What Difficult Life Events Do Children from Low-Income Families Experience?

In 2017, Singapore Children’s Society started on a research study on resilience in children from low-income families.

Our study focused on one type of difficult life event - Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

Why study Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)?

ACEs are traumatic or stressful experiences that happen to people under 18 years old. Examples include:

- Abuse
- Neglect
- Household Problems

ACEs can have severe and long-lasting impacts on the physical health and mental well-being of a person. Furthermore, research shows that children from low-income families are more likely to experience ACEs.

About the study

Our study seeks to understand the prevalence of ACEs experienced by children from low-income families.
What Difficult Life Events Do Children from Low-Income Families Experience?

Who took part?
120 caregivers and their children from low-income families have taken part in the study so far. We are still interviewing children and caregivers, so the results presented are not final.

What questions?
We asked children to complete a questionnaire to find out whether they had experienced 18 different types of ACEs.

How common are ACEs among children?
- About half the children experienced 4 or more adverse childhood experiences
- Around 9 out of 10 children from low-income families faced at least 1 adverse childhood experience

What types of ACEs do children experience?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abuse</th>
<th>Parental Separation</th>
<th>Household Member in Prison</th>
<th>Household Member - Substance Abuse Problems</th>
<th>Witnessed Domestic Violence</th>
<th>Household Member - Mental Illness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Abuse</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Abuse</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other ACEs</th>
<th>Witnessed Community Violence</th>
<th>Bullied</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Witnessed</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>43%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

WHAT DID WE FIND?
Similar to previous research, we found that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are common in children from low-income families.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?
ACEs can have severe and lasting impacts on children. Children who experience ACEs have a higher risk of developing mental health and substance use problems in adulthood. Hence, it is important to reduce the impact of ACEs and prevent ACEs from recurring.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

As practitioners, we can:
- Talk to the child, listen and be supportive. Ask open-ended questions to encourage sharing. (e.g. What did you like about your day? Was there anything you didn’t like?)

As a community, we can:
- Educate ourselves and caregivers on warning signs that children show after going through ACEs. Children might not talk about their difficult experiences and these can occur outside the home.
- Screen regularly screen children for ACEs to provide timely help.
- Communicate
- Inform

EDUCATE
Educate ourselves and caregivers on warning signs that children show after going through ACEs. Children might not talk about their difficult experiences and these can occur outside the home.

SCREEN
Regularly screen children for ACEs to provide timely help.

COMMUNICATE
Talk to the child, listen and be supportive. Ask open-ended questions to encourage sharing. (e.g. What did you like about your day? Was there anything you didn’t like?)

INFORM
Speak to professionals such as counsellors or teachers if you suspect a child is experiencing difficulties.

More information about the study can be found at https://www.childrensociety.org.sg/research-ongoing
Being away from school not only made it hard to catch up with school work, but also weakened friendship ties useful for academic and emotional support.

Lack of empathy from teachers could further dampen the child’s motivation to be in school.

“...the teacher [told] him “you don’t know how to read...... stand behind.” Then the teacher ignored him.”
- Mother, on the teacher’s reaction to her child’s academic difficulties

Emotional support from school personnel and practitioners is just as important as academic help.

“She [caseworker] always say I can do better than this [...] I am a smart kid ... [child’s name] you are a very bright child. I remembered.”
- Child, on being inspired by caseworker

“[My form teacher] would help with any subjects we have difficulties [with], any problems, as long as we ask her she will teach us very patiently.”
- Child, on support given by teacher

Implications

1. Peer Support
Peer support systems can be put in place to help the children cope with feelings of isolation when they return to school.

2. School personnel
School personnel and practitioners will need to provide more emotional support to these children to re-assimilate them into the school environment.
According to her study with 73 parents and caregivers of healthy children aged 7-12 in Singapore, she found that...

1. Most parents underestimated their child’s sleep needs. 91% of children did not receive about 10 hours of sleep daily as recommended.

2. Parents’ knowledge of sleep could be improved. Only 34% of parents correctly identified that their child was not getting enough sleep.

3. Many children engaged in media and electronics use before bedtime. 79% of children watched TV/DVD/videos and used computer/electronic media 1 hour before bedtime.

School-aged children should receive 9 to 11 hours of sleep at night in order to be active and alert in the day.

Practitioners can share tips with parents to promote better sleep among children. E.g. It is best for children to have set times for going to bed and waking up.

Screen use before bedtime can overstimulate the brain, making it harder to sleep well. Instead, children can engage in a calming bedtime routine (e.g. reading stories) to help them wind down.

Having enough sleep is important for children to stay alert and energetic during the day.

But, do parents really know how much sleep their child needs?

For more information on Singapore Children’s Society’s Research Grant, visit www.childrensociety.org.sg/research-grants

For more tips on good sleep hygiene, visit https://www.sleepfoundation.org/sleep-topics/children-teens-sleep
Play your part to promote resilience in children

Do you work with low-income families?

Want to find out what challenges your clients face and how to better help them?

Invite your clients to our study!

Who can take part?

• Children between 10 to 15 years old and their main caregiver

• Households with an income of $4000 per month or less, or Per Capita Income (PCI) of $1000 per month or less

Benefits for your organisation

Refer at least 10 children to get a summary report of your clients

Refer at least 30 children to get a free talk on Resilience by a principal clinical psychologist and experienced trainer/consultant

Participants will receive

A $20 NTUC voucher per caregiver-child pair as a token of appreciation

Want more details?

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