Mr Chairman, thank you for giving me the floor.

1 Protecting and promoting the rights of children is a topic close to my heart because I have four young children. I want what most parents want for them: to lead a happy, healthy, productive and meaningful life. But as we are all sadly aware, these ideals still elude many children in the world today. It is our collective responsibility to protect this vulnerable group of persons. As UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon put it at the 20th anniversary of the Convention of the Rights of the Child in 2009, “children should always have first claim on our attention and resources”.

2 As a small island state with no natural resources, Singapore depends on its people. Investing in our children, who will become our leaders of tomorrow, is a key priority for our government. The Singapore government is committed to promoting and protecting the fundamental rights of our children. The best interests of the child are a primary consideration in our policy formulations. We want our children to achieve their full potential in life.
Mr Chairman,

3 In this regard, I would like to humbly share three aspects of how we develop and care for our children. These are (a) education, (b) physical and mental well-being, and (c) strengthening the family unit.

Education as an Enabler

4 Today, Singapore is ranked third in the Global Competitiveness Report (2012-2013) on “Quality of the Educational System”. We have a high literacy rate of 96% and our unemployment rate is low at 2%. But we cannot rest on our laurels. The quest for affordable and quality education must continue.

5 Our Compulsory Education Act ensures that every Singaporean child receives a minimum of six years of Primary education as foundation for continued education and training. However, our government acknowledges that children may not enjoy equal opportunities to education as others because of their social background. Recognising the need to keep education paths upwards wide open to all, we are progressively enhancing our early childhood sector to allow our very young to access affordable, quality pre-school education. This year, we launched the Early Childhood and Development Agency, an autonomous agency jointly overseen by the Ministry of Education and Ministry for Social and Family Development. It will look into all aspects of children’s development below age six across kindergartens and childcare centres.

7 Upon completing six years of Primary education, our children can look forward to enhanced secondary and post-secondary education pathways designed to allow children of different abilities to find pathways that best bring out their potential. For example, we have specialised schools that cater to children’s
interests and talents in the arts, sports, mathematics and sciences. Programmes offered in our institutes of technical education, polytechnics and universities are wide ranging and are regularly reviewed to stay relevant and meet changing social and economic needs.

8 Finally, to ensure no child is deprived of education due to his or her family’s financial situation, various state and community-based financial assistance schemes are available. These include funds for textbooks, uniforms, computers, breakfast and overseas learning programmes.

Physical and Mental Well-being

9 Mr Chairman, I turn now to the physical and mental well-being of our children. By taking care of their health needs early in life, we help children enjoy their childhood and develop at their own pace. Singapore has a low infant mortality rate of 1.8 per 1000 births and all children are required to be immunized against a list of diseases before they begin Primary education. Free dental health services are also provided in all primary schools.

10 But to care for the whole child also means looking after his social and mental well-being. All Singapore teachers are trained in basic counselling skills to identify children who may need special help. In addition, full time counsellors are deployed to our schools to assist children who require more intensive interventions. Children are also taught social-emotional competencies such as self-management, relationship management and responsible decision-making as part of the curriculum. We hope this will equip them with the right skills to cultivate good mental health habits as they progress into adulthood.
Strengthening the Family Unit

11 Mr Chairman, strengthening the family unit, the basic unit of society, is another integral element of our government’s policy. Children blossom in nurturing and loving family environments. Yet all parents know that raising a child is both rewarding and also time and resource consuming. To ensure that both parents can be involved in the early years of the child, mothers enjoy 16 weeks of paid maternity leave, while fathers can tap on one week of paternity leave. Parents can also enjoy six days of childcare leave during the growing years of the child to witness their development and care for their child. In addition, infant and childcare subsidies help ease parents’ financial burden in providing for the child.

12 To further strengthen the family, we launched an initiative known as FamilyMatters! in April 2013 to give a greater boost to family life education. FamilyMatters! programmes equip families with the skills and knowledge to enhance quality of family life through partnerships with schools, employers, businesses and community partners.

13 A strong and cohesive family unit is fundamental for the development and care of our children. Unfortunately, there may still be cases where a small group of children are at risk of family violence. As a safety net, we have put in place a legal protection framework under the Children and Young Persons Act and any interventions will be carried out in the best interests of the child.
Conclusion

14 Mr Chairman, since Singapore ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1995, our government has continued to review our policies and to effectively implement the Convention. We remain unwavering in our commitment to our children. In this spirit, we welcome and will continue to participate actively in international discourse and sharing of experiences so that we can develop our children to their fullest potential.

15 Thank you, Mr Chairman.