

Govt plans to license babysitters, childcare centres

By DAPHNE LEE
daphne@thestar.com.my

KUALA LUMPUR: The Government will use the carrot-and-stick approach to get home-based "babysitters" and childcare centres to apply for licences and seek proper training for their staff.

Women, Family and Community Development Minister Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil told *The Star* that her ministry had been reviewing the Childcare Centre Act over the past year.

"We have been in dialogue with childcare practitioners and others involved in children's welfare. What we realised is that there are many gaps in the curriculum and infrastructure of childcare centres, as well as the laws governing them.

"I'm happy to say that we are now ready to submit proposals to amend the Act. These amendments are based on concerns for safety, quality of care and the training of child-minders," she said.

At present, thousands of working parents rely on child-minders or nursery operators, the majority of whom are not trained or licensed. The Social Welfare Department shows that, nationwide, only 1,831 childcare cen-

tres are licensed as of March this year.

"It is a real problem. Childcare centres and nurseries come under my ministry and it is very important that I ensure that these places are safe and provide quality care," said Shahrizat.

On Feb 9, a toddler died while in the care of a nursery in Petaling Jaya which was later found to be operating without a permit. Two-and-a-half-month-old Brandon Teh had asphyxiated when he choked on his own vomit.

Shahrizat said the care of children from birth to the age of four came under the ministry's welfare department that was in charge of issuing permits to childcare centres.

Among the proposed amendments to the Childcare Centre Act - which the minister will table in Parliament in July - are the extension of the validity period of the certificate of registration from 12 months to 60 months and increased penalties on unregistered childcare centres. The current penalty is a RM1,000 fine or a two-year prison term.

Shahrizat, however, stressed that she preferred to use a non-punitive, humanitarian approach in encouraging centres to apply for permits.

She urged parents who used day-care



Shahrizat: 'It is important that I ensure that these places are safe and provide quality care'

facilities to find out if the service they used was licensed and inform the ministry or the department accordingly.

Shahrizat is also encouraging childcare centre operators to enrol their staff for the 19-day basic childcare course conducted by the welfare department.

"The course costs just RM480 and covers essential topics such as nutrition and hygiene, storytelling and physical activities. It is a small price for

operators to pay if they want their staff to deliver the best care,' she said, adding that she wanted government-recognised day-care centres to set the benchmark in the industry.

Shahrizat will also launch the "prototype" early childcare centre at Taska Penyayang Bakti in Bandar Sri Damansara here in June, with nine more to be opened in various parts of the country by the end of the year.

These centres will provide quality care for the children of low-income families whose monthly earnings do not exceed RM2,000. They will be charged a subsidised fee of RM100 a month per child.

Parents who earn more may also enrol their children as it is hoped that the centres will be places that promote social as well as racial integration.

Shahrizat said her ministry had set up a committee headed by the secretary-general and comprising childcare practitioners, experts from universities and NGO representatives to ensure a smooth implementation of the law, upgrading of the childcare infrastructure, security, and quality care and education.

(The Star, 29 Apr 2006)

■ See *StarMag* tomorrow for full report