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Science Centre 'ripe for a transformation'; It could become the place of kids' dreams, say parents, experts

IMAGINE a place where one could experience the zero gravity of outer space, or the biting cold of an Arctic winter, and where children as young as 18 months could excite all their five senses with games and activities.

If the Science Centre - considered by some to be a dated attraction - was transformed into such a place, could it become the stuff of dreams?

Educators, parents, adventurers and academics certainly hope so.

"When I left the Science Centre, Unesco called it one of the top 10 in the world," said Professor Leo Tan, who was the centre's director from 1982 to 1991. "They need to update and refresh the exhibits... Singaporeans travel the world, so the centre must have something to ignite interest in the jaded visitor," said Prof Tan, who is now director of special projects at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Faculty of Science.

The Science Centre, which attracts about a million visitors a year, opened in 1977. Education Minister Heng Swee Keat said on Monday that it is a place where Singaporeans of many generations have been able "to imagine, experience, discover and dream".

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced during the National Day Rally on Sunday that a new Science Centre will be built beside Jurong Lake.

To be completed by around 2020, it will be part of the future Jurong Lake Gardens, which will combine the existing Chinese and Japanese Gardens and Jurong Lake Destination Park.

One way forward, said Prof Tan, is to expand KidsSTOP, the Science Centre's recently opened 3,000 sq m attraction for children aged between 18 months and eight years. There, they can pilot an imaginary plane or unearth fake dinosaur bones from a sandpit.

"The best way to stimulate a child's wonderment of the world is to stimulate their five senses, and the earlier you start, the better," he said. "Children play; that's how they learn."

Parents The Straits Times spoke to agreed. Pet shop owner Agnes Thaw, 33, who is the mother of five children aged nine to 13, said her kids prefer to visit the Singapore Zoo or the Jurong Bird Park. "Kids love to be hands-on, and the zoo regularly has events where they can be so," she said. She added that the Science Centre's exhibits should also be refreshed more often.

Student Hannah Balch, 13, said: "I hope it has more exhibits on the human body, so kids can learn how it works and how to take care of it."

The centre, though, is too often "thought to be a place only for children", said Dr John **van Wyhe**, a science historian at NUS. The new Science Centre could seek to "enthral" young adults by incorporating digital technology and games, he said.

It could also help youngsters build dreams, said Ms Sophia Pang, who is an adventurer and business analyst in her 40s who, in 2009, skied 900km to the South Pole despite having no hiking experience.

The mother of a girl, nine, and a boy 15, said this could be achieved by letting them experience different "sensations and environments" such as sub-zero temperatures and the weightlessness of space.

The new Science Centre could also get visitors to think about science critically, not just "accept it blindly", said Prof Tan. For instance, visitors could be exposed to issues such as the growing of genetically modified food, and the ethics of human cloning.

It could also showcase cutting-edge research and invite scientists from around the world to speak, he added.

Having said that, radical changes are not needed, added Prof Tan. He said he hopes the new centre will keep the Observatory, stargazing events, and continue to have dinosaur exhibits.

"Some of these topics are always in vogue for kids and will stimulate their imagination. Then, when the kid grows up, the kid in him or her still stays."

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