy belongings
- (f) **Pram and child buggy rental facility** for families with infants or toddlers
- (g) **Flexible arrangement of tables and chairs in eating places** to cater to bigger families
- (h) Provision of **baby chairs** in eating places

### **General Public**

14 The general public too has a role to play in creating a conducive environment for families. Simple gestures, such as lending a helping hand to those struggling with baby-prams up or down steps, offering their seat (on buses, MRT or any public places) to those travelling with young children, would go a long way.

15 The PEC hopes to raise public awareness through:

- Feature articles on family friendliness and other related issues in newspapers, parenting magazines and web sites on a regular basis
- Current affairs programmes, e.g. "Talking Point", "Focus" or docu-drama on how a typical family copes with their daily life and how a family friendly environment would help them manage their family life better
- The Singapore Kindness Movement's campaigns aimed at encouraging people to be more considerate to families with young children.

### **CONCLUSION**

16 There is clearly a need to create a supportive physical environment for our families. It is necessary for the various stakeholders, i.e. businesses and service providers, government and the general public, to work together to increase the provision of family friendly facilities and create a family friendly environment in Singapore that will improve the quality of life for Singaporeans.

**List of family friendly facilities needed by families and where are they needed**

(see Annex C for the design guidelines for these facilities)

S/N	Desired Family Friendly Facilities	Location
1	<p><b>Child-friendly toilet</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child-sized water closet and wash basins</li> <li>• Easy-to-turn taps</li> <li>• Non-slip floor to ensure the safety of the children</li> <li>• Child protection seats to allow parents to seat their baby/toddler safely in the restroom with them</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shopping centres</li> <li>• Eating places</li> <li>• Parks and places of interest</li> <li>• MRT/LRT stations and bus interchanges</li> <li>• Swimming complexes</li> </ul>
2	<p><b>Family room</b> with the following facilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Breastfeeding areas</li> <li>• Diaper changing stations</li> <li>• Rest area for families, particularly those with young children</li> <li>• hot / cold water dispensers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shopping centres</li> <li>• Parks and places of interest</li> </ul>
3	<p><b>Diaper changing stations</b> (in the absence of a family room) to be provided in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Both</u> male and female toilets</li> <li>• <u>or</u> in individual washrooms for persons with disabilities</li> </ul>	<p>Public toilets in the following commercial and public areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shopping centres</li> <li>• Eating places</li> <li>• Parks and places of interest</li> <li>• MRT/LRT stations and bus interchanges</li> <li>• Swimming complexes</li> </ul>

S/N	Desired Family Friendly Facilities	Location
4	<p><b>Children's play areas</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cushioned or shockproof floor to ensure the safety of the children</li> <li>• Seating areas for parents supervising their children</li> <li>• For outdoor playgrounds, sheltered seating areas should be provided to protect the parents and children from the sun/rain</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shopping centres</li> <li>• Parks and places of interest</li> </ul>
5	<p><b>Lockers for prams</b> and other heavy belongings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shopping centres</li> <li>• Supermarkets</li> </ul>
6	<p><b>Pram / Child buggy rental facilities</b> for families with infants / toddlers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shopping centres</li> <li>• Supermarkets</li> </ul>
7	<p><b>Flexible arrangement of tables and chairs</b> or a <b>variety of table and chair arrangements</b> to cater to groups of different sizes, particularly bigger families</p>	<p>Eating places including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restaurants</li> <li>• Food courts</li> <li>• Hawker centres</li> <li>• Coffee shops</li> </ul>
8	<p><b>Baby / High chairs</b></p>	<p>Eating places including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restaurants</li> <li>• Food courts</li> <li>• Hawker centres</li> <li>• Coffee shops</li> </ul>