

PROTECTION OF CHILDREN IN SINGAPORE: AN OVERVIEW

**Research and Advocacy Standing Committee
Singapore Children's Society**

INTRODUCTION

Singapore is a small country without natural resources. People are its only resource. Since its independence in 1965, Singapore has enjoyed economic success and this is due primarily to the fundamental principle that Singapore's continued prosperity depends largely on its people to maintain its competitiveness. The Singapore family size is small and its population is ageing. Children are regarded as valued members of the family and the country's greatest asset and future. As such, great importance is placed on their well-being, health, education and development regardless of their racial, religious and socio-economic background. Children deserve a childhood free of abuse and neglect and their basic physical, intellectual, emotional and social needs must be met. Children are vulnerable and unable to protect themselves in adversity. Therefore, they cannot go unprotected.

DEFINITION OF THE CHILD

The age of majority applicable in Singapore is 21 years old as provided by common law. However, there are different definitions of "a child" stated in various legislations for specific purpose.

According to the Children and Young Person Act (CYPA) 2001, a "child" is a person below the age of 14. A "young person" means a person who is 14 years of age or above but below the age of 16 years. A "juvenile" means a male or female person who is 7 years of age or above but below the age of 16 years. The Employment Act adopts the same definitions as the CYPA for a "child" and a "young person".

The Women's Charter 1997 defines "a child" as a "child of the marriage who is below 21 years", and a "minor" as "a person who is below the age of 21 years and who is not married, or a widower or a widow". Under the Women's Charter, any person who has carnal connection with a girl below the age of 16 years, except by way of marriage, is guilty of an offence. The Penal Code provides that an offence of statutory rape is made out if (among other things) a man has sexual intercourse with a girl even with her consent if she is below 14 years of age. This means that a "child" below 14 years old cannot legally consent to sexual intercourse.

The Smoking (Control of Advertisement and Sale of Tobacco) Act prohibits the sale or giving of tobacco products to persons under 18 years. Under the Custom (Liquor Licensing) Regulations, it is an offence for a licensee to permit a person under the age of 18 to consume alcoholic liquor at the licensed premises or for the person under 18 years to purchase alcoholic liquor.

In October 1995, Singapore became signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), pledging its commitment to help children when they are in an environment of abuse and neglect. The UNCRC defines a "child" as someone below the age of 18.

Regardless of how a "child" is defined, these laws are designed to promote and protect the best interests of the children, to punish those who victimise them, and to ensure appropriate treatment for their recovery and social integration.

THE SCOPE OF CHILD PROTECTION

Protecting children has to do with the legislation, policies, programmes, and services that strive to promote children's holistic development, to protect those who are at risk from harm, and to rehabilitate those children if, and when they become a threat to themselves and to others in the society.

Although children are the primary target, it is important to realise that a child is always part of a system consisting of the family, peer group, school, neighbourhood and the community. What happens within the system would have inevitable impacts on the child. In Singapore, the family is recognised as the building block of society and the most natural environment for nurturing the young. Policies and programmes are therefore pro-family to preserve and strengthen the family unit. Increasingly, many efforts have been made to enable, support and empower the family not only to discharge its responsibilities to the young, but also to enjoy its role.

While all families have basic and developmental needs that must be met, some families may face special problems. Poverty, violence, alcohol and substance abuse, and other recurrent and chronic crisis situations in the family may put the child's welfare at risk. Under such circumstances, the state and the community have the responsibility to step in to deal with these problems in the family and to ensure that the child's well-being can be better protected.

Child protection services used to deal with children when problems occur. The focus in recent years has expanded to become more proactive and preventive in its approach, instead of limiting to treatment and rehabilitation.

Children have basic needs for their healthy growth and development. These include food and nutrition, safety, a nurturing environment, protection from harm, secure emotional ties, and education. They provide children with a strong and healthy foundation for life. Services and programmes must therefore promote and support the child's physical, social, emotional and intellectual development, functioning, and well-being. They should also be able to identify children and families at risk and to provide early intervention before full-blown problems of a physical, psycho-social, emotional, behavioural, and medical nature emerge. Interventions may involve the removal of a child from a home where he or she is suspected of being abused or neglected to a place of safety, or the removal of an adult responsible for the abuse. For children who are already involved in serious antisocial or delinquent activities, such as gangsterism, drug addiction and promiscuous behaviour, intervention and rehabilitation may include institutionalisation for treatment for drug addiction, counselling and vocational training.

THE LAW AND CHILD PROTECTION IN SINGAPORE

Singapore takes a serious view of violence in any form. The Government believes in creating a violence-free environment and that those who are vulnerable such as the young and those with disability should be protected. Social legislation exists to protect children and young persons and victims of violence. Singapore also takes a serious view of child abuse, neglect and sexual exploitation of children, as well as the participation of children in commercial public entertainment, illegal hawking, gambling and begging. Child protection services firstly aim to ensure the safety of children and secondly, strengthen the parent-child relationship.

The general legal framework and provisions for the protection of children and victims of violence in Singapore are set out in a number of statutes. It is important to note that the law only provides essential safeguards. The more successful we are in our efforts to promote children's well-being, the less the law will be called into use. Selected legislations will be highlighted.

The Children and Young Persons Act (CYPA)

The CYPA was enacted in 1949 to provide for the welfare, care and protection of children and young persons as well as the treatment and rehabilitation of children and young persons who are beyond parental control or who have committed offence. The Act strikes a balance between family authority and responsibility and the protection of children and young persons by the State. The Act has been amended several times over the years. It was revised in 1993, incorporating enhanced penalties for child abuse. It was further amended in 2001 to widen the options for rehabilitating young offenders. The recent amendments provide greater protection and enhance the well-being of children and persons who are neglected, abused or destitute and those who are placed in residential institutions. In the revised CYP Act (2001), emotional and psychological cruelty has been clearly spelt out as a form of abuse.

In March 1996, the Child Abuse Protection Team (CAPT) was introduced by the then Ministry of Community Development and Sports (MCDS) to institutionalise a multi-disciplinary and multi-agency team approach in the management of child abuse cases in Singapore. CAPT provides a forum for child protection professionals to discuss, develop and follow through a plan of action for child abuse cases, ensuring that the best interest of the child is being met. The National Standards for Protection of Children issued by MCDS sets out the framework for the management of child protection in Singapore and describes the referral standards as required by the different sectors involved. The National Standards aims to enable professional judgement to be exercised within a framework of transparency; encourage the adoption of good practice including the development of practice guidelines and manuals; and enhance public confidence that the management of child protection will be prompt and handled with the child's interest as the main priority.

MCDS has since become the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS). For the abused child and the child at risk of abuse, MCYS has the power to take such cases to the Juvenile Court, which will make a Care and Protection Order (CPO) in respect of the child. If the abuse is severe, the abuser may be prosecuted in an adult criminal court. The CPO may leave the child at home with careful supervision undertaken by MCYS, or a relative may be appointed as "fit person" to care for the child. Where the situation warrants, the child may be removed and placed in foster care or a children's home. The intervention process is not just directed at the child alone, but also involves the abuser and the family members.

The child and parents may be so at odds with one another that the norms of upbringing have broken down. The desperate parents who cannot control the child's behaviour may resort to excessive use of physical punishment, leading to child abuse. Under such circumstances, the parents can bring the problem to the Juvenile Court asking for a Beyond Parental Control Order (BPCO). A child whom the parents cannot control may be in danger of committing criminal offences. The BPCO would allow the parents to act before the child becomes a Juvenile Arrest Case under the police.

The Police prosecutes juveniles in Court based on the severity of the offence. If the decision is made to charge him, he will appear in the Juvenile Court should he be under 16 years of age. If he is above 16 years of age, he will appear in the Subordinate Courts. Diversionary measures are available to the Police and the Attorney-General's Chambers for young offenders who they intend to let off with a caution. The Guidance Programme is a 6-month counselling and rehabilitation programme for juveniles who are let off with a police caution instead of being charged in Court. Juveniles are helped to recognise the seriousness and consequences of their acts, and to acquire life-skills such as self-control, handling of peer pressure and conflict resolution. Parents of these juveniles are guided on necessary skills and knowledge to be more effective in the parenting and supervision of their children. The Programme comprises counselling, group sessions and support groups for the juvenile, the parents and other family members. Other activities such as recreational and community service activities are also provided.

The Streetwise Programme is a developmental programme aimed at changing the behaviour of youths who have unwittingly drifted into gangs. It is a 6-month structured programme that includes counselling, family conferencing, peer support, recreation and academic activities. It is part of the community based treatment programme for youths placed on probation for committing gang-related offences. It is also targeted at youths who are looking for help to get out of gangs.

When a juvenile is prosecuted and convicted in Court, there is a wide variety of community based and residential orders which the Court may make, e.g., supervision, probation, care of a "fit person", detention centres, approved schools, weekend detention, community service order and reformatory training centres. The Court may also undertake some pre-court measures such as family conferencing, which is a process that provides an opportunity for the juvenile to understand the seriousness of the offending behaviour; to accept responsibility; to address the issue of family and community accountability; to contribute to the cautioning process if possible; and to make possible reparation compensation to the victim.

The philosophy underlying the treatment of juveniles is that all community based options have to be considered. Institutionalisation should be the last resort. When juveniles are committed to institutions for rehabilitation, the ultimate aim of the institutional programme is to reintegrate them into society. This is achieved through inculcation of discipline, desirable social values, education, and marketable skills. Family and community involvement are essential in the rehabilitation process and in the reintegration of children into society. Parents participate in orientation programmes, counselling sessions, workshops, group sessions, and parent support groups. The Government works closely with civics and grassroots organisations, voluntary welfare organisations, individual volunteers, schools and employers to develop a network of services to supplement and support the rehabilitation process and to provide a continuum of services and programmes.

The Women's Charter

The Women's Charter was considered a landmark piece of legislation when it was enacted in 1961. Its wide-ranging provisions form the legal basis for equality between spouses and lift the barriers towards attainment of equal partnership between husband and wife. It safeguards women's rights in matters relating to marriage, separation and divorce, and the custody and care of children, division of matrimonial assets and maintenance upon divorce or separation. It spells out the responsibility of parents over their children who are minors or who are dependents. It also provides for the protection of women and girls against abuse and exploitation. The Women's Charter was amended in 1996 to give greater protection to family members against family violence and women and children in a divorce or separation.

The Guardianship of Infants Act (GIA)

Where parents are divorced or separated, children are often traumatised by the break-up of the parents. The GIA states that the welfare of the child shall be the first and paramount consideration in any court proceedings involving the custody or upbringing of a person below 21 years or the administration of any property belonging to or held in trust for that child. The impact on the child depends on the age of the child, the relationship with parents, events leading to the divorce and the arrangements after the divorce. These children usually have problems dealing with guilt, anger, and a sense of loss; and the children in distress may demonstrate depression, anti-social behaviour, or getting into trouble at school and with the law. Preparing children for the divorce and counselling helps children understand, learn to cope, and come to terms with their parents' divorce eventually. Where the child is considered old enough to understand the issues, the judge may interview the child to determine his or her wishes before a decision is made. The court may also direct MCYS to investigate and submit a report to assist the Court in deciding the best possible arrangement for the child upon the dissolution of a marriage. Whichever one parent has custody, the other parent almost always has the right to see and spend time with the child regularly. The important message is that although the couple is no longer husband and wife, they will always remain father and mother to the child.

The Penal Code and Sexual Activity Involving Children

The Penal Code sets out such offences as culpable homicide, murder, infanticide, exposure and abandonment of a child, causing hurt and grievous hurt and rape. It provides for, among other things, the imposition of imprisonment and/or the imposition of fine for persons who abuse and neglect children.

The Penal Code states that sexual intercourse with a girl below the age of 14 years constitutes the criminal offence of rape, even if the girl gives her consent. Where the girl has consented, the male involved could be punished with up to 20 years imprisonment, and could be caned. However, if the girl did not consent, and force or threats were used to pressure her into engaging in intercourse, the punishment is mandatory minimum of eight years plus 12 strokes of the cane.

When the girl is already 14 years old but not yet 16, the activity is an offence called “carnal connection”, provided she has given consent. The male is still liable to punishment limited to a maximum of five years imprisonment.

Homosexual intercourse or sodomy is also a punishable offence under the Penal Code in Singapore. When a child is involved, the adult partner would be charged and the child could become the subject of a CPO, if his parents have failed to keep him safe from exploiting adults.

The Adoption of Children Act

Adoption is a permanent arrangement for children who are abandoned, orphaned, taken away from their parents by the Court or given away by their birth parents. Once the Courts make an Adoption Order, the child becomes “exclusively in the position of a child born to the adopter in lawful wedlock”, with the same rights as birth children. The child will receive a new birth certificate showing the adopters as the birth parents, which enables the family to keep the matter confidential.

Children can be adopted locally or from foreign countries. Adoptive parents have to meet certain strict criteria, including age difference between the child and the adoptive parents, financial stability, compatibility, and the ability to provide a warm and loving environment for the child. Anyone wishing to adopt a child must be at least 25 years old and at least 21 years older than the child, except if the adoptive parent is a relative to the child. A single person may also adopt a child but a single male may not adopt a female child.

Before the Court makes an order for adoption, the Court must be satisfied that the Adoption Order is for the welfare of the child, with due consideration given to the wishes of the child, his age and understanding. Adoption Orders can only be made in Singapore by the Court under the Act. The Attorney-General or any fit and proper person appointed by the Court acts as Guardian Ad-litem to a child when an application for adoption has been made. Investigations are conducted by Child welfare Officers of the MCYS. To protect the interests of adopted children, a pre-placement report would be followed by a post-placement report. For all adoptions under our laws, the Court must be satisfied that the adopters have not received any financial consideration for the adoption other than those sanctioned by the Court, i.e., expenses. This is to ensure that no transactions or the sale of children have occurred.

Employment Act

Singapore prohibits the employment of children below the age of 12 years. While a child or young person is allowed to work under the law, Singapore's labour legislation restricts the type of work the child or young person can engage in and the maximum hours he or she may be employed.

Children and young persons are not allowed to work in any occupation, place or working conditions injurious or likely to be injurious to their health; or in any service involving management of, or attendance to, or proximity to machinery in motion or any live electrical apparatus which is not effectively insulated; or in any underground work. They are not allowed to work during the night between 11.00 pm to 6.00 am. They are also not allowed to work more than 3 hours without a break of 30 minutes or 6 hours in any one day in the case of a child; and 4 hours without a break of 30 minutes or 7 hours in any one day in the case of a young person.

SERVICES FOR PROTECTION AND PROMOTION OF WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN

The Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports and National Council of Social Service have published a Directory of Social Services and a Directory of Services for the Disabled in Singapore. In 2003, the book "Rebuilding Lives, Restoring Relationships" was jointly published by the Subordinate Courts and MCYS. A whole community of professionals – judges, social workers, teachers, psychologists – came together in a shared mission to help rebuild the broken lives of children, and to restore those who were lost back into the embrace of their families and into the goodwill of the community. The book listed the agencies involved in this critical task: schools, the court, and other government and non-governmental agencies, all working in different ways, but towards the same end. In 2004, Singapore Children's Society published a Directory on programmes and publications that enhance children's social and emotional well-being in Singapore.

Services for protection and promotion of well-being of children can be supplementary, supportive or substitute in nature.

Supplementary services

Singapore enjoys a generally good standard of living. However, there will always be some families who miss out on the benefits of prosperity and their children's basic needs are not being met. Supplementary services provide tangible financial or other material help to families.

In addition to provisions to help families in poverty, supplementary helps targeted specifically at children's needs are also available. Community Development Councils provide funds to help with children's schooling and transportation. Singapore Press Holdings sponsored the School Pocket Money Fund, which raised large sums for distribution to ensure, among other things, that poor children can afford food at school recess times. Many voluntary organisations also have funds that can be tapped to supplement needs for school expenses. The ethnic community organisations - Chinese Development Assistance Council, Mendaki and the Association of Malay Professionals, Sinda and Eurasian Association, serving Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Eurasians respectively - all have educational focus. Besides financial assistance, they also provide low-cost tuition to school children as well as parent education. A "Fairy Godparent" programme is available to encourage donors to support children from lower-income families to have the opportunities of attending pre-schools. Other schemes such as the "Back-to-Work" Child Care Scheme are also available to allow mothers from low or no income families to seek employment by helping them with the expenses of placing their children in childcare centres.

Supportive services

Supportive services are social service provisions that strengthen the capacity of parents to fulfil their roles more effectively. Many families, including the normal functioning families, require supports to enable the social functioning of adults in their parental roles. These include affordable housing and healthcare services; job availability, training and re-training; family-friendly workplaces, affordable quality childcare facilities for working parents, and recreation facilities.

When both parents work and when care by other family members is not available, alternative affordable and quality care arrangements by non-family members become necessary. While there exist alternative care by maids and family day care providers who take care of a small group of children in their own home, child care and student care centres are some of these services that families have come to rely upon as more mothers join the work force.

Child care centres cater for children from infancy up to the age of seven years as a service for working parents. Childcare centres are licensed by the MCYS and fees are subsidised. The Child Care Centres Act and the Child Care Centres Regulation are to ensure not only the children's safety and well-being, but also their learning and development. Student care centres cater for primary school children who have no adult at home when they return from school or before they go to school. These children may be lonely and bored and may seek distraction outside the home such as frequenting shopping centres and getting involved in undesirable activities with questionable company without their parents' knowledge. Student care centres provide a place where these children can have a proper meal, do their homework and engage in recreational activities under supervision of adults.

A number of programmes are run by voluntary welfare organisations that aim to reach out to children who could be at risk. "Project Cabin" introduced by The Singapore Children's Society (SCS) is a school-based youth outreach project that provides an alternative "hang-out" place for children in the form of a fully equipped air-conditioned container Cabin. A Cabin is put into a school compound. Although it is located inside the school, for the children, it is a world of their own. It is where they can listen to music, watch television shows and get cold drinks from a fridge. There are books, comfortable chairs, board games, musical instruments. There is also companionship – both from their peers and from the social workers, parents and volunteers who man the Cabin. Project Cabin has since been recognised by MOE as a co-curricular activity for the students. "Project Roundbox", also initiated by SCS, hopes to capture the untapped creativity and energy of youths-at-risk by engaging them in a holistic and non-intrusive manner, through drama, music, craftwork, street dance and arts. This is done through the setting up of the Drop-in Centre, a place where young people can visit and sign up for lots of different artistic and creative activities, such as playing in pop music bands, learning face-painting, and modern dance. "Tinkle Friend", also a project of SCS, is a telephone helpline service for young children, targeting at children between 7 and 12 years. Many of the children who call come from single-parent households or dysfunctional homes. The helpline provides a listening ear for children who are left alone without adult supervision, who are bored, lonely or stressed, and helps them to cope with their problems.

An extensive network of family service centres (FSCs) is available in Singapore to offer general family-oriented programmes, ranging from parent education, to family counselling and student care. Some FSCs may have special programmes to meet the needs of children and their families. For example, in "Healthy Start" programme, the FSCs work closely with the staff of hospitals with maternity service, who identify families at risk of social problems. A long-term supportive relationship is then established with the at-risk family, to ensure that the child's developmental needs, health checks, pre-school enrolment are attended to while assisting the family with other possible issues such as employment, budgeting, and marital relationship. Other voluntary welfare agencies also offer supportive help to families where the children have problems in the family or in school, or are on the verge of delinquency.

The major responsibility for protecting children who have been abused and neglected lies with MCYS. A Manual on the Management of Child Abuse in Singapore was first launched in 1999 to set the intervention framework for Ministries involved in the protection of children from abuse. The manual outlines the different roles and responsibilities of various parties – MCYS, the Police, Ministries of Education, Health, Manpower, Attorney-General’s Chambers, Juvenile Court and other non-governmental organisations – to ensure that services are put into action in every instance where a child requires protection. With the launch of the National Standards for Protection of Children in 2002 and the implementation of the amendments to the CYPA in 2001, the Manual was revised and updated in 2003 to ensure its continued usability and relevance for the respective protective agents.

Early intervention is crucial in child abuse and neglect. “Project SEEDS” is a programme initiated by SCS to train school teachers to identify suspected abuse cases, help parents of these children acquire effective parenting skills, provide counselling, refer them for financial assistance if necessary, and help them to identify and access their own network of support in times of stress. SCS’s “KidsLive” project brings knowledge and information on child abuse and neglect directly to the teachers and students in the schools. Through staging of performances, students learn how to protect themselves against abuse and how to seek help.

Premature school leavers represent about 1% of the school population. However, they may face a lifetime of unskilled and insecure employment. When they in turn become parents, they are likely to be inadequate in meeting the needs of their children, perpetuating a vicious cycle. A new initiative from 2004 government budget known as “School Social Work to Empower Pupils to Utilise Potential” or “Step-up” has started to fund work in schools by staff of social work agencies. They provide counselling, casework, and other methods of help for troubled school children. In addition, the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) runs “Project Bridge”, which seeks to encourage youths back into school or vocational training.

Substitute services

Substitute services provide alternative residential arrangements for children whose parents are not able to carry out their functions and the child must be removed from the home.

Foster Family Care is the usual temporary arrangement that provides the child with relatively normal family life pending a more permanent solution, which can be a return to biological parents, relatives or guardian, or adoption. Foster families must meet a series of stringent suitability criteria set out by MCYS to be accepted for the placement of foster children. Foster parents and other family members are expected to attend regular courses on child care arranged by MCYS. MCYS pays a fostering allowance and an educational allowance to the foster family to cover the child’s expenses. Children up to 18 years of age are eligible for foster care. However, it is usually easier for the child and foster family if the child is younger. Older children may have been so emotionally traumatised by their early life experiences that they may find it difficult to trust and respond to others. Careful matching of foster family to child is important for a good start in the relationship to avoid repeated rejections and subsequent needs for removal.

Residential care covers Children’s Homes with a wide range of specific purposes. When children are in need of care and protection, the role of the home is to shelter, protect and heal emotional trauma of the child. Examples of such substitute services are the SCS’s Convalescent Home, Salvation Army’s The Haven, and Pertapis Children’s Home.

Some children have been placed on Probation Order or Beyond Parental Control statutory supervision orders, but fail to benefit from such community-based programmes. If their behaviour problems persist, these children are usually placed in residential care settings, which give them a more structured daily routine than in their own homes, but they are still allowed to attend school. When the juvenile concerned is on Probation, he or she will be required to stay in a probation hostel for up to 12 months. For boys, they stay in Singapore Boys Hostel run by MCYS. For girls, they may be in Gracehaven or Pertapis

Women and Girls Home.

Those who fail to respond positively to the freedom allowed in these intermediate homes will be sent by the Juvenile Court to institutions designated under CYPA as “approved schools”. They are the Singapore Boys’ Home and Toa Payoh Girls’ Home administered by MCYS. Programmes for education, skills training, personal development, and counselling are conducted within the perimeters of the Home. Those who make good progress in the “approved school” may earn the freedom and privilege of attending outside schools.

Adoption is a permanent substitute service arrangement covered in the Adoption of Children Act.

Child Development Service in Singapore

In a society that places an extremely high value on academic achievement, children who are different and who deviate from the “normal” pathways of progress have a marked disadvantage. Growing evidence shows that the emotional components caused by the disabilities represent a more serious threat than the disorder per se. Repeated failures and lack of success experiences lead to a negative self-image and lack of self-esteem. On one hand, depression among these children may result in self-mutilation, suicide, apathy and withdrawal. On the other hand, some of them may grow up with antisocial behaviours such as juvenile delinquency, become runaways or dropouts and drug abusers.

In Singapore, up to the mid 1980s, child development service had been limited and rehabilitative in nature, focusing on children with severe disabilities such as mental retardation and cerebral palsy. Virtually all services for the disabled, including special education, were started by voluntary welfare organisations, which were also entirely responsible for fund-raising. As the standard of child health began to improve, we started to see fewer and fewer numbers of children suffering from severe physical and mental handicaps as a result of better perinatal and medical care. Taking the place of this group of children is a larger number of children with developmental and behavioural disorders of low to moderate severity, such as autism spectrum disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, learning disability, mild cerebral palsy, visual and hearing defects, and developmental delays. These children may be biologically impaired or environmental deprived. . A disabled child will handicap the entire family. There is therefore a need for a comprehensive child development programme for early identification and management of children with developmental problems, so as to correct developmental dysfunction if possible, minimise the impact of a child’s disability, strengthen families, and establish the foundations for subsequent development.

In 1988, the Advisory Council on the Disabled made several recommendations with significant impact on the improvement of child development services in Singapore. One of them was to set up a programme for the early identification and management of children with developmental problems. The Development Assessment Clinic was set up at Singapore General Hospital in 1991. Further development led to the development of a comprehensive nation-wide community-based child development programme in 2002, coordinated by an Inter-Ministerial Committee comprising the MOH, MCYS and MOE. The programme consists of a network of developmental screening in public and private sectors, a hospital-based developmental assessment, followed by a community-based multi-disciplinary rehabilitation and intervention programme. Strong working relationships and partnerships with social services in the community, as well as with schools, have been forged. Experience from the child development programme has provided important statistics and information on further planning and development for services for children with special needs in Singapore. Certain critical factors have been identified as keys to a successful child development programme. First, it requires parents who are dedicated and committed, have reasonable expectations and never give up hope on their child. Second, schools are receptive, accommodating and dare to give the child a chance. And third, peers are understanding, accepting and forgiving of some of these children’s apparent eccentricities. The roles of the professionals are mainly to provide an early diagnosis of the child’s problems, identify the child’s strengths and weaknesses, treat the child as being different rather than abnormal, guide the parents, and advocate for the child.

RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY

Advocacy means taking the child's part and pleads his cause with others, to ensure that the well-being and best interests of the child are protected. Advocacy involves helping the parents to reshape, rebuild, and to adjust their view of the view. In the schools, advocacy is to help teachers to understand the child's difficulties, to represent the rights of the child and argue for him to receive and benefit from certain service in the school. In the community, advocacy involves educating the community on the implications and special needs of children, taking part in policy making and resource allocation, and initiating appropriate multi-disciplinary programmes for the child and the family. Responsible and effective advocacy should be supported by excellent research.

For years, there was hardly any research works on issues of child protection in Singapore. Advocacy has been based on world literature, which may not be applicable to local culture in many respects. The series of research monographs on professional and public perceptions of maltreatment of children in Singapore, published by the Singapore Children's Society, can therefore be considered as monumental works, which will serve as a good local reference for those who protect and those who legislate.

THE UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) came into force in 1990 with the overwhelming support from the General Assembly of the United Nations. Singapore acceded to the UNCRC on 2 October 1995. The UNCRC spells out comprehensively the basic human rights of children everywhere. These include: the right to survival and to development of their physical, mental, and emotional potential; the right to protection from influences that are harmful to their development; and the right to participation in family, cultural, and social life. Although UNCRC is an international law, it does not have the legal jurisdiction to take action against State signatories that fall short. However, it does carry great moral authority to oversee, persuade, assist, and use various means to help countries comply with the articles of the UNCRC.

Four key principles that are also articles of the CRC guide the implementation of the UNCRC.

Non-discrimination (Article 2): All rights apply to all children without exception. It is the State's obligation to protect children from any form of discrimination and to take positive action to promote their rights.

Article 12 of the Constitution of Singapore specifically guarantees all Singapore citizens including children, the right to equality and non-discrimination. All persons are equal before the law and entitled to the equal protection of the law. There shall be no discrimination against citizens of Singapore on any ground such as religion, race, descent or place of birth in any law or in the appointment to any office or employment under a public authority or in the administration of any law relating to the acquisition, holding or disposition of property or the establishing or carrying on any trade, business, profession, vocation or employment.

Best Interests of the Child (Article 3): All actions concerning the child shall take full account of his or her best interests. The State shall provide the child with adequate care when parents or others charged with that responsibility, fail to do so.

Singapore has entered a declaration on this article, stating that a child's rights as defined in the CRC shall also be exercised with respect for the authority of parents, schools and other persons who are entrusted with the care of the child and in the best interests of the child and in accordance with the customs, values and religions of Singapore's multi-racial and multi-religious society regarding the place of the child within and outside the family.

Right to life, survival and development (Article 6): Every child has the inherent right to life, and the State has an obligation to ensure the child's survival and development.

Singapore has a good track record in child health and development and has met the targets on child health and development of the World Summit Goals for Children. The high standard of healthcare is attained through a comprehensive infrastructure of health services and programmes for children and mothers.

Singapore is generally pollution free and has a clean and green environment. Residents enjoy a high standard of public health. Singapore's water courses are relatively pollution-free. Modern sanitation is available to almost 100% of the population. Singapore also has a comprehensive health care system for children. The health needs of Singapore children are attended to from the time of conception till they complete their pre-university education, usually at the age of 18 years. No child in Singapore is deprived of his inherent right to live. The Infectious Disease Act provides for the quarantine and prevention of infectious diseases. The Act and its regulations require compulsory immunisation of children against diphtheria and measles. Immunisation is provided against tuberculosis, poliomyelitis, measles, mumps, rubella, tetanus, diphtheria, pertussis and Hepatitis B. Childhood immunisation programmes are made available to all children in Singapore through government polyclinics, the School Health service, private and public hospitals, and private practitioners. Housing and Development Board (HDB), the public housing authority, aim to provide affordable high quality housing to residents. The average norm of a HDB dwelling unit per person, including children, is 25 square metres in HDB towns. This living standard is equivalent to other developed countries. A conscious effort is placed on safety measures in the design of HDB flats, the planning of parks and children's playgrounds, to ensure that the standard of living is adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.

Respect for the views of the child (Article 12): The child has the right to express his or her opinion freely and to have that opinion taken into account in any matter or procedure affecting the child.

The Constitution of Singapore states that every citizen of Singapore has the right to freedom of speech and expression. However, Parliament may by law impose restrictions on this right if it considers them necessary or expedient and in the interest of the security of Singapore. The rights of the child to express his own views in all matters affecting him would include issues of custody, care, education, abortion and sexual sterilisation. The Government encourages feedback on policies and issues from students through various activities and programmes organised by the Ministry of Education. The views of young people are also sought by the Feedback Unit.

The above four principles should be considered in all areas affecting children, specifically, within the five dimensions of children's rights: a) Basic Health and welfare; b) Family environment and alternative care; c) Education, leisure, and cultural activities, d) Civil rights and freedoms, and e) Special protection measures for children in situations of emergency, children in conflict with the law, children in situations of exploitation, and children belonging to a minority or indigenous group. In these five dimensions, the UNCRC especially calls for the following for children:

- i) Protection from abuse, neglect, exploitation (economic and sexual), discrimination, and also protection of children's privacy;
- ii) Provision of food, shelter, care, clean water, sanitation, healthcare, education, and social services;
- iii) Participation in events and decisions that affect children's well-being, according to age, ability, and maturity;
- iv) Promotion of the children's rights by parents, policy makers and service providers, schools, the media, and the general body of the citizens of the country.

Promotion and implementation of the UNCRC should be the combined efforts and responsibility of the parents, the voluntary service sector, civic organisations, and the community, with the government taking the leading role.

FUTURE CHALLENGES IN PROTECTING CHILDREN IN SINGAPORE

Singapore has achieved much for children and has largely fulfilled its obligations under the UNCRC, even surpassing the benchmark in some areas. However, in the light of the UNCRC, certain areas could be further improved for the benefits of our children. There are potential problems and issues and they are the future challenges.

Developmental health of our children

In UNICEF's report on "The State of the World's Children" 2001, Singapore was ranked first, together with Japan, Sweden and Switzerland, for the lowest under-5 mortality rates in the world. Childhood mortality rates in Singapore have fallen to very low levels and are now mainly associated with conditions that modern medical care cannot affect. These include stillbirths of unknown cause, serious congenital malformations and genetic disorders, extreme low birth weight, serious accidents and cancers. This means that death rates are no longer adequate indices of medical care, particularly the traditional perinatal and infant mortality rates in relation to obstetrics, neonatal and general maternity care. Other population-based indices must be developed to enable proper evaluation of "how we are doing" as a community in the provision of medical services to mothers and children. Furthermore, relative good health by usual statistical criteria may mist the awareness of subtle and soft issues that interfere with quality of life, especially for children. Complacency and unawareness may deflect services and support away from the special needs of children and families, diffusing services and running into the risk of diluting or diminishing standards.

A number of "new morbidities" have been identified to be our major challenges in child health in the next decades. They are: chronic medical illnesses, developmental disabilities, learning problems, injuries and neglect, behavioural disturbances and disorders, sequelae associated with unhealthy lifestyles, and social and emotional disorders. On one end of the spectrum, there are children who are overweight and obese, leading to increased incidence of childhood diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. At the other extreme, there is concern that the endless media focus on being slim, may lead to a rise in eating disorders among young girls. As most families require both parents to be at work, increasing number of latchkey children and children brought up by foreign maids would become a worrying phenomenon. A small but increasing number of young suicides and attempted suicides and self-wounding cases reflect the tip of the iceberg of stress suffered by teenagers, from school pressures, relationships with parents, and from boy-girl relationships. These are known in developed countries as "modernity's paradox". As multiple aetiological factors are involved, medical and other health interventions may not always be the most appropriate and effective means of providing help to these children. The emphasis on developmental health in promoting the capacity of children to achieve their potentials, and in avoiding poor outcomes in health, education, behaviour and crime, and their huge costs to society, requires a concerted national effort.

Education opportunities for children with special needs

In Singapore, a high premium is placed on developing a child's potential and abilities to the fullest and nurturing each child to be a responsible citizen. Our education system aims to help our young acquire the values, skills and knowledge to face future challenges. This policy has led to the development of a comprehensive and technologically oriented educational system, which is ability-driven and provides opportunities for all. With the implementation of the Compulsory Education Bill (2000) in 2003, all children must attend at least six years of primary education in national schools.

Three groups of children are exempted: children attending the Muslim religious schools, or madrasahs, children receiving home-schooling, and children with special needs. Children in madrasahs and children in home-schooling programme approved by the Ministry of Education would still need to sit for the National Primary School-Leaving Examination (PSLE).

Children with mild and sensory disabilities but who are able to cope with mainstream schools would continue to attend these schools. Children with moderate to profound disabilities require special education (SPED) schools to learn basic survival skills, skills for independent living and vocational skills to earn a livelihood. These schools are established by voluntary welfare organisations with the help of the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the National Council of Social Service. It is accepted that providing appropriate education for every level of every disability will be a complex and expensive endeavour. These children, however, need special support in their learning experience.

In 2005, The MOE has undertaken a review of measures to cater to children with special needs, in both Special Education (SPED) schools and mainstream schools.

Initiatives to enhance support for SPED schools include:

- a. provide additional funding to improve the quality of professional resources in SPED schools by helping the SPED schools to recruit better qualified teachers, providing better professional development for the staff and improving the curriculum design;
- b. build an additional SPED school to cater to children with autism;
- c. increase support for SPED school infrastructure, by accelerating and completing the development of purpose-built SPED schools by 2008, and providing additional development funding.

Initiatives to enhance support for mainstream schools include:

- a. increased resources to enhance current early detection, intervention and support programmes for students with mild to moderate levels of special needs to cope with the regular school curriculum and to remain in the mainstream schools and do well.
- b. Designated mainstream schools will have dedicated staff known as Special Needs Officers with training in special education, who will provide a combination of in-class support and specialist intervention for children with learning disabilities.
- c. Training in special needs will also be provided for selected mainstream teachers across schools. This will raise general awareness of different types of learning disabilities and help teachers identify and manage children with mild learning disabilities. Over the next five years from 2005, about 10% of teaching staff in all schools would be trained to enable them to better support students with special needs in their respective schools.

Parent education programmes

Raising children in the complexities of modern life is perhaps the most challenging of all jobs, and yet not many parents are well prepared for it. Poor preparedness in stepping into the roles of parents is at the roots of many problems of child abuse and neglect, parent-child relationship problems and dysfunctional families.

A systematic and comprehensive parent education programme is needed to provide information, skills training, and support to parents at every stage of their child's life, even before they become parents. These programmes should emphasise on effective parent-child communications. In addition, positive parents' relationship with each other also needs to be addressed, starting from childhood into adult years, as it forms the bedrock of a stable family.

Civil rights and freedoms for children

Singapore has stated its position on issues of civil rights and freedoms for children. The Singapore Constitution provides that every citizen of Singapore has the right to freedom of speech and expression, to profess and practise his religion and to propagate it, and to freedom of association and assembly. However, these rights have to be applied within the limits permitted in the interest of public safety, order, health and morals; and within the constraints of Singapore's geographical size, population density and its resources.

The UNCRC recognises that young children may not have the maturity to make many decisions by themselves and would require parents and adults who have their interest at heart, to help them to make decisions, or if they are too young, to make decisions on their behalf. When children exercise their rights, they are expected to do so within the confines of the law, and without infringing on the rights of others, including the authority of parents and other custodians. Children's rights include responsibility. Children's rights to have their views taken seriously can be seen in judiciary procedures. When children testify in courts, their testimony is given due weight and they do so without fear or intimidation, as provided in the Vulnerable Witness Programme. In adoption and custody disputes, the Family Court takes children's opinions into consideration.

Children need to be given opportunities to learn to express themselves, to make responsible decisions, and to participate in processes that affect their well-being and their future, according to their age and maturity. Hopefully, children with this growing-up experience would turn out to be educated, responsible, more productive, and with greater potential to contribute to society as useful citizens and leaders in the society.

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