

Kids get chance to share views at inaugural forum

100 primary school pupils to join Children's Society dialogue next month

By LIM YI HAN

DO KIDS get enough play time? Is school too stressful? How do they want to spend weekends?

These are several of the questions which an Our Singapore Conversation-style forum next month are expected to ask. But the answers will come from those who know best – children.

Organised by the Singapore Children's Society, the inaugural forum, which will be an annual event, will see 100 primary school pupils taking part. The dialogue is part of a move by the society to reach out to more children.

Said chairman Koh Choon Hui: "Children always want adults to

listen to them more and after the forum we hope to provide feedback to the relevant authorities."

Added the society's executive director Alfred Tan: "Children don't bluff, they won't patronise you. We want them to say what they want to say."

The forum – which is the first of its kind here, according to the society – will be moderated by five adult panellists drawn from the society's volunteers and stakeholders, such as teachers and social work professionals.

"The children will be guided by trained facilitators, so it's not a concern that they may not be mature enough," explained Mr Tan. "The facilitators will make sure

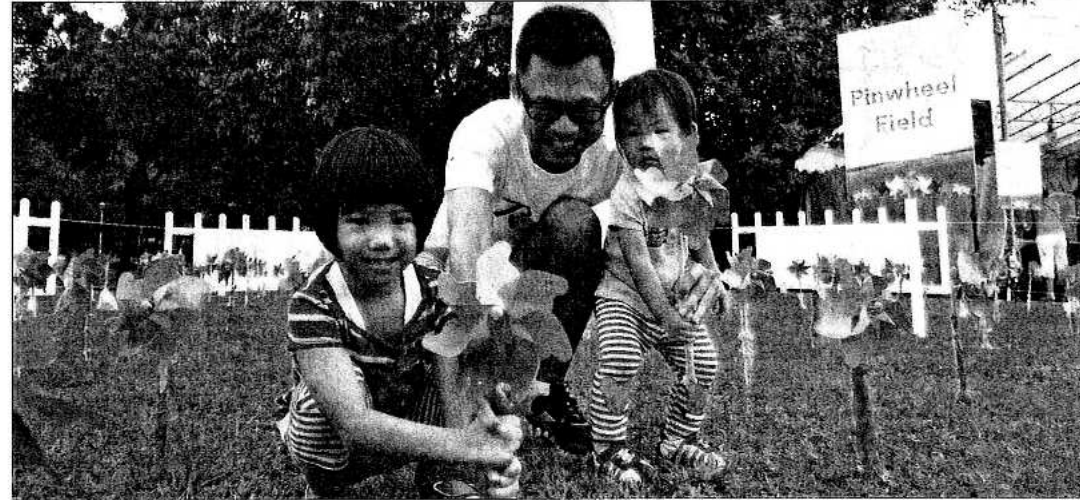
views are put in perspective."

The event also hopes to raise awareness about the work done by the Children's Society, which was set up in 1952.

It aims to promote the well-being of children, especially those from abusive and dysfunctional families. With 155 full-time staff running nine centres islandwide, its services include caregiving and giving talks in schools and community clubs on topics from parenting to character development.

Mr Koh pointed out that the society does not help children only from disadvantaged backgrounds. "Every child is important. Children who come from well-to-do families can run into trouble if they are not brought up with the right values," he told *The Straits Times*.

"The value system is what worries me now. Children are more ex-



Are kids here getting enough play time? The answer will come from those who know best – children – at an inaugural forum for them next month, part of a move by the Children's Society to reach out to more kids. ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM

posed to undesirable influences especially through social media these days."

Mr Tan added: "Now, children tend to communicate through on-line platforms. They don't play with each other outdoors as much.

"There is also a lot more information available to kids these days so it is very difficult to control them because parents don't know what they are getting."

Youth crime rates for the most common offences have gone down – police arrested 584 people aged seven to 19 for crimes including theft and rioting between

January and March, down from 935 during the same period last year. But Mr Koh stressed that "preventive work" is still very important.

Mr Koh said: "The rehabilitation process is more costly, and usually more painful. We should prevent them from crossing the line, and avoid getting into trouble in the first place."

As such, the Children's Society will do more to engage children. It will, for instance, work more closely with grassroots organisations to help children living in interim rental housing blocks.

It will also expand current pro-

grammes, such as Project Cabin. Classrooms in schools are turned into centres, complete with board and video games and computers, giving students at risk of juvenile delinquency a place to spend their time after school. Run by the society's staff, there are currently 19 "cabins", which also offer character development programmes, in secondary schools.

The Children's Society said it reached out to more than 70,000 children last year. Mr Tan said: "The focus now is not to wait for them to come to us, but we go to them."

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