

Helping kids starts from the heart

National grid operator SP Group expands its CSR efforts to give children from lower-income families a stronger start, and provide more opportunities for staff to volunteer



One need not approach volunteering with the mindset that they have to invest lots of time, effort or money. No contribution is too small. One of the biggest hurdles to overcome is simply taking that first step.

— Mr Giles Ee, executive engineer, SP Group, and a member of the company's staff volunteer arm, SP Heart Workers

By RACHEL CHIA

A typical work day for Mr Giles Ee, 28, goes something like this: Even as he spends most of his time as executive engineer spearheading gas transmission projects at SP Group, he carves out a few hours planning activities for children.

Just last year, Mr Ee helped organise the launch of an interactive play at Aliwal Arts Centre for lower-income families, featuring music, handcrafted sea animal headgears, and a mini carnival.

Named KidStart Sea Adventures, the production is one of several corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts supported by Singapore's national grid operator and sustainable energy solutions provider SP Group, through its initiative for children, SP Kids at Heart.

KidStart Singapore is a non-profit organisation supporting children under six years old from lower-income families in early child development.

"We were pleasantly surprised by the zest with which the children tackled the craft activities with their parents," says Mr Ee who, beyond coordinating the event, also helped out at a prop-crafting station as one of 20 staff volunteers on-site.

"Many parents shared that this was the first theatre production for their children, and to watch them dance and sing brought lots of joy," he adds. "It was a heartwarming reminder of the importance of family bonding. This truly touched me, as we may have taken many things in life for granted."

Mr Ee began volunteering when he was in secondary school, spring cleaning rental flats, collecting newspapers, and doing grocery runs for the elderly.

Today, his systematic nature and attention to detail are being put to use as a member of the SP Heart Workers committee, SP's staff volunteer arm, where he oversees event logistics and partnerships with social service agencies.

The company provides its employees with opportunities to participate in volunteering activities all year round, often during work hours.

"Beyond being able to engage with colleagues from other departments whom I normally do not interact with, I am also able to sharpen my organisational skills through working with various stakeholders to execute events," says Mr Ee.

Joining hands for good

Most customers of SP Group may be familiar with its longest-running charity initiative – the SP Heartware Fund, which benefits vulnerable seniors – from its donation appeals on utilities bills twice a year.

But SP Kids at Heart, a new initiative, was born amid the Covid-19 pandemic as the organisation looked to expand its outreach to more lower-income families.

"Despite the challenges brought on by the pandemic, we scaled up our efforts to fulfil long-standing commitments and set up new programmes to benefit a wider range of social service users, from seniors, to children and youth,"



SP Group executive engineer Giles Ee (above) helps plan activities for children as part of the company's CSR initiative, SP Kids at Heart. The initiative is a partnership with KidStart Singapore, to empower parents like Mdm Jasleasha Ong (left) with skills to better engage their children.

PHOTOS: SP GROUP, KIDSTART SINGAPORE

Celebrating Social Service Partners

The Ministry of Social and Family Development has designated 2023 as its Year of Celebrating Social Service Partners to recognise the contributions of corporates, social service agencies, professionals, academics, social enterprises, and volunteers.

To make a significant impact on the lives of those in need, Singaporeans and companies are encouraged to volunteer, donate, or join the social service sector.

says Mr Stanley Huang, group CEO, SP Group.

The company has since contributed \$2.1 million to benefit more than 5,000 KidStart children and their families. SP Group has been working with the non-profit organisation since 2021.

SP Group has sponsored and distributed books, toys and tech tools to about 2,000 KidStart families, to improve their home learning environments and ensure that the children's learning was not disrupted during the pandemic.

"For parents, we aim to equip them with soft skills to help them connect better with their children and support them in their holistic education," Mr Huang adds. "By working with KidStart Singapore, which shares this common vision, it allows us to deliver targeted assistance to the community and achieve greater impact for the beneficiaries."

Last year, apart from the marine-themed play, the company – together with KidStart and independent charity EtonHouse Community Fund – provided books and bookshelves to some 3,000 children to create a conducive space at home to foster strong family bonds.

Focusing on bonding

SP Kids at Heart's efforts aim to enhance the social mobility and long-term prospects of children

from vulnerable backgrounds.

Why is the focus on bonding? Research has shown that parent-child bonds significantly influence how a child's brain develops, and this has an impact on lifelong outcomes, explains KidStart Singapore CEO Rahayu Buang. "The parent-child bond is created by applying techniques in nurturing positive interactions and enriched caregiving."

While parents from lower-income families want the best for their child, they may face resource constraints and lack know-how. "Empowering parents with the skills to engage their children builds up their confidence in taking care of them, which in turn helps foster positive developmental outcomes," adds Mdm Rahayu.

That's been so for Mdm Jasleasha Ong, whose daughter, aged three, was previously not interested in books. "I tried reading to her, but she would flip through the pages quickly," Mdm Ong, 43, says.

But after setting up a reading corner at home with the books from SP-funded KidStart Stories, the little girl's attitude changed.

"I learnt that it was about choosing age-appropriate books," says Mdm Ong. "My daughter is now so excited when it is reading time, and even asks me to join her. She dances and uses songs to express herself. I now know how to use our interactions to develop her language skills better, and we have a strong bond."

Small things like these can create a great impact, says Mr Ee, who helped pack and deliver the books to families. "Something as simple as lending a listening ear to the beneficiaries, or organising engagement activities, can impact them in a positive manner and effect a difference in their lives."

Everybody has unique skills that can be channelled towards volunteering, he adds. "One need not approach volunteering with the mindset that they have to invest lots of time, effort or money. No contribution is too small."

"One of the biggest hurdles to overcome is simply taking that first step."

Foster a culture of giving

Volunteerism is an integral part of SP Group's DNA, says the company, with close to 400 staff volunteering in SP Kids at Heart activities alone.

Staff are encouraged to not only participate in volunteering activities during work hours, but are also accorded official leave for volunteering, says group CEO Stanley Huang.

Members of senior management play an active role in communicating support for and participating in corporate giving, adds Mr Huang.

This is something that Mr Giles Ee, an executive engineer at SP Group, can testify to, having witnessed department heads spearheading activities. "Various departments leverage volunteering events as team bonding opportunities," he says.

"I believe the emphasis on the culture of giving is also a point of pride for many staff," says Mr Ee, who is also part of the SP Heart Workers organising committee.

In 2021, SP Group's CSR contributions – in donations, sponsorships and manpower – totalled \$4.5 million. It has a wide range of programmes to support vulnerable groups across ages, from young children under the age of six to tertiary students, and seniors.

To Mr Huang, pursuing a common good unifies staff, fosters team building, and cultivates a giving spirit. "We believe that by participating in volunteering efforts, our staff gain a sense of fulfilment, are more engaged in their jobs, and can influence their families and friends to similarly give back to the community in meaningful ways," he says.

By the numbers

\$2.1m

Amount donated by SP Group over the past 2 years to benefit young children from lower-income families

5,000

Number of families that benefited from the SP Kids at Heart programme to date

8,000

Total volunteering hours clocked by SP Group staff in 2022

For more information on how to contribute, visit <https://go.gov.sg/YCPartners>

