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TITLE: Parents play important role in helping kids learn Mother Tongue: Sim Ann

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SINGAPORE: Minister of State for Education Sim Ann said parents have an important role in shaping their children's attitudes and interest in the learning of Mother Tongue languages, particularly in the early years.

She told reporters after opening the Second Mother Tongue Languages Symposium on Saturday that it is not about the level of proficiency parents can demonstrate to the child that makes the difference, but an encouraging and positive mindset that nothing is too difficult.

Reading is an inexpensive yet powerful way to interest children in Mother Tongue, Ms Sim said.

She said: "When children hear grown-ups read, they pick up sounds that form the language, which in turn helps them to speak and interact using the language. When they see the words in the books, it helps them to pick up new vocabulary and how the words are used in the context of a story. When the children are familiar with the story, we can encourage them to retell the stories in their own words which then helps them to develop confidence in using the language and even be creative, giving the story a new twist or added details. We can also role-play it with them."

Some parents said they read to their children a few times a week, starting when their children were barely a few months old.

Educators said reading together can also improve parent-child bonding, but parents should keep such reading sessions light-hearted and fun.

Lim Kwee Hua, master teacher at Curriculum Planning and Development Division, Ministry of Education, said: "It's a kind of enjoyment. So after reading, parents can carry out activities with their children - let's say, telling a story, do a bit of acting, or drawing. Actually parents can think of activities to enhance the reading of stories."

For parents who may not be fluent in their Mother Tongue, experts said there are other ways parents can help their children.

Mdm Lim said: "At the National Library, they also have storytelling time. Actually parents can

bring their child to the library's storytelling time. After storytelling time, they can bring the book home to read."

S P Jeyarajadas Pandian, supervisor, principal, and master teacher of Umar Pulavar Tamil Language Centre and Curriculum Planning & Development Division, said: "If they are not Tamil-speaking, or it's not a Tamil-speaking home, they should firstly try to speak (Tamil).

"They should invite friends who're Tamil-speaking more frequently to their homes and they should start speaking in Tamil, and that person who comes to the home, the visitors, can speak to the children. And at the same time, I think the parents should also try their best to have some words - some small action words, like 'go', 'come', 'comb your hair', 'put on your shoes'. These can be very simply spoken in Tamil."

Nazariah Ali, a mother of three, said: "In school, mostly they will speak in English. But at home I will try to speak to them in Malay so that they know about their Mother Tongue language instead of just English. So I believe that for kids, whatever we start should be at home, so only we can teach (ourselves) Malay language instead of outsiders."

Beyond the school and homes, Ms Sim said community partners can play a role in providing students with opportunities to be immersed in an environment that is conducive for learning the language.

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