

Back to pre-school for most, but not all

While most parents are glad for their children to resume some normality in routine by going to school, others are taking a wait-and-see attitude on the Covid-19 pandemic and keeping their little ones at home



Stephanie Yeo
Senior Correspondent

Bolan Liang has been out of pre-school for almost five months now. His parents are in no hurry to send the three-year-old back.

His mother, Ms Carol Zhao, pulled him out of his playgroup class just before Chinese New Year because of Covid-19 fears.

"I feel it's almost impossible that young kids of his age can have any social distancing. Also, wearing masks the whole day seems very challenging," says Ms Zhao, a business analyst in her 30s.

While pre-schools have reopened in phases from June 2 for different age groups, some parents have chosen to keep their little ones at home. Unlike primary school, pre-school attendance is not compulsory.

These parents are adopting a wait-and-see attitude as they observe the number of community cases. They also worry about their children having to wear masks or shields for protracted periods.

A check with major pre-school chains show that these parents are in the minority. Most pre-schools report fairly healthy attendance figures, from around 80 to 90 per cent.

Kindergarten-level children were the first to return on June 2. Nursery-level children went back to school last Monday while those in playgroup and infant care resumed classes last Wednesday.

Mr Poh Soon Tat, head of operations at Star Learners, which has 41 centres islandwide, says the attendance figures is highest among kindergarten children, "but that might also be due to the fact that they started school earlier on June 2 and had more time to progressively return and get more accustomed to school".

In time, he believes the rest will return too.

Ms Coreen Soh, deputy general manager of The Little Skool-House, another brand under NTUC First Campus, says some parents who are still working from home prefer to keep their children with them, while others remain concerned about how the Covid-19 situation will play out.

Others are monitoring their children to see if they can keep their masks on throughout the day before they send them back, says Ms Pua Yoke Ting, principal of Star Learners at Bishan Central.

READING THE MIDDLE GROUND

For some families, it is a matter of logistics. They have children of different age groups and prefer to keep them together, says Ms Thian Ai Ling, general manager of NTUC First Campus' My First Skool and afterschool.

An example is Ms Eileen Yeo, 37, who is opting to tread the middle



I feel it's almost impossible that young kids of his age can have any social distancing. Also, wearing masks the whole day seems very challenging.



MS CAROL ZHAO (left). She and her husband, Mr Dennis Liang, are in no hurry to send their son, Bolan Liang, three, back to school

At her age, I think her immune system may not be as strong as my older kid's.



MS EILEEN YEO (above), on her daughter Arwen, four. She and her husband, Mr Alan Kong, are opting to tread the middle ground. Arwen goes to school on alternate weeks like her brother, Aiken, who is in Primary 1

ground and do half and half. Her daughter Arwen, four, returned to her Nursery 2 class last Monday and will alternate between a week of pre-school and a week of home-schooling.

This arrangement works for her as her son, Aiken, also alternates between classroom learning and home-based learning in Primary 1. Both children suffer from allergic rhinitis and eczema, which adds to her worries about their use of masks.

Arwen has been out of pre-school for about three months. Ms Yeo withdrew her from class after the centre had a child's caregiver testing positive for Covid-19.

"That freaked us out a little bit," she says.

"At her age, I think her immune system may not be as strong as my older kid's," adds Ms Yeo, whose flexible schedule as a realtor allows

her to work and teach Arwen at home.

WARRANTED FEARS

While parents are understandably concerned about their children being exposed to the coronavirus, Dr Chan Poh Chong, head and senior consultant at the division of general ambulatory paediatrics and adolescent medicine at the National University Hospital (NUH), says the good news is that so far, infections in children are less common and severe compared with those in adults.

"It doesn't seem to spread in schools and childcare centres as much as it does through close family contact and enclosed or poorly ventilated areas," he says.

The enhanced health and safety measures in schools, from social distancing to the use of masks to hand-

washing, helped prevent the spread of other common infections as well.

On the flip side, he worries that an extended break from school will interrupt a child's cognitive and socio-emotional development, although parents who actively teach their kids at home can mitigate the effects.

"Unfortunately, many parents are busy themselves, either at work or doing work from home, and may leave their children with digital devices to entertain themselves. This not only reduces proper and useful learning, but also increases negative traits like addictions and behavioural issues," he says.

"Physical activities in small enclosed homes are limited and reduced outdoor activities will also impair toddlers' physical development."

He and other experts suggest

keeping these children engaged with meaningful activities at home so that they can keep learning and avoid becoming addicted to screens.

Dr Cynthia Lim, senior lecturer in the Early Childhood Education Programme at the S R Nathan School of Human Development at the Singapore University of Social Sciences, says pre-schoolers who stay at home can still reap learning benefits if their parents actively engage them in daily routines such as eating, doing chores and bathing.

"There are many 'teachable moments' parents can make use of being at home 24/7 with their children. Interactions are bound to lead to learning," she adds.

Parents looking to teach their young ones at home can turn to local websites such as Homeschool Singapore, which offers consultation services and resources for short- and long-term homeschooling.

Mr Mark Lim, its media liaison, reports a 230 per cent increase in inquiries this year compared with last year. Most queries were from parents of pre-schoolers.

Some schools also provide learning resources that parents can tap. My First Skool, for example, engages children and parents via its Parents Portal and YouTube channel.

Spending more time together at home forges a closer emotional bond, says Dr Lim. It allows parents to teach at their child's pace, as well as cater to his or her interests.

However, being in close quarters with older pre-schoolers aged four to six as they have more opportunities for peer interactions, such as taking turns, teamwork and making friends.

Parents who choose to keep their young children at home should enforce screen-time rules, she says. There should also be a clear schedule with periods where the children are expected to play on their own, such as building a hide-out or fortress, or playing with open-ended materials such as recycled items like bottle caps and leaves.

"Parents should support the social-emotional development of their children before any academic goals. This has a more far-reaching effect than learning the ABCs at this age," says Dr Lim.

ADAPTING TO NEW NORMAL

But Dr Lim warns that a long absence will also make the transition back to school harder.

One way parents can help is to keep in contact with their child's teacher via online meetings to maintain the emotional attachment.

In addition, she says, children

also have to "learn a new way of functioning in school", where there is now less peer and social interaction. Pre-schools have instituted a slew of stringent measures to protect their returning pre-schoolers, including regular disinfection of surfaces, segregating children and staff, and strict health checks.

Star Learners has installed air purifiers with natural pharmaceutical-grade Australian tea tree oil, which is said to be antibacterial, while The Little Skool-House uses desk shields at tables during activities and mealtimes at its 20 centres.

The Government also screened some 30,000 teaching and non-teaching pre-school staff before centres resumed full services.

In addition, centres have created attractive educational resources and activities to help children understand and follow the new rules.

PCF Sparkletots created stickers, storybooks, activity sheets and card games for its pre-schoolers, while My First Skool launched a 30-day Safe & Healthy Habits Challenge.

Such multi-pronged efforts have helped allay parents' concerns. Ms Too Bee Sin, 35, a research and development engineer, says she "can return to work with peace of mind" after experiencing the smooth check-in and safe distancing protocols at PCF Sparkletots, where her daughter Adele is enrolled.

The six-year-old took a while to adapt to wearing a mask, but was pleased to receive one from the school that had her favourite cartoon character on it. She was so proud to be appointed a "Stay Safe Hero" to champion safe distancing that "she also wants us to exercise safe distancing even at home", Ms Too quips.

Mrs Poornima Deepan, 35, has sent her daughters, aged four and two, back to their Star Learners childcare centre as she is confident about its safety measures.

"Since I work from home, it's a bit tough to manage the kids. There's only so much you can do to entertain them and, after that, they go back to watching TV. When they go to school, they have fun activities to do," says the IT consultant.

With Covid-19 expected to be around for some time, parents should not let their fears hinder their children's development, says Dr Chan of NUH.

"Keeping our children safe, but allowing them to continue learning and interacting with others should be our aim in this new normal way of living."

stephyeo@sph.com.sg

(Right) Ms Too Bee Sin (with her husband, Mr Wong Jenn Hwa) has peace of mind to return to work after experiencing the smooth check-in and safe distancing protocols at PCF Sparkletots, where her daughter Adele, six, is enrolled.



(Right) Mrs Poornima Deepan (with her husband, Mr Deepan Mariapan) has let her daughters Eesha, four, and Kayla, two, return to Star Learners childcare centre, where they can participate in more fun activities than just watching TV at home.

