

Raising Children in Singapore: A Paediatrician's Perspective

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The State of Singapore's Children

Singapore has made remarkable achievements in improving maternal and child health in the last four decades since its independence. The infant mortality rates have fallen from 82.2 per thousand births in 1950, to 6.6 per thousand in 1990 and 2.1 per thousand in 2007. The under-5 mortality rates are 9 and 3 per thousand children 0-5 years old in 1990 and 2006, respectively¹. In UNICEF's report on "The State of the World's Children 2007",¹ Singapore was ranked first, together with Japan, Sweden and Switzerland, for the lowest infant mortality rates and under-5 mortality rates in the world in 2006.

Childhood mortality rates in Singapore have fallen to very low levels and are now mainly associated with conditions that modern medical care could not 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 such as traditional infant and perinatal mortality rates are no longer adequate indices of medical care. Other population-based indices must be developed to enable proper evaluation of "how we are doing" as a community in the provision of holistic care to mothers and children. 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. We must guard against complacency and unawareness, which 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 pose major challenges to 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 life-styles, and social and emotional disorders. These problems are not new. They emerge and become matters of concern when the more urgent demands of acute medical or economic conditions are met in our maturing society.

Future Challenge to Child Health in Singapore

Between 1965 and 2006, Singapore's per capita gross domestic product (GDP) grew from \$1567 to \$46,832. The median household income of families in Singapore has risen from \$2296 in 1990 to \$4500 in 2006.² Our prosperity has ensured that children today are free from many of the daily struggles that earlier generations faced.

However, there is a darker side to our growing prosperity. Between 1980 and 2006, the general divorce rate for women rose from 3.8 to 8.0 for every 1000 married resident females. In 1990, about 4% of resident households with at least 1 child below 16 years were headed by single parents. In 2005, this proportion grew to 5%.²

As most families require both parents to be at work, increasing number of latchkey children (home alone after school) and children brought up by foreign domestic workers 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.

Furthermore, 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.

These are known in developed countries as "modernity's paradox". As multiple causal factors are involved, medical and other health interventions may not always be the most appropriate and effective means of providing help to these children.

From a global perspective, the world today possesses powers and perspectives inconceivable 50 years ago: We have the ability to reach out to the entire planet through television, satellites, computers and air travel. Our children are well versed in viewing all kinds of videos such as YouTube which is beyond the censorship or supervision. They grow up with World of Warcraft and MapleStory

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where they lead virtual lives and belong to virtual tribes. Through MySpace and Facebook, they can mingle with their friends without having to leave homes. At the same time, almost universally, young people are deciding whether or not to smoke, drink alcohol, experiment with drugs, or have their first sexual experiences. The adolescent years are high-risk years with long-term consequences. Globally, about half of all HIV and AIDS infections occur among young people under the age of 25.³

Young people do not create these problems. Their health and development in most societies are undermined more by the attitudes and behaviour of the adults around them than by their own actions. There are no vaccines for smoking-related cancers, heart disease, alcohol or drug abuse, HIV and AIDS, violence, but all are preventable. What is needed is a strong dose of social immunisation delivered by adults who care. Children are badly in need of positive role models. These young people have the potential to be productive citizens, to protect themselves, to have long loving and respectful relationships, and to make the world a better place, but they need education, information, and emotional support to make formal choices.

Looking after the developmental health of the children will ensure the nation's wealth in the future. A concerted national effort is required to promote the capacity of children to achieve their potentials, and to avoid poor outcomes in health, education, behaviour and crime and their huge costs to society.

How can children's lives be further improved? How do we help children reach their full potentials?

The basic needs of young people are universal: a healthy start in life, an ongoing relationship with positive role models, safe places to learn and to grow, a marketable skill through effective education, and a stake in the well-being of their communities.³

Families and Parenting⁴

The family is the most powerful and pervasive influence, and the constant in a young child's life. Every stable society transmits values from one generation to the next. In today's context, the transmission of values is not easy. Almost universally, families and lines of authority are at risk of breaking down. The extended family of traditional societies is giving way to nuclear families, which in turn are dissolving into single-parent families and even the no-parent families of many street children in certain parts of the world. In an Asian society like ours, we must strive to preserve the traditional family values of love, care and concern, filial responsibility, mutual respect, commitment and communication.

Raising children amidst the complexities of modern life is perhaps the most challenging of all jobs, and yet not many

parents are well prepared for it. When deciding whether to have children, we may envision the joyful, tender moments that we associate with parenting. And such moments are plentiful. However, most parents discover that child rearing is more difficult than they anticipated. Good parenting takes an incredible amount of time and parenting changes our lives forever in lots of ways. Poor preparation of parental roles is the root of many problems of child abuse and neglect, parent-child relationship problems and dysfunctional families.

Parenting consists of a number of interpersonal skills and emotional demands, yet there is little in the way of formal education for this task. Most parents adopt parenting practices their own parents used. Husbands and wives may bring different viewpoints of parenting practices into the marriage. Unfortunately, when methods of parenting are passed on from one generation to the next, both desirable and undesirable practices are perpetuated.

Regardless of the type of culture and family structure in which children grow up, they benefit enormously when one or both parents are highly involved in their upbringing, provide them with a warm and nurturing environment, help them to develop self-control, and provide them with a supportive, safe, and stimulating environment that will make them feel secure and allow them to reach their full potential. This is true for fathers, as well as for mothers. While there has been an increase in the amount of time fathers spend with their children, far too many fathers still do not develop an adequate relationship with their children.

To parent effectively, we need considerable support, but we also need direction. Parents in all cultures share 4 main goals that indicate desirable outcomes of parenting. They include: good behaviour, competence, good parent-child relationships, and positive self-esteem and self-confidence. Once we are clear of our goals, systematic and comprehensive parent education programmes can then be designed to provide information, skills training, and support to parents at every stage of their child's life, even before they become parents. These programmes will emphasise on effective parent-child communications. In addition, positive parents' relationship also needs to be addressed, starting from childhood into adult years, as it forms the bedrock of a stable family.

If we really want to support families and promote healthy relationships between children and the adults who raise them, then we must create more viable choices for working parents who are trying to balance their responsibilities to their children and their jobs. In Singapore, we are rapidly developing both supplementary and supportive social service provisions to provide tangible financial and other material help to families in poverty, targeted specifically at children's needs, as well as to strengthen the capacity of

parents to fulfil their roles more effectively. Policies and practices should also recognise and honour cultural diversity, and the strengths and individuality of all families.

Educating our Children

The world is changing rapidly and we must provide our children with the skills needed to thrive in this rapidly changing environment. Education is the best gift we can offer our children.

Schools should focus not only on developing the children's knowledge and cognitive skills, but should also pay more attention to their socio-emotional and physical development, as well as the character-building of these children. Although schools are extremely important for education and development, children also learn from their parents, siblings, peers, books, televisions, and computers. The information and thinking society of the 21st century will no longer be content with products of education that have been trained to merely take in and recycle information handed out by teachers and other authority figures. Today's children who become tomorrow's adults need to experience an education that teaches them to think for themselves and to generate new information. The idea of "moulding" children no longer captures the essence of what is needed.

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.

With the implementation of the Compulsory Education Bill (2000) in 2003, all children must attend at least 6 years of primary education in national schools. However, the figures in 2006 showed that 5% of our children entering primary school have not attended preschool at all. To ensure that all our children can have a good start in life, the government will work with various agencies to get as many children as possible into preschool or kindergarten. At the same time, many efforts are made to halve the school dropout rate at primary and secondary school levels from 3% to 1.5% by 2010. All these measures will go a long way in helping especially the lower-income group to level up, in making sure everyone, however disadvantaged, financially or because they have special learning needs, has access to education. This is important to prevent polarisation in society.

To provide opportunities for all, the Ministry of Education has announced in 2006 a major adjustment in the education policies that will provide many paths for students to grow and develop. "Every child's talent is valued" and "No child would be left behind". The vision is to "build a mountain

range with many peaks of excellence".

From 2008, primary school pupils will not be streamed into EM1, EM2 and EM3. Instead, depending on their strengths, they will study subjects at different levels of difficulty – the Standard level or the easier Foundation level. Therefore, there is a shift from a "fixed" menu to the subject-based "a la carte" menu of study. With more flexibility in the curriculum, catering to the different abilities of students, instead of a one-size-fit-all, students will not be so easily discouraged and leave the school system prematurely as a result.

In 2006, Northlight School was set up with the mandate to engage and educate premature primary school leavers or those who have not done well in the Primary School Leaving Examination. Assumption Pathway, another school of similar nature, will be ready for students in 2009. To provide greater educational pathways and to recognise different talents, the Singapore Sports School was started in 2004 and the School of the Arts will open its door in 2008.

These changes in our educational approach would allow many children with different developmental problems to be included in the mainstream schools, supported by trained teachers and integrated with their peers in their learning experiences. The emphasis is to allow opportunities for them to continue to learn and develop along their innate strengths. The definition of success will therefore be widened.

Early Interventions and Education Opportunities for Children With Special Needs

How a society cares for the disabled reflects the kind of society it is. We want ours to be a society that cares for all its members: one that does not ignore the needs of those who are born or afflicted with disabilities.

In Singapore, an early child development programme that is community-based and family-focused has evolved in the last decade, with integration of the medical, educational, and social services.⁵ The objective of the programme is early identification and treatment of children with developmental and behavioural problems so as to correct developmental dysfunctions, minimise the impact of a child's disability or of prevailing risk factors, strengthen families, and establish the foundations for subsequent development. A disabled child will handicap the entire family. There is only a small window of opportunity and this is in the pre-school years of the child.

High-quality, evidence-based early childhood interventions can make a real difference for children at considerable risk for poor outcomes because of developmental disabilities or significant family problems. However, we are also aware that programmes that work are

rarely simple, inexpensive, or easy to implement.

In 2005, The MOE has undertaken a review of measures to cater to children with special needs, in both Special Education schools and mainstream schools.⁶

The Enabling Masterplan⁷ initiatives for 2007-2011 will see even closer collaboration between the relevant Ministries and the voluntary welfare organisations in Singapore. A wide-ranging plan has been proposed to reach out to children and adults with disabilities, as well as the people who care for them or employ them, so that shortfalls in services for these groups will be plugged over the next 5 years. Essentially, a child, from infancy to 6 years of age, undergoes subsidised early intervention programmes to enhance their language, communication and motor skills. Lower-income families will get bigger subsidies. The family will obtain a grant to be trained in specialised care giving. The child is assessed for placement in a mainstream or specialised school, whichever is appropriate. He or she shares in activities jointly organised by mainstream and special schools. Upon graduation, a young person with disability will undergo vocational assessment and placement tailored to his/her disability. National bodies such as the NTUC's Skills Development Institute give training, based on industry needs. Persons with disability will find jobs and become self-sustaining. Hostel living trains him/her to be independent and smaller-sized group homes where he or she can receive rehabilitation and care will be available.

Protecting Children in Singapore⁸

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.

Protecting children has to do with strong legislation, practical policies, effective 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 targets, 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.

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, such as The Children and Young Persons Act, The Women's Charter, The Guardianship of Infants Act, The Adoption of Children Act, Employment Act, and The Penal Code. In the revised CYP Act (2001), emotional and psychological cruelty has been clearly spelt out as a form of abuse. 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.

The National Standards for Protection of Children issued by MCYS 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.

The Socio-Cultural Contexts of Growing up in Singapore

It is important to consider the socio-cultural contexts in which the child develops. These socio-cultural contexts include the cultural and ethnic worlds in which children live and develop. Children need to be educated and to understand that they are citizens of the world. Global interdependence is no longer a matter of belief or preference. It is an inescapable reality.

To help children of any ethnic heritage reach their full potential, they must recognise the diversity within every cultural and ethnic group. Not recognising this diversity leads to unfortunate and harmful stereotyping. They must also understand that there are legitimate differences among cultural and ethnic groups. Recognising and accepting these differences are important aspects of getting along with others in a diverse, multi-cultural world. In addition,

there are similarities among cultural and ethnic groups that need to be recognised. Incorrectly assumed differences will involve stereotyping and can lead to prejudice.

As adult role models, we need to consider different sides of sensitive cultural and ethnic issues and see things from different points of views and encourage children to do likewise. If we do not seek alternative explanations and interpretations of problems and issues, our conclusions, and those of our children, who often model and emulate their parents' and other adults' behaviour, may be based solely on expectations, prejudices, stereotypes, and personal experiences.

Conclusion

The well being of children is always one of our nation's most important concerns. We all cherish the future of our children for they are the future of society. Children who do not reach their full potential, who are destined to make fewer contributions to society than society needs, and who do not take their place as productive adults diminish the power of that society's future.

I hope future generations of our children are better than us. We can only do so by bringing them up right today.

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