Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh and a very good afternoon.

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Distinguished Ministers from Asia and Pacific countries

Excellencies, High Commissioners, Ambassadors

Delegates and Speakers

Honoured Guests

Members of the Media

Ladies and Gentlemen

1. “To reach real peace in the world, we will have to begin with the children,” said Mahatma Gandhi. Such is the transformative power of childhood. However, we will never reach real peace if children are exposed to violence, conflict and war. Not a day passes without vivid images of violent scenes which are watched by children on TV and the newer media such as video and computer games, smart phones, and electronic tablets, to name a few. Children are also victims and witnesses to violence, crimes, or abuse in their homes, schools and communities. According to a US Department of Justice survey in 2009, more than 50 percent of American children were exposed to violence. More alarming is the recruitment and induction of children into combat and terrorism.

2. What is then the impact on children? It has been reported that repetitive exposure to violence is often associated with long-term physical, psychological, and emotional harm. Later in life the children are at higher risks of engaging in criminal behaviour and are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, suffer from depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic disorders. They are also more likely to fail or have difficulty in school or become delinquent.
3. We can and we must prevent such harmful behaviour from young before it’s too late. Decades of rigorous neuroscience research has shown that children’s earliest experiences play critical roles in brain development. Scientists have found that neural circuits, which create the foundation for learning, behavior and health, are most flexible or “plastic” during the first three years of life.

4. We know that positive early experiences, especially stable and stimulating relationships with loving, caring and responsive parents, family members and other care givers in society, safe and supportive environments, and appropriate nutrition strengthen these neural circuits. When encouraged by loving and caring responses, motivation, confidence and competence will tend to flourish.

5. On the other hand negative reaction, abuse or neglect can compromise essential aspects of psychological development. I’ve told that a stress hormone called cortisol is raised in these situations and can damage the developing brain when there is no familiar, trusted adult to provide the prompt, intimate reassurance that helps bring stress hormones back to baseline levels. This may lead to life long problems in learning, behavior and physical and mental health.

6. The period 0-3 years is therefore critical for every aspect of a child’s development. We must take this opportunity to provide high quality and effective interventions which can determine how well the brain matures and influences a child’s development. Comprehensive Early Childhood Education and Care or ECEC lays the foundation for healthy growth, creativity, cognition, language, emotional and social competence. As Dr Maria Montessori, said, “The most important period of life is not the age of university studies, but the first one, the period from birth to the age of six”.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

7. The growth of ECEC was rather slow in most countries, including Malaysia. Greater priority was given to compulsory primary education. It became apparent in the 1980s when colonialism came to an end, more women joined the labour force and extensive developments occurred in child and family policies in Europe and the United States. Examples from countries such as Sweden show the positive impact of welfare state policies on universal access to quality ECEC. Sweden ranked first in the United Nations Children’s Fund 2008 league table, of ECEC, followed by the Nordic countries of Iceland, Denmark, Finland and Norway with similar welfare state policies.

8. ECEC came to the fore with the UNESCO Declaration of Education for All or EFA in Jomtien in 1990 and the Dakar Framework for Action in year 2000. These documents recognise that learning begins at birth. Improving and expanding comprehensive ECEC became one of the six goals of basic education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

9. Even then ECEC expanded only modestly, mainly in urban areas. From more than 630 million children under 6 years of age, fewer than a third benefitted from any form of ECEC due to social, economic and geographic reasons. However, in economically advanced countries of the OECD approximately 25 percent of children under the age of three benefitted from ECEC, with some countries registering more than 50 percent.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

10. I believe it is our collective responsibility as parents, guardians, NGOs, governments and citizens of the world to develop and nurture the children from the earliest age possible.
We owe it to them to lay the foundation for empowering them to take on the challenges that are familiar to us now, as well as the possible complexities of tomorrow.

11. We should not underestimate the importance of ECEC, particularly when rapid societal changes have affected family units. Raising children has become more complex and earning two incomes is a necessity to meet family needs. Investing in ECEC helps working mothers enter the job market and earn a living with peace of mind, knowing that their children are in safe and secure learning and caring environments. More work-based ECEC centres will lower absenteeism, increase productivity, boost GDP and reduce welfare costs.

12. Most importantly, it is in childhood education that hope is brightest for the inculcation of values, ethics and roles that ultimately shape the nation’s character, growth and social cohesion, thus making it one of the most potent nation building properties. As said by Sadina Ali, the fourth Caliph of Islam “if you want to see the future of a country, look at its youth today”. There is no point building and leaving behind beautiful infrastructure and country if we don’t impart the right values for ethical conduct to the next generation. In fact it is easier to fix a broken road or to build it than to fix broken individuals. History shows that civilizations or countries with high level of education, beginning in the early years, were more progressive and tolerant and less likely to experience conflict or inequality.

13. The impact of ECEC in enhancing subsequent academic performance in school is indisputable from the numerous studies that have been published. Furthermore, cost-benefit analyses of early childhood interventions have shown, in different settings, that the returns on early childhood education and care can be as high as 8 USD for every 1 USD invested. The returns are attributed to savings in costs of later interventions such as remedial education, special education, health, nutrition, welfare and crime rehabilitation. Nobel Laureate in Economics James Heckman said, “At current levels of resource, society over invests in remedial skill investments at later ages and under invests in the early”. As aptly said by Frederick Douglass the African-American abolitionist who escaped slavery and became one of the famous intellectuals of his time, “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken adults”.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

14. Investment in children is about securing for a better tomorrow. Yet, it is truly paradoxical that, while knowledge about the impact of early childhood education is increasing, in most countries, this most crucial period of a child’s development is the one most neglected, underfunded and even disjointed from the continuum of education. Children from rural and low income families and those with special needs are at greatest risk of exclusion. This is unfortunate because much of the evidence suggests that the largest benefits are to children from the most disadvantaged families. Good childcare can compensate, at least partially, for a disadvantaged home life.

15. In times of resource scarcity, innovations are essential for inclusivity and quality. I congratulate the organisers for holding this regional policy forum on ECCE in Malaysia. Such a forum is crucial for sharing and disseminating innovations among countries in the Asia Pacific region and the rest of the world.

16. Thus, I must express my sincere gratitude to the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the PERMATA Division of the Prime Minister’s Department, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, UNESCO and the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood or ARNEC, for inviting me to deliver a keynote address this afternoon. I will share some ideas on Inclusivity and Quality in ECCE based on the experiences of Permata Negara, an ECEC programme for children aged 4 years and below which I initiated in 2005.
in this Forum I will not dwell upon preschool education that is under the purview of the Ministry of Education.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

17. PERMATA Negara is one of seven initiatives which come under the ambit of the PERMATA programme. "Permata" means ‘Jewel’ and ‘Negara’ means ‘Nation’, alluding to children as the Jewels of the Nation, where “Every Child is Precious and No Child Should be Left Behind”. PERMATA is guided by the philosophy that quality and holistic education must begin as early as possible and must uncover and nurture the enormous and invaluable potential inherent in all children. We echo what President John F. Kennedy once said: “All of us do not have equal talent, but all of us should have an equal opportunity to develop our talents.”

18. Based on that philosophy, the first initiative is Permata Negara or ECEC which is the foundation for giving children a headstart in life. Permata Pintar and Permata Insan are educational programmes for children aged 3-10 years who form 0.01 percent of the population who are gifted and talented. Permata Seni enhances the performance of children aged 7-16 years who are talented in music, choir, and dance. Permata Kurnia provides early intervention for children with autism spectrum disorder. Perkasa Remaja or youth empowerment programme helps them achieve long term change through engagement. The seventh is Permata Children’s Hospital, the first dedicated children’s specialist hospital in the country.

19. Permata Negara is a programme that arose out of my concern at the increasing prevalence of social ills such as drug abuse, delinquency, HIV/AIDS, dysfunctional families and so on, among youths. On 2 August 2005, nearly 11 years ago, I convened a meeting of professional women, academicians, government retirees, individuals interested in social and children’s issues and security personnel, to address these issues. Our meetings often lasted till late at night, prompting the Prime Minister Dato’ Sri Mohd Najib to tease us that our meetings were even longer than his Cabinet meetings. After several meetings we concluded that the many major threats to our children today aren’t a matter of chance, but a matter of choice.

20. So, we chose to promote a concerted and collaborative effort to save, improve and nurture young lives from the earliest age so that they will not become troubled adults later. In Malaysia this would cover about two and a half million children below 5 years. It is a long term solution to the type of society we wish to live in. Adopting the theme “Every Child is Precious, No Child Left Behind” we envisioned a new deal for children where not just some but all Malaysian children have the best start in life and the chance to succeed.

21. Convinced that an evidence-based approach is best for advocacy, we collected data and information from several sources. We studied ECEC programmes offered by various providers, scrutinised police statistics on juvenile crimes and misdemeanour, surveyed literature on ECEC in other countries and inspected the budget allocation. We visited prominent centres overseas, such as the Pen Green Centre in Corby County, England, to adopt good practices.

22. Based on our thorough research we discovered that ECEC in Malaysia is governed by two laws. ECEC for children 0-5 years comes under the Child Care Centre Act 1984 regulated by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, while preschool education for children aged 5-6 years falls under the Education Act 1996 regulated by the Ministry of Education. There was hardly any coordination, coherence and continuity in policy
and services. Budgetary allocation for preschool education was less than 1 percent in the period 2001-2005 with no clear provisions for children below 4 years.

23. There was also no national pedagogical and quality assurance framework to guide the variety of providers. There was also inadequate engagement of parents or guardians, families and communities to promote positive attitudes and behaviour towards children’s learning. Research findings were not compiled, disseminated and effectively utilised for planning, implementing, monitoring, evaluating and enhancing ECEC.

24. We resolved to bring the ECEC issues speedily to the front burner of policy makers at the highest level, and obtain a mandate for action. Strike while the iron is hot. This is where I helped to open doors for the new ideas to be presented to policy makers. As an old Chinese proverb says, “The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step”. So, on 21st February 2006, we took that first step in presenting our findings and recommendations to the then Deputy Prime Minister Dato’ Sri Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak in the presence of Ministers from four relevant Ministries, namely, Education, Housing and Local Government, Rural and Regional Development and Women, Family and Community Development. We were advised to hold further consultations with the relevant agencies, NGOs and the Media. By 21st June 2006 a Memorandum entitled “Every Child is Precious” was presented to the Cabinet for policy decisions.

25. We were extremely pleased and grateful that the Cabinet approved our recommendations for improved governance, accessibility, quality of curriculum, research, evaluation and monitoring. Most importantly RM 20 million was allocated for the period 2006-2010 to develop policies and programmes for Permata Negara. Since then I am happy to say that the Government has been most benevolent in allocating annual budgets to ECEC through these Ministries.

26. A Permata Coordinating Council was established under the Chairmanship of the Prime Minister, to develop, strengthen and coordinate policies on ECEC and their implementation under the existing laws for children aged 0-6 years. Equity in policy imperatives was achieved by targeting children aged 4 years and below, from rural and remote areas, new villages and low income urban areas, to ensure children who are known to benefit greatly from ECEC, are not left behind. A Permata Division in the Prime Minister’s Department was established to coordinate policy implementation in collaboration with the relevant agencies, the private sector and NGOs.

27. The Cabinet approved 7 pilot projects to test an internationally benchmarked ECEC curriculum which we developed together with a teacher training programme, in collaboration with Sultan Idris Education University. The Permata Negara curriculum has four distinct goals, namely, healthy children, strong families and communities, learning environments where children feel safe, secured and loved, and enrichment programmes to nurture talents. Based on the “learning is fun” concept, the curriculum brings out curiosity, creativity, interest and talents. Through play, exploration, experimentation, problem-solving and discovery children develop cognitive and social skills, confidence and values such as appreciation of diversity and love for the environment. Simple concepts in science, technology, mathematics and engineering or STEM are also incorporated. Recently we developed a method for identifying high intellectual ability for children below 5 years. A one week enrichment or junior science camp has been developed and implemented.

28. Parental involvement of at least four hours per month is compulsory to ensure continuity of learning at home. A Parents Association provides mutual support and organises weekend activities for the children. Health and dental checks are conducted twice a year and all
29. For the first time we determined the minimum qualification of diploma, but many of those recruited have a Bachelor’s degree. They underwent 6 weeks of training, 2 of which are practical training in a child care center.

30. The Cabinet also approved the establishment of the National Child Development Research Centre (NCDRC) at Sultan Idris Education University, which is also the reference centre for Permatas Negara.

31. By 2013 the regulations in the Child Care Act were amended to adopt the Permatas Negara Curriculum as the national curriculum and its Teacher Training programme became the standard for all educational institutions offering ECEC programmes. Research by NCDRC showed children in Permatas Negara Centres were 1-2 years ahead in cognitive, social and emotional development compared to peers in non Permatas Negara Centres. The programme has now been expanded to 850 centres nationwide in smart partnership with the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, the National Unity Department, and the State Governments of Terengganu and Pahang. These centers benefit more than 25,000 children in rural and low income urban communities. This is in addition to about 65,000 children who receive ECEC from about 4000 registered private childcare centres.

32. In 2015 we began developing quality assurance standards and processes called Permatas Q with the intention of enhancing quality and to celebrate documented achievements. The instruments were piloted on 605 centres. Based on the feedback, the instruments are being refined and hopefully it will become the national benchmark for ECEC.

33. In late 2015 we introduced Permatas Kurnia to provide early intervention for about 300 children with mild to moderate autism spectrum disorder and to prepare them for mainstream school and an independent and productive adulthood. The Permatas Kurnia Centre also trains teachers, conducts public awareness to eradicate ignorance and prejudice and empowers parents with skills to help their children achieve their potential.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

34. Reflecting on what I have shared with you, I do believe that in moving forward, we do not have to consider only innovations. Please allow me to highlight some ideas which are basic for ECEC which we have taken for granted and sometimes even forget to apply. I think these ideas are key in enhancing inclusivity and quality of ECEC in the Asia Pacific Region.

35. First is that advocacy must be evidence-based. Much progress in ECEC has been seen in this region but more need to be done through advocacy as Governments grapple with competing priorities. It is the Government through relevant Ministries which has primary responsibility for ECEC within the context of Education For All. Evidence-based advocacy will secure political will, adequate resources, support from a well informed public and commitment from bilateral and multilateral funding agencies as well as the private sector to sustain the momentum.

36. Second is to establish a strong governance at the national level. The Permatas Council, chaired by the Prime Minister is absolutely essential to ensure a systematic and integrated approach to policy development. This approach strengthens political will while taking into account the social, cultural and economic benefits. It also ensures equitable distribution of resources which prioritise universal access, quality and continuity of holistic development.
and well-being of children from birth to primary school. Targeting strategies for inclusivity require public funding and a variety of measures, such as tax credits or relief, offering vouchers to parents, reduced fees, and paying family allowances.

37. Third is to promote multi-sectoral collaboration. ‘It takes a village to raise a child’, says an African proverb. The environment children live in, the food they eat, the healthcare and education they receive, the policies and programmes impacting their socialization process are all important for nurturing or hindering the development of a child. These require key players not only from the education sector but also health, local authorities, safety departments, families and communities. A silo mentality must be eliminated as ECEC is too important to be handled only within an agency. A coordinating agency such as the Permata Division in the Prime Minister’s Department which oversees multi-sectoral collaboration will more likely lead to greater access, inclusivity, integration of services, better monitoring to enhance quality and ensure safe, secure and loving environments for children to learn and grow. It will also provide a stable framework and long term agenda for research and evaluation.

39. ICT will continue to be a major influence in life as rapid technological advances will give rise to more and more sophisticated tools and children will spend more and more time on interactive media. We must teach them to use such tools for learning in a responsible, moral and ethical manner. We must guide them on how to select helpful ideas and reject harmful ones.

40. Most importantly we must educate both the mind and the heart. Through volunteerism and civic engagement we must instil an awareness of good citizenship with love and loyalty to the nation. We must also help them develop a global vision of peace, non-violence, social justice, human rights, democracy, cultural diversity and environmental awareness. If we do not teach them peace, love, compassion and respect for life, someone else will teach them violence and hatred, both in the real and virtual world.

41. Fifth is teacher quality. There must be a minimum qualification and appropriate remuneration rates. In many countries at least a Bachelor’s degree is required. Through basic education and continuing professional development, teachers must be trained to make children feel safe to take risks, learn to trust and encourage them to ask questions, share their feelings and ideas, and grow. As Einstein said, “It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.” Nurturing curiosity and the instinct to seek solutions as well as to help the child differentiate between good and evil are perhaps the most important contributions a teacher can make.

42. Sixth is compulsory parental involvement for continuity of care and mutual support. Home background is and will continue to be the single most powerful influence on a child’s development. High quality ECEC cannot be expected to compensate fully for poor parenting. Parents are the first teachers who are responsive to the child’s own unique individuality. They have a duty to keep them safe. The way parents respond, and the way children naturally reach out cannot be scientifically analysed and measured. Yet, the loving touch and intimate one-to-one interaction such as baby talk, the back and forth smiling and
gurgling, the repeating of sounds, words, gestures, the joy over very small step in the child’s progress, along with adequate nutrition, are what constitute the essential input for the development of healthy brain circuits and the child’s emotional, physical and cognitive development.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

43. A Chinese proverb says, “When the winds of change blows, some people build walls and others build windmills.” We owe it to our children to build windmills. There is already evidence from many countries of what can be achieved through strong national strategies supported by effective development co-operation. Towards Education for All, progress under these strategies could and must be accelerated through increased international support, particularly for countries in transition, countries affected by conflict, and post-crisis countries.

44. ECEC has eroded the last great obstacles to equality for many millions of working women. Parents reconcile the competing demands and pleasures of income-earning and family life. When parents return to work GDP and public revenue increase, welfare budgets are reduced. ECEC offers an opportunity for societies to attempt a further significant reduction in poverty, inequality, and disadvantage. Employers must take heed of these benefits and encourage the establishment of more ECEC centers at the workplace.

45. For the children, there is no more important cause than providing every child with the necessary building blocks and conducive environment to enjoy a life full of love and laughter with other children, where they can dream and have the chance to succeed in life. As the popular Malay proverb goes, “Melentur bukuh barih dari rebungnya” literally means “If you want to shape the bamboo, it should start from it’s shoot”. Today’s children in the next generation will be leaders, wealth creators, innovators, entrepreneurs and professionals in private and public sectors. Their success will be determined by how well we have nurtured the enormous and invaluable potential inherent in them from childhood. They are the most potent symbol of any country’s ambitious march towards peace and prosperity.

46. We should not be daunted by adversity. Our path for PERMATA in Malaysia has not been without resistance. Some people did not understand while some are sceptical and even politicise the issue. But, we continue to pursue the cause relentlessly and persevere because we believe and are firmly committed towards ECEC and talent development for a better future of the nation. I agree with what Shannon Alder, the inspirational author who believes in freeing herself from fear, so she can lead a life of purpose. “You will face your greatest opposition when you are closest to your biggest miracle.” So, persist and press on. ECEC is somewhat a miracle.

Let’s give our children a “Head Start in Life” with quality, effective and holistic approach to ECEC, as you and I believe that “Every child is precious and no child should be left behind” in the pursuit of Education For All. I wish you all the best for a successful Forum.

Wabilahi taufik wālihidāyahu wassalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh.

Thank you.