

MINOR ISSUES

Navigating social media access with a teen | **C3**

GAME FOR FAN MEET

K-idol Lee Jun-ho shows love for his supporters | **C5**



life

VOLUNTEERING IS A CALLING

Stefanie Sun's husband shares his 13-year journey | **C6**



Help pandemic kids enter Primary 1



Ms Siti Ummu Aidilah Badar, 29, teaching her son Muhammad Al-Zaim Muhammad Shafiq, six, how to pack his bag for Primary 1. ST PHOTO: BRIAN TEO

Pre-schoolers who grew up during Covid-19 had fewer chances of socialisation and learning, but good parental support can prepare them for a new chapter



Stephanie Yeo
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Muhammad Al-Zaim Muhammad Shafiq is starting Primary 1 in January 2024, but he spent much of his pre-school life wearing a mask and practising social distancing. He started nursery school at My First Skool at Block 63 Telok Blangah Heights when he was three, shortly before Covid-19 forced all schools to shut down during the circuit breaker in April 2020. When schools reopened almost two months later, teaching children in their formative years how to read and write became more difficult, as teachers had to find ways to express themselves clearly behind masks and face shields. Spontaneous play ceased as their young charges learnt that standing

apart was safer. Zaim, now six, clearly missed being able to speak at will and play with his classmates, says his mother, Ms Siti Ummu Aidilah Badar, 29, a restaurant manager. Thankfully, the chatty boy has an older brother, seven, as his playmate at home. Almost four years since the pandemic, the repercussions of what some experts call "education's long-Covid" continue to reverberate around the world. In the United States, for example, school closures erased two decades worth of progress in reading and mathematics. Singapore's quick response in pivoting to home-based learning across all levels meant that the fallout was considerably less dire here than in many other countries, but studies have yet to reveal the long-term picture as the Covid-19 generation enters formal schooling. The ages from birth to three years old are recognised as the time when the brain develops the fastest and children are the most primed to learn.

Research from around the globe suggests that some young children who grew up during the pandemic have learning deficits in "expressive language" or being able to express how they think and feel, says Dr Mercy Karuniah Jesuadian, a lecturer in psychology and child and human development at the National Institute of Education at Nanyang Technological University. How well pre-schoolers have managed to bridge that gap depended on many factors, from whether they were enrolled in pre-school during the pandemic to whether they had access to online lessons at home. At the same time, not all pre-schools here pivoted swiftly to online teaching, a platform that is "especially tricky" for the very young as they learn best when it is hands-on and interactive, Dr Jesuadian notes. Local research suggests that family socio-economic status (SES) also shaped children's learning during the pandemic, she adds. Those from higher SES families had better-educated parents who interacted more with their kids, read more to them and taught them more knowledge and skills. Adding to the learning and development challenges was the unsaid – and often unseen – mental toll the pandemic took on the youngest members of society, who

may not have been able to articulate what was happening to them. Some kids found it difficult to adjust to the extreme changes Covid-19 brought on and showed it in different ways, from social anxiety to selective mutism. "We had kids who were overwhelmed having to interact and go out to crowded places. We had to work on anxiety management and exposure therapy," says Ms Pamela See, an educational and developmental psychologist with private counselling practices Think Psychological Services and Think Kids. "Some kids had poorer social skills and needed more structured learning to close that gap. And we had some kids who did not speak in public due to anxiety." Pre-school educators saw firsthand the effects of the lockdown and social distancing and worked hard to help their students catch up. Ms Thian Ai Ling, general manager of My First Skool, which has 157 centres and 24,000 pupils, says: "The current Kindergarten 2 children, who were three years old when the Covid-19 pandemic started, had limited social interactions outside of home then, as they were kept away from playgrounds and had fewer play dates. "When they returned to pre-school, we observed behaviours such as reluctance to share or take

turns. In pre-school, these children had to rely on other cues, such as the tone of voice and body language, to better read and understand their teachers who were wearing masks." That said, it is important to note that children's experiences during the pandemic varied depending on many factors, including family support, says Ms Tan Su-Lynn, a senior educational psychologist at Promises Healthcare. Zaim, for instance, seems better prepared for Primary 1 than his brother, Muhammad Al-Aniq Muhammad Shafiq, who is just a year older. "He's cleverer in his studies because he started school one year earlier than his brother," Ms Siti says, adding that Zaim also has better social skills because he has an elder sibling. She credits his teachers for proactively suggesting ways to help him at home, as well as My First Skool's Learn & Share programme (formally called its Home Learning Programme), which has online content that students could participate in together with their parents since 2021. This hybrid approach complements the in-school curriculum. But since Zaim does not like to share, Ms Siti is taking pains to reinforce this skill before school starts. She has also learnt from her elder son's Primary 1 experience of buying unnecessary items from the school bookshop and aims to teach Zaim how to manage money better. Ms Tan says: "Early intervention services, supportive parenting and access to quality early education programmes can help mitigate the potential negative effects on children's development and school readiness."

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MS PAMELA SEE, an educational and developmental psychologist, on how some children found it difficult to adjust to the extreme changes brought on by Covid-19

CONTINUED on C2