LIEN foundation

CIRCLE OF CARE

Singapore's first model of integrated care expands to 9 preschools & 2 primary schools. More than 1,700 children to benefit in the next 3 years.

Developed by the Lien Foundation and Care Corner, 'Circle of Care' (COC) is a multi-disciplinary, child-centric model of education and care combining social work, learning support, and parental involvement.

Circle of Care will be extended to two primary schools to support children up to Primary 3, especially those at-risk. It aims to reach at least 15 preschools by 2018.

Singapore, 2 Mar 2016

1. Three years after its launch, the Lien Foundation and Care Corner Singapore are expanding the **Circle of Care** (COC) programme from two to nine preschools, in partnership with three major preschool operators and two primary schools. Anchor preschool operators MY World Preschool and PAP Community Foundation, as well as PPIS (the Singapore Muslim Women's Association), have come on board alongside Lakeside Primary School and Gan Eng Seng Primary School (see annex for list). The ground-up collaboration aims to build clusters of primary schools and preschools to create a structured transition, especially for at-risk children from disadvantaged families, from preschool into primary school.

2. In 2013, the COC model was successfully piloted at two of Care Corner's childcare centres - Leng Kee and Admiralty - for children from birth to age 6.[1] It uses a new and integrated approach that weaves a 'circle of care' around the child, bringing teachers, social workers, education therapists and community partners – who typically work apart – together to provide a holistic continuum of care for children. The early intervention provided by this ecosystem of care is able to benefit children at-risk or with learning difficulties effectively because it is done in the natural setting of a preschool, where children spend hours daily.

Child-centric approach breaks silos

3. "Children from low-income families are hurt not only by their circumstances, but by the silo-ed manner the present system defines and addresses their inter-connected needs," said Mr Lee

[1] As of July 2015, all five of Care Corner's child development centres, including Lengkok Bahru and Admiralty, have been transferred to MY World Preschool.

Poh Wah, CEO, Lien Foundation. “In the Circle of Care, we seek to break down these long-standing barriers to reduce enduring gaps in the academics and well-being of at-risk children." With social workers, teachers and therapists working as a team, the COC is able to identify the root causes of a child’s difficulties, provide help on different fronts and extend assistance to the children and their families. By breaking the silos of education and care, the integrated care model safeguards the child’s growth and development. The ground-up collaboration with the COC Partner Preschools and Primary Schools were based on their progressive leadership that sought to do more for children at-risk.

4. Overseeing the implementation of COC across the nine preschools is Care Corner Singapore. “As a VWO that used to run both Family Service Centres and preschools, we recognised the important link between social work and early childhood,” said Mr Yap Poh Kheng, CEO of Care Corner. "The preschool is the best place for social work intervention. With COC we are able to holistically integrate learning support services and social work intervention for less advantaged children and families, within a natural childcare setting which offers extended opportunities for engagement.” Care Corner transferred operations of its five preschools in 2015 to focus on providing COC as a service to other preschools.

Positive impact of COC

5. Since its launch, COC has demonstrated impact in improving child and family outcomes. In one preschool of 80 children, Parent-Teacher Conferences (PTCs) in 2012 were attended by only a handful of parents. After COC was introduced, attendance rates rose to 32% in 2013, then 54% in 2015. Considered by early childhood professionals to be a key indicator of healthy parental involvement in the most formative phase of a child’s development, attendance at PTCs is nonetheless a perennial challenge that plagues preschools working with children from at-risk backgrounds, due to lack of understanding or instability at home caused by a variety of factors. In COC, social workers were assigned to engage families of at-risk children. The deeper understanding and closer ties forged resulted in the improved PTC attendance.

6. The progress made by the COC’s multi-disciplinary team showed that the majority of the children (between 70% and 100%) under its School Readiness Programme (SRP) achieved improvement in literacy and numeracy. “There are four circles of care that affect the young child’s holistic development: the family, child care centre, community and government policies. When one circle fails the child, directly or indirectly, there will be both short and long-term consequences on the child and repercussions on the society he or she lives in. Identifying and

intervening in the early years reduces both social and financial costs to the individual, families and the state," said Dr Khoo Kim Choo, Consultant for Circle of Care and 25-year early childhood veteran and leader. Dr Khoo led the conceptualisation of Circle of Care.

7. The COC also revealed a latent need for intervention by social workers. About 30% of the 76 at-risk children in COC from 2013 to 2015 were new cases identified by the COC team through observation of the children's behaviour. These cases were not served by any social service organisations either because the children's families did not request for help, or their cases were closed when circumstances improved or when the social service organisation was unable to contact them.

8. Of the 76 at-risk children, 95% come from families with household incomes of below $3,000 a month and the majority live in HDB rental flats. They suffer from irregular school attendance due to a litany of problems that range from health issues, financial and housing distress, unemployed parents or death in the family. The COC team managed to raise their average attendance from about 30% to close to 70% by working closely with their families. Continued and long-term engagement through COC was crucial in breaking the cycle of skipping school.

Expanding the sphere of assistance to low income families

9. Highlighting the advantages of integrated care, Mr Mohd Ali Mahmood, Senior Director, Singapore Muslim Women's Association (PPIS) said, "We need to think beyond financial assistance and academic grades when dealing with the challenges faced by the poor. Low-income and zero-income families with multiple problems need the different skills of a multi-disciplinary team to address these challenges." PPIS will introduce COC in two of its preschools. Anchor childcare operator, MY World Preschool, shared its reason for implementing COC in five of its preschools. "MY World believes that every child deserves equal opportunity to quality care and education. With Circle of Care, we are able to provide preschoolers, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, a good start in life," said Ms Phyllis Tan, Director, MY World Preschool.

COC benefits all children

10. In Circle of Care, all children, not only those from disadvantaged backgrounds, benefit. The children's learning experiences are enriched with access to a diverse range of community resources. These include music and movement programmes, parent-child workshops and parent-child bonding activities with the involvement of volunteers. The integrated care

approach draws on the strengths of the community to play a role in the children's learning and development, with parental involvement setting a sound foundation. Community partners such as organisations and volunteers who would like to partner COC can sign up at www.circleofcare.sg.

How COC works

11. Children in a COC preschool will be supported by a multi-disciplinary team comprising their principal and preschool teachers, educational therapists and social workers. The COC Social Worker brings together different aspects of help and care for the child and family, and these could range from case management, community resources, and educational therapy, to counselling or financial aid. They work closely with the teachers to identify, assess and provide early intervention to children at-risk including those with learning difficulties.

Social workers play key role

12. Reflecting on the role of social workers, Ms Geraldine Foo, Care Corner's Social Worker said, "Early childhood is a golden period where we can work upstream to partner and journey with disadvantaged families to unlock various key issues." Education therapists, who provide learning support in numeracy and literacy skills to the children in small groups, support the COC team. The COC team meets regularly to update and share information in order to better understand and work more effectively with the child and family.

Investing in Integrated Care

13. The expanded Circle of Care will be supported by a $3.8m grant from the Lien Foundation and $500,000 from Care Corner Singapore. The funds go towards assembling a team that includes eight social workers, two of whom will be dedicated to the partner primary schools. Besides the social workers, three coordinators will focus on facilitating smooth collaboration with each of the three partner preschool operators.

14. In addition, Care Corner will conduct professional development training for preschool operators and Family Service Centres to help early childhood educators, social workers, educational therapists, volunteers and professionals from related fields to understand this new dimension of social work. They will examine and learn how to apply the fundamentals of creating an integrated care approach for preschool settings. This is part of the overall strategy to help the early education sector improve key outcomes for children and their families through early intervention.

15. Presently, the cost of supporting an at-risk child, excluding education therapy services, is about $125 to $165 per month, depending on the intensity of the social work cases. In the last three years, 76 out of the 230 children under COC fell under the at-risk category. Tapping on available resources will enhance the programme's scalability and outreach in the long term. To expand its reach and scale, Circle of Care will also work with existing programmes and resources, such as the government's existing Development Support Programme, which will reduce the cost of supporting an at-risk child on education therapy in COC.

Extending COC up to Primary Three

16. Spurred by improvements shown by the children at-risk, the COC team continued to extend a helping hand to the pioneer batch of COC children. This was provided with the consent of their parents. In 2015, all 13 at-risk children who still required assistance after they had graduated from Kindergarten 2 opted to continue engaging the COC team even after they moved on to P1.

17. In general, there is presently no formal system of information sharing or collaboration between the preschools and primary schools. This means that some of the hard-won progress made by at-risk children in their preschool years under COC could be affected. These children could also fall through the cracks if the school is unable to identify their disadvantaged circumstances and need for intervention. These children would miss out on the guidance they need, such as pastoral care or counselling, even though the services are available in school.

Linking care between preschools and primary schools

18. To bridge this gap, the COC team has made primary schools one of the cornerstones of the expanded COC. Lakeside Primary School and Gan Eng Seng Primary School have formalised working relationships with the COC team, enabling regular meetings between the COC social workers and the school's teachers, counsellors and pastoral care team. This leads to quicker and more coordinated exchanges of information, and more comprehensive supervision of a child's needs.

19. Gan Eng Seng Primary was approached due to its proximity to Leng Kee Centre. Many of the COC pioneer batch of children attend Gan Eng Seng Primary. Lakeside Primary School was invited to join COC to offer a continuum of care alongside the nearby PCF Sparkletots Preschool @ Taman Jurong. Underlining the need for such a transition programme, PCF Sparkletots Preschool @ Taman Jurong lead principal, Ms Carole See noted, "The close collaboration

between PCF preschools and primary schools in conjunction with support from Circle of Care will further strengthen and enhance the gradual progress in learning for children from disadvantaged backgrounds."

Working together to support children up to Primary Three

20. Under the COC's Primary School Transition Programme, the COC team not only prepares the COC children for Primary 1, it gets the parents ready too. Besides sharing with the COC Partner Primary Schools information about the child, the COC team will highlight the child's areas of strengths and where more support and guidance is needed. The COC Social Worker will collaborate with the school's team of pastoral care support, class teacher and allied educator. Before school starts, workshops and school visits will be organised for the parent and child. The COC Social Worker will journey with the child and child's parents from Primary 1 to Primary 3 and be a key point of assistance between the school and parents in relation to the child's attendance, class performance, and relationship with teachers and peers.

21. On the synergy between COC and Lakeside Primary School, its principal, Mrs Wang-Tan Sun Sun said, "The advantage of the COC model is the early intervention at the preschool level and the longitudinal follow-through during the early years of primary school. We are excited about the potential impact it can make during a child's formative years and the possibilities this may bring in terms of increasing social mobility in the long run."

22. COC children attending non-COC primary schools who still require intervention and guidance will continue to receive help but on a less structured basis. The team would need parents' consent to introduce its role to the respective primary school the child attends. The degree and level of interaction the COC team has with the school to ease the child's transition to Primary 1 would depend on the school's response.

COC at primary schools can ensure continued progress

23. Some students at Gan Eng Seng Primary School are already experiencing the benefits of the COC connection between preschool and primary school levels. "Our Student Welfare Officer is already working with the Circle of Care team, and our children are benefiting from this closer collaboration with our neighbouring preschools," said Mr Ong Lye Whatt, principal of Gan Eng Seng Primary School, which is one of the five primary schools under the Ministry of Education's Student Welfare Officer pilot scheme - where a social work-trained officer is at hand to reach out to vulnerable students and families.

24. The expansion of Circle of Care underscores the benefits of connecting care to education. Its child-centric philosophy and focus on parental engagement acknowledge the need for care and education that go beyond the classroom. Its initial success with early intervention and school readiness, especially for children-at-risk, calls for greater thought and review of the integrated approach for early childhood education in Singapore.

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About the Lien Foundation www.lienfoundation.org

The Lien Foundation is a Singapore philanthropic house noted for its model of radical philanthropy. It breaks new ground by investing in innovative solutions, convening strategic partnerships and catalysing action on social and environmental challenges. The Foundation seeks to foster exemplary early childhood education, excellence in eldercare and effective environmental sustainability in water and sanitation. In the area of early childhood education, the Foundation aims to create a better playing field by strengthening capacity in this area and opening up opportunities for disadvantaged preschoolers.

To advocate greater access to quality early childhood education, the Foundation commissioned a study, *Vital Voices for Vital Years* that examined leaders' views on improving Singapore's preschool sector. In June 2012, the Lien Foundation released a global benchmark study called *Starting Well* that ranked 45 countries on their provision of preschool education. The use of I.T forms a key strategy in the Foundation's efforts to increase efficiencies and enhance professionalism in the preschool sector. The Foundation has championed a community-based model of care where specialists go into mainstream preschools to help children with learning difficulties. Its success has inspired a scaled-up national version in Singapore. In its push for inclusivity in education, the Foundation set up Singapore's first inclusive preschool, *Kindle Garden*, with AWWA (Asian Women's Welfare Association).

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