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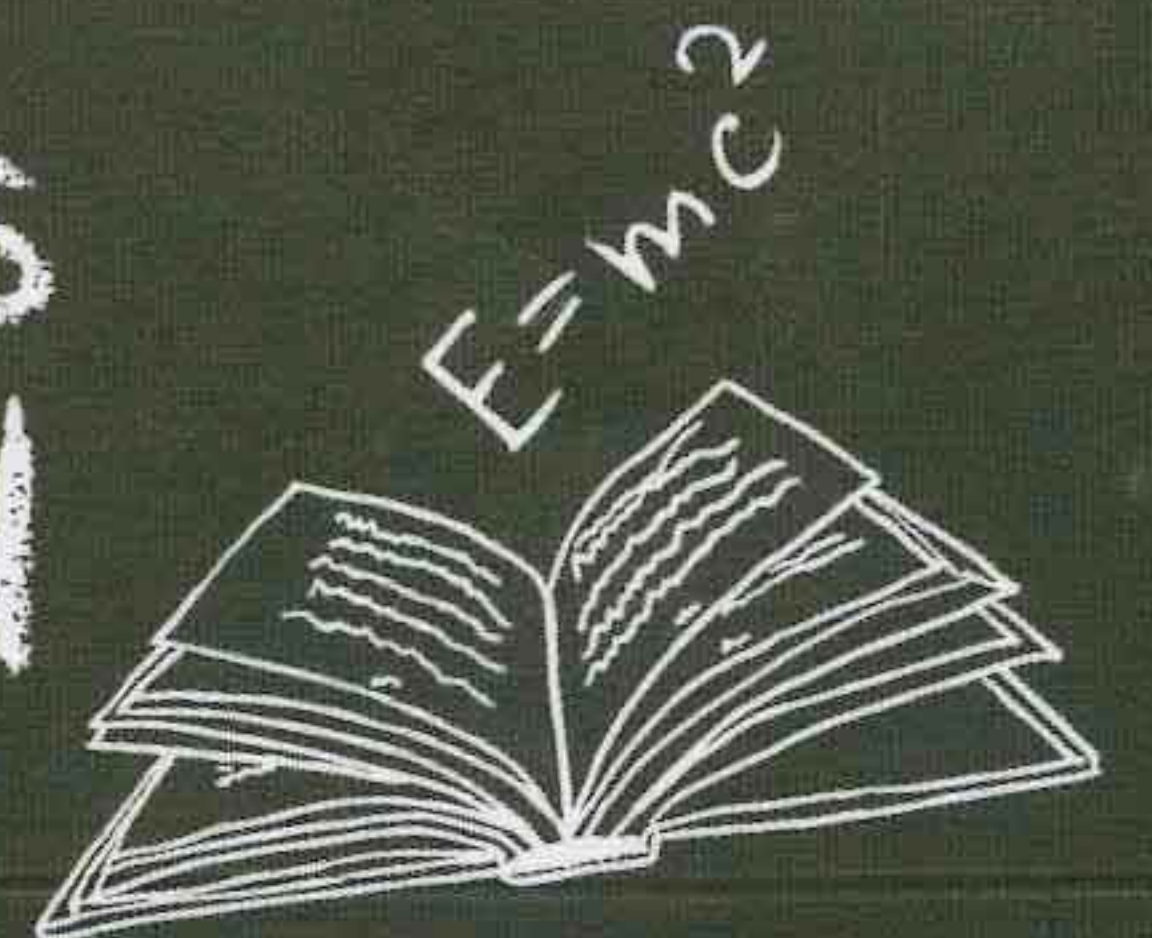
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Inspiring with Grace

WORDS LOW LAI CHOW

Character Montessori executive director Grace Yong confessed she was not easy to raise as a child. “I had a mind of my own and quite a strong character. My mum found me challenging to manage. She was of the opinion that little girls should be seen and not heard. Good children should just obey and not ask why. But I was always trying to bend the rules and in a sense challenge them.”

Growing up, the mother of four boys aged 11 to 20 wasn’t sure of what she wanted to be, although she vaguely thought about taking on an office job like her accountant mother. After graduating with a business administration degree from NUS, she went on to work as a communications executive for a Christian relief organisation before moving on to help out in a friend’s educational toy business with marketing and sourcing.

“The educational toys retail toy business shrivelled up with the economy nose-diving in the late 1990s. As I

had three little ones by then, I took the opportunity to work part time in the same company and started a new business unit, providing enrichment programmes (that used teaching aids for hands-on exploration to learn math concepts) for primary schools.”

It was during these seven years that her interest was piqued in children’s education. She also gravitated towards the area of character development, especially as this seemed to be sorely lacking in the preschools and primary schools her children were going to at the time.

Eventually, she took a masters degree in Early Childhood Education and started Character Montessori with her architect husband.

In the initial years of setting up the school, she found it difficult to adjust to time away from the children. These days, simple routines — like having family dinners on most nights, as well as family meetings on a fortnightly or monthly basis, where they discuss issues like

turning off the lights to conserve energy at home — allow her to ensure all is well at home so she can focus on her work.

Being a career mom is something she compares to a juggling act that can never be perfected. Sometimes, the line between family and her work is blurred — right down to the two coconut trees from home that have since become a permanent fixture at the school’s Punggol centre — but the family simply laugh it off. “Even now, Roy is grumbling about his coconut palms!”

One might even think of Character Montessori as an extension of Grace’s approach to parenting — Grace is a firm believer that shaping moral character is fundamental to a child’s education.

A few months ago, her third son Daniel came home with the preliminary exam results for his ‘O’ levels and said he was glad that — unlike his friends, who would tweet about letting their parents down with lacklustre exam scores — he never felt the need to feel “like a failure”.

“When I heard that, I felt that I was the one who had passed the test!” Grace said she’s always known she wants to pass on core traits such as confidence, self-awareness, moral reasoning, resilience and gratefulness to her children.

With a ‘seize the day’ approach to life — “There is no such thing as a typical day for me” — Grace is inspired by people with faith in what they do and make a difference in the lives of others. In turn, she is a source of inspiration to her family and the people around her.

Her advice for career mums? Work on developing good parenting skills (“There are no bad children, only badly managed ones”), set clear parenting goals with their spouses, prioritise these goals, and never feel guilty about making choices.

“Accept the fact that you are human. There will always be times you wish you had done more.”

Wise words indeed. 