

FIRE SAFETY

A BURNING PROBLEM WITH KIDS AT HOME

Statistics show that a child dies from fire-related injuries in Malaysia every two weeks. A study also shows that only one in three parents consistently teach their kids about fire safety at home. To improve the level of fire safety awareness among children, the government has rolled out a six-month pilot project with help from international stakeholders. **JUNE MOH** writes

WITH a reported 265,000 childhood deaths every year worldwide caused by fire-related incidents, The World Health Organisation (WHO) has categorised burns as a global public health problem.

WHO also reported that more than half the deaths take place in Southeast Asia, with most of the cases happening in low- and middle-income countries. Non-fatal burn injuries are a leading cause of morbidity, with fire-related injuries occurring mainly in the home and workplace.

In Malaysia, statistics have shown that a child dies every two weeks from fire and burn injuries, and 54 per cent of respondents in a survey have reported incidents of burns and scalds at home.

With the level of fire safety

awareness still wanting, the Urban Wellbeing, Housing and Local Government Ministry engaged Safe Kids Malaysia Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) to conduct a pilot study on fire safety involving 640 parents of children aged between 7 and 12 years.

The study, conducted last year, discovered that only one in three parents consistently taught their kids about fire safety and only 11 per cent of parents reported that schools frequently taught fire safety education.

It also found out that 6.4 per cent of parents reported a fire in their homes in the past two years.

Based on the study, a pilot project, Safe Kids At Home: Preventing Fire and Burns, was rolled out in March in nine primary schools in Sentul, Kuala Lumpur.

The schools are SK Seri Delima, SK Bandar Baru Sentul, SK Sentul 1, SK Kiaramas, SJK (T) Segambut, SJK (T) Fletcher, SJK (T) Sentul, SJK (C) Chung Kwok and SJK (C) Sentul Pasar.

The six-month project, in partnership with the Fire and Rescue Department, is expected to benefit some 6,000 students by the time it is completed.

Deputy Urban Wellbeing, Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Halimah Mohamed Sadique said the lack of awareness of the importance of fire safety among Malaysian children was alarming.

"In 2016, the Fire and Rescue Department conducted 5,251 fire safety awareness talks and 6,089 fire drills to educate society on the importance of this matter," she said.

The initiatives, she said, would be followed by more programmes by the Fire and Rescue Department to keep children safe from preventable injuries, namely burns and fire.

Malaysia is the first country in Southeast Asia selected for the programme after China and India.

"I hope the programme, which started in Sentul, will eventually be scaled up and reach more children in more areas over time.

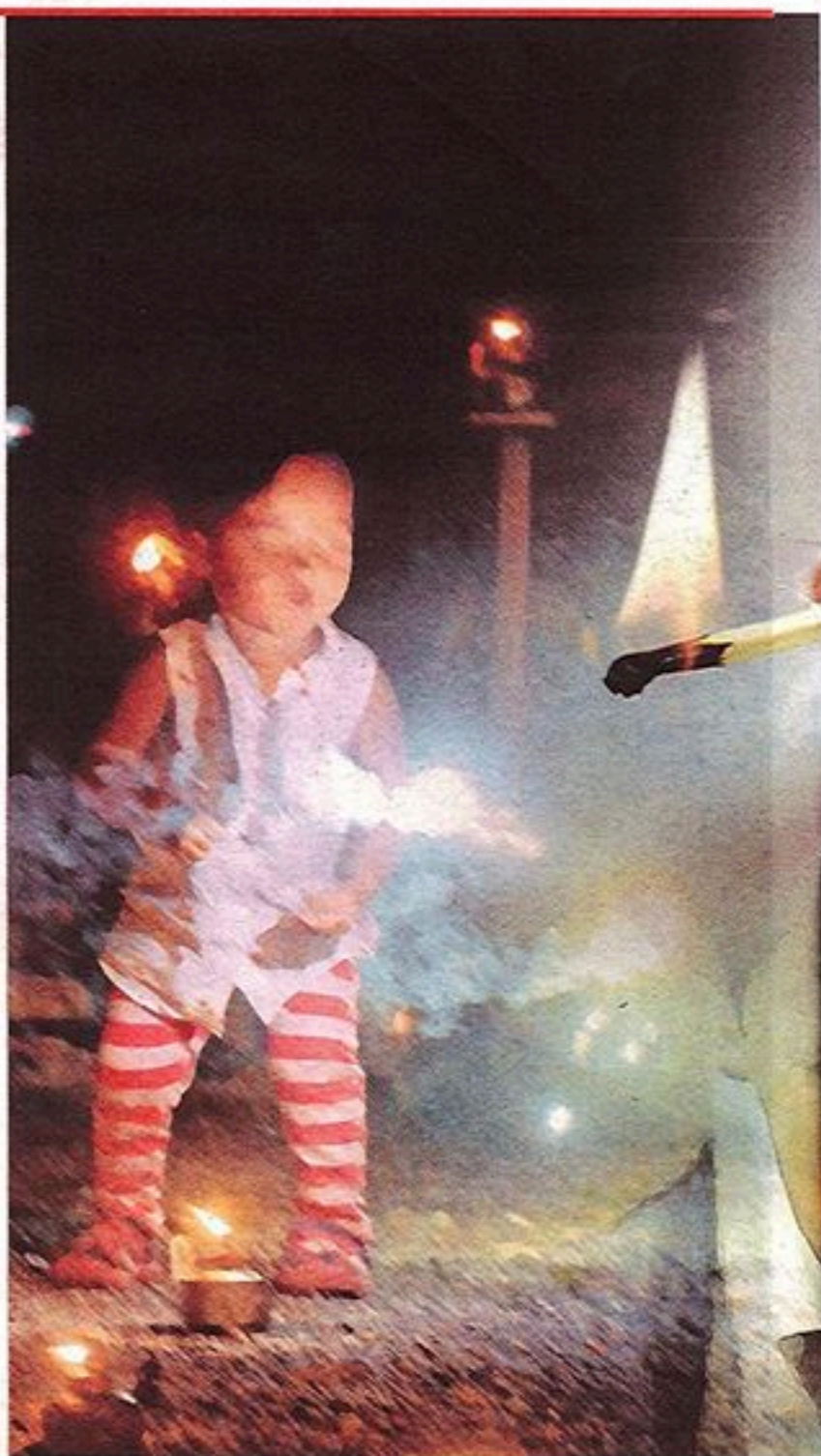
"One day, we will cover the entire nation," she said.

Safe Kids Malaysia UPM executive director Associate Professor Dr Kulanthayan K.C. Mani hoped more children would benefit from the programme in the future.

"There is clearly a need to educate children and encourage more parents to reinforce key safety messages at home.

"Parents may expect their kids to be educated on fire safety awareness in school, but that may not always be the case," he said.

"Based on the study, we found out that there is a critical need for



Safe Kids Malaysia UPM found that 6.4 per cent of parents reported a fire in their homes in the past two years.



fire and burn education for children," he told the *New Sunday Times*.

The programme, he said, went specifically into the aspect of education in fire and burns prevention for children.

According to WHO, burns were the 11th leading cause of death of children aged 1 to 9, and were also the fifth most common cause of non-fatal childhood injuries. While a major risk was improper adult supervision, a considerable number of burn injuries in children resulted from child maltreatment.

Another risk factor for burns was the socio-economic aspect, namely poverty, overcrowding and lack of proper safety measures.

Kulanthayan said children from low- and middle-income families were more susceptible to burn injuries due to lack of space.

"People in this socio-economic group are typically confined to a tight living space, where the kitchen is located quite close to other parts of the house.

"In some cases, children even end up playing in the kitchen, where they have access to a water heater, iron, rice cooker and other kitchenware."

For the study, Kulanthayan led a team of experts to conduct the first-ever fire and burn survey in the country to measure the level of awareness of preventable burn injuries and deaths among children.

The study found out that 51 per



Datuk Halimah Mohamed Sadique

STUDY RESULTS OF FIRE-RELATED CHILD INJURIES

Frequencies of child injuries in the past two years by cause

• Suffocation	2.3%
• Consumption/poisoning	3.3%
• Electric shock	9.1%
• Other injuries	23.9%
• Cut	26.9%
• Traffic accidents	34.5%
• Burn and scald	54.1%
• Slip and fall	79.8%

Causes of fires at home, and in the homes of friends and neighbours in the last two years

• Gas flame	14.6%
• Faulty cookware	1.0%
• Loose/non-insulated wires	5.2%
• Use of old/faulty electrical appliances	4.2%
• Playing with matchsticks/lighters	18.8%
• Playing with firecrackers	16.7%
• Candles	37.5%
• Others	2.1%

Most common causes of burn injury in the home

• Touching hot utensils	24.4%
• Touching hot iron	21.7%
• Touching hot water heater	17.2%
• Motorcycle exhaust pipe	16.7%
• Burning firecrackers	14.4%
• Scalds while drinking hot beverages	10.5%
• Frying food	10.3%
• Cooking	6.1%
• Playing with candles	5.0%
• Blast from pressure cooker	4.7%
• Using gas stove	2.5%
• Touching ignited mosquito repellent coils	1.9%
• Acid spills/flammables	1.7%
• Blast from gas cylinder leakage	1.7%

Source: Safe Kids Malaysia UPM

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cent of parents were worried that their children were likely to suffer from a burn or scald at home than any other injury.

"Parents play a pivotal role in preventing fire and burn injuries at home," he said.

The top five most common causes of burn injuries at home, he said, included touching a hot utensil (24.4 per cent), hot iron (21.7 per cent), hot water heater (17.2 per cent), having close contact with motorcycle exhaust pipes (16.7 per cent) and burning firecrackers (14.4 per cent).

"A child touching a hot wok in the kitchen stove may only be treated for a mild injury.

"However, the child is susceptible to second- or third-degree burns when the wok overturns and spills its hot content," he said.

The study was done in collaboration with the Fire and Rescue Department, the Education Ministry, United States-based Safe Kids Worldwide and Honeywell

Hometown Solutions.

Honeywell Asean president Brian Greer said the programme followed the successful model that had reached three million students in 20 cities in China.

It was expected to reach 325,000 students and 175,000 parents in India by year's end.

"We hope the students will take home what they learned in schools. When they grow up, they will be more proactive in educating their own children about fire and burn safety," said Greer.

The module, he said, included exercises at home, which the children were required to complete with their parents.

"For example, they have to speak to their parents and map out the fire escape plan to learn how to exit the house in the event of fire.

"More people had died from smoke-related deaths than the fire. Fire victims are often trapped in hallways and in places where they tried to seek a way out."

FIRST AID

Home remedies 'not advisable' for burn injuries

MOST parents are clueless when it comes to providing first aid to their children who suffer scalds and burns at home.

The study by Safe Kids Malaysia Universiti Putra Malaysia found that two out of five parents said they would look for a household remedy to treat a scald or burn injury.

Surprisingly, 83 per cent of the parents said they would reach out for toothpaste to apply on the affected skin.

This was not advisable and could increase the risk of infection and scar, said Fire and Rescue Department director-general Datuk Wan Mohd Nor Ibrahim.

"Using toothpaste will not minimise injury from burning and scalding. In fact, it will make it worse," he said.

The World Health Organisation (WHO), in its "World Report on Child Injury Prevention", wants the immediate application of "cool (not ice cold) water" to burns to be promoted as an effective first-aid treatment.

"There are many studies assessing the first aid of burns in high-income countries, and from these, examples of good practices, such as to 'cool the burn', are drawn," it said.

"Cooling the burn surface is one of the oldest methods of treatment. However, only a handful of studies have examined burn interventions in low- and middle-income countries."

The following are first aid dos and don'ts, according to WHO.

DOS:

Stop the burning process by removing clothing and irrigating the burns;

Extinguish flames by allowing the patient to roll on the ground, or by applying a blanket, or by using water or other fire-extinguishing liquids;

Use cool running water to reduce the temperature of the burn;

In chemical burns, remove or dilute the chemical agent by irrigating with large volumes of water; and,

Wrap the patient in a clean cloth or sheet and transport to the nearest appropriate

facility for medical care.

DON'TS:

Do not start first aid before ensuring your own safety (switch off electrical current, wear gloves for chemicals, etc.);

Do not apply paste, oil, haldi (turmeric powder) or raw cotton to the burn;

Do not apply ice because it deepens the injury;

Avoid prolonged cooling with water because it will lead to hypothermia;

Do not open blisters until topical antimicrobials can be applied, such as by a healthcare provider;

Do not apply any material directly to the wound as it might become infected; and,

Avoid application of topical medication until the patient has been placed under appropriate medical care.



Datuk Wan Mohd Nor Ibrahim

BURN CASES AROUND THE WORLD

1. In India, more than a million people are moderately or severely burnt every year.

2. Nearly 173,000 Bangladeshi children are moderately or severely burnt every year.

3. In Bangladesh, Colombia, Egypt and Pakistan, 17 per cent of children with burns have a temporary disability and 18 per cent have a permanent disability.

4. Burns are the second most common injury in rural Nepal, accounting for 5 per cent of disabilities.

5. In 2008, over 410,000 burn injuries occurred in the United States, with approximately 40,000 requiring hospitalisation.

Source: World Health Organisation

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