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Parenting as a Balancing Act: Challenges Relating to Involvement in Children's Education

Feature by Former Research Officers Lui Zhi Jing and Jerrine Khong

Children's education is an important issue for many families.

According to a 2017 study by the Institute of Policy studies, 30% of the 1500 parents interviewed felt stressed at least once a month in the past year, about their children's primary school education. Parents identified a variety of stressors, the most common being helping their children with tests and examinations in school. Parents who are highly stressed may pass their stress to their children.

About our study

We conducted a qualitative study to better understand parents' experiences with their child's education, and what can be done to support parents. In this article, we focus on some key challenges that were highlighted by parents and professionals.

All six parents who spoke to us were mothers. Our findings may be a reflection of female parenting experiences.

Participants

6 mothers with children between Primary 3 and 5

5 professionals working with children (e.g., social workers, teachers)

Parenting as a Balancing Act: Challenges Relating to Involvement in Children's Education

Feature by Former Research Officers Lui Zhi Jing and Jerrine Khong

Educating a child requires a large amount of time and resources. Mothers found themselves having to constantly juggle different roles and views to provide what they thought was best for their child.

1 Finding the balance between employment and parenting effectively

The mothers we interviewed highlighted the importance of time as a resource. Some mothers chose to give up working to focus on being a parent as they felt that it was not feasible for them to do both effectively.

"So even you talk about quality time right, actually honestly to me as a parent, quantity is more important than quality. You must first have quantity time before you can even talk about quality. There is no such thing as wah during the whole 24 hours har *… your child during that one hour would show you everything, every wrong thing that she does so you can correct her during that one hour [...]" (Mother 3)*

Without sufficient time, some mothers reported feeling frustrated in their interactions with their child. They also did not have time for themselves, as parenting begins once work ends.

"So I will just say, can you let mummy finish my dinner first? Then I'll go to your homework. So it's like, yea.. I come back, shower, eat dinner, I didn't even have a break, then she just come in already (laughs) So I feel very stressful. So I'll say, can you wait a while first, ya then I will deal with her homework, and also the spelling lah*." (Mother 6)*

In response to the lack of time, some mothers made alternative work arrangements. With fewer work commitments, parenting duties became more manageable and mothers also felt less stressed.

"Now I'm not working... [...] most important I'm less stressed lah *(laughs) because not working already* mah *[...] less stressed from work..." (Mother 6)*

Most mothers in our study have taken time off their careers to focus on parenting. Their experiences may reflect that mothers are often expected to, and are the ones who take up a significant role in their child's education.

Nevertheless, we are mindful that being able to take time off work is an economic privilege; not all mothers can make such arrangements. Future studies can explore how less privileged mothers cope with parenting challenges.

2 Navigating the conflict between society's and the individual's view of education

Society's View

The mothers and professionals we interviewed believed that parents in general were concerned about children's education and had high academic expectations.

"All parents want their children to do very well in school … Especially with this generation of parents […] the parents are aware that like you really have to be the crème of the crop to get into, let's say, top schools, prestigious universities in future." (Teacher 2)

vs.

Parents' View

The mothers in our study believed in a more holistic approach to education, such as developing character strengths and moral values, and having the space to learn from mistakes.

"So I think learning […] is a holistic approach so in the sense that for me being involved not just in academics but also when we go out – what we see, what we do and stuff also have an impact on child's learning as well." (Mother 2)

Parents who do not agree with society's view of education may find it challenging to uphold their beliefs. Some interviewees even doubted if they made the best decisions for their child's education.

"It's a struggle for me lah*. It is a struggle because I am not by nature like that. Initially in the preschool* aiyah *I think it is like okay like that, so that's why I didn't let him go for any enrichment classes until Primary 3 […] Then I realize that oh, could that be the reason why he has some difficulties writing his composition and all that." (Mother 5)*

Consequently, some of our interviewees felt the need to align themselves with society's view, as going "against the tide" proved to be increasingly challenging.

"[…] Once you reach Primary 2 and 3, and Science comes along, and then you just feel like this tsunami is just sweeping you away and you got to ride with the wave or you just get drowned loh*. […] Over the years I find myself changing you know. It is very scary you know, because you find that you are also influenced by the entire atmosphere of very academic focus." (Mother 5)*

Some mothers shared that they were able to stand firm in their own views of education. Here are some strategies they had found helpful:

1. Having social support from like-minded peers

"I have maybe one or two more friends who are like-minded and I really appreciate [it] because we told each other that we must always remind each other not to be too stressed up or too caught up in the rats race." (Mother 4)

2. Being exposed to the viability of alternative educational pathways

"Because I have been in the HR in my company [...] I see successful cases where [students] will still go to poly and eventually go to university, the track that they want to go, and it doesn't mean that you must have high qualifications then you can be successful." (Mother 6)

If you are a parent who is experiencing any of these difficulties, you are not alone!

Supporting your child's education as a parent is no mean feat, as you may have to juggle between various roles and decisions on what is best for your child. While supporting your child, remember also to take care of yourself physically and mentally. If you require professional support, you can find relevant mental health resources here: https://tinyurl.com/MHsupportlinks

What does research say about this?

The Decision-making Experiences of Bystander Witnesses to Suspected Child Abuse

Feature by Research Officer Clarissa Choo, based on research completed for her Honours Thesis

Child abuse has been on the rise in the last decade, reaching an all-time high in 2020 with 1,313 investigated cases. While the increase can be attributed, in part, to sharper screening tools distributed to professionals in 2015, it is undeniable that child abuse is a serious problem in Singapore requiring collective attention.

Members of the community play a crucial role in preventing and responding to child abuse. Community responsiveness is especially necessary for the protection of young children who have little contact with professionals like teachers or social workers. The "Break the Silence" campaign by the Ministry of Social and Family Development has also emphasised the power of an intervening bystander to make a difference in addressing child abuse.

However, how do bystanders decide whether or not to intervene with suspected child abuse? What are some tensions or dilemmas faced in making that decision? What differences in attitudes or opinions lead to bystanders' decisions to intervene or not in cases of suspected child abuse?

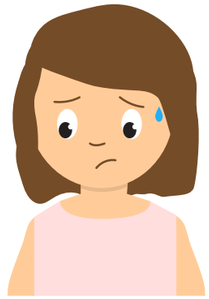
About the study

4 interveners 4 non-interveners

In a qualitative study, 8 participants who were witnesses to suspected child abuse were interviewed. Participants were asked about how they decided whether or not to step in, and the tensions and dilemmas felt in that decision.Two key differences between interveners and non-interveners identified by the study are presented in this article.

1 Differing concerns and worries

Both interveners and non-interveners expressed deep distress and unease when witnessing suspected child abuse. However, the two groups differed in who they felt more concern for, as well as how they evaluated the consequences of their action versus inaction. Worrying for different people, and having different concerns of the potential consequences of intervention led to different decisions about intervention.



INTERVENERS

They were generally worried for the child, and expressed fears of the negative consequences of inaction.

"It was also thinking about the consequences of what if I do nothing about it?... If it's really child abuse, then the children will continue to suffer ... I think it's better safe than sorry?... The consequences of child abuse pushed me to take action." (Intervener 1)

"We were damn scared that ... the boy would get ... beaten like super severely" (Intervener 3)

NON-INTERVENERS

They expressed greater worry for the parent or family and were fearful of possible negative consequences of their action.

"How would [intervening] affect the relationship with the kid? It could.. end up pulling them even further apart, making it even more abusive. That intervening already draws ... a wedge between the parent and the child." (Non-intervener 1)

"Maybe ... they're having like, a really hard time, so you don't want to just add to people's ... troubles or like, anxieties." (Non-intervener 4)

2 Differences in whether suspected child abuse was relatable to one's own experiences

While interveners tended to view child abuse as something relatable to their own experiences (i.e., that of the 'Self'), non-interveners seemed to distance themselves from child abuse, designating it as something that they could not relate to, and that was 'Other', either by racial lines or neighbourhoods. Whether bystanders saw child abuse as a relatable experience of the 'Self', or that of a distinct 'Other' affected their willingness and motivation to intervene.

INTERVENERS

They related what they witnessed in the suspected child abuse to their own experiences. The recognition that abusive actions may be a reality encouraged them to take action and intervene.

"We.... read the news and we realised that like during the Circuit Breaker period, a lot of families..., their emotions [were] very heightened... I mean we could feel it even in our own family.... But like,.... everybody's tensions get a bit heightened, 'cause they're just living so close to each other without going out or anything. So we were like oof, better be more mindful [of abuse]." (Intervener 3)

NON-INTERVENERS

They tended to distance themselves from abusive action by rationalising that:

- Abusive discipline was typical or normal for a racial Other (i.e., parent-child pair are of a different race than bystander)

"[T]he father and the daughter were of a certain race, and, and that, uhhh, kind of reinforced my idea that this certain race used violence to discipline the kids." (Non-intervener 3)

- Child abuse was not possible in one's own neighbourhood, but only occurred in other estates, therefore absolving the bystander from the responsibility to intervene.

"I think it's, more because of the underlying assumption that, child abuse is quite unlikely to happen in my neighbourhood." (Non-intervener 4)

Reflections

In the 14th Singapore Children's Society Lecture held on 28th August 2021, Mrs Priscilla Lui, a veteran in the areas of child rights and child protection from Hong Kong, spoke about the shared journey needed to safeguard children. She asserted that safeguarding the wellbeing of children is an effort that must be undertaken collectively by the community. Members of the community play a crucial role in caring for children and their development.

When asked how members of the public can help to detect possible child abuse, she emphasised the importance of paying attention to the needs of children and their families. While one should be mindful not to intrude on family matters, according to Mrs Lui, taking action with suspected child abuse is an act of care for both the child and the family.

From this study, it is evident that all interviewees felt a strong sense of care and concern for children and families. However, they responded to that concern differently, reflecting the complex decision-making process when it comes to intervening in suspected child abuse. While there may not be a single "right way" to respond to these situations, where there is risk of harm being done to a child, the community plays an important role in standing up for the child's safety. If you suspect that child abuse is occurring around you, please call the National Anti-Violence Helpline at 1800 777 0000.

A complete list of journal articles that are reviewed in this feature can be found at https://tinyurl.com/ResearchBitesFeb2022Ref

How Do Low-Income Families Experience Food Insecurity?

Feature by Research Officer Kate Chew and Former Research Officer Elysia Poh

In 2019, social workers from Yishun Family Service @ Children's Society (YFC) noticed that their clients' children were eating instant noodles frequently. The social workers were concerned that children's nutritional needs might not be adequately met. This observation prompted us to study the food consumption habits of low-income families, and the underlying factors that affected food consumption.

In collaboration with colleagues from YFC, we conducted interviews with 11 children and 6 caregivers from 8 families. In this article, we share some of the findings from our study and discuss how different stakeholders can play a role in alleviating food insecurity.

Food insecurity is a state where one lacks physical and economic access to sufficient, nutritious food for a healthy life. Thus, a family who has sufficient access to food, would still be considered food insecure if their meals are not nutritious.

	Has access	No access
Nutritious food	Food secure	Food insecure
Not nutritious food	Food insecure	Food insecure

Factors that contribute to food insecurity

Financial constraints

✓ **Insufficient household income**
Some families' household incomes were insufficient to provide adequate food for their children.

✓ **Job-related issues arising from COVID-19**
Caregivers experienced job instability during the COVID-19 period, further reducing their household income.

"Suddenly there is a […] lockdown, so eventually my husband […] company contract with (X company) was already end […]. That took him almost three months before he signed contract with the company." (Caregiver A)

✓ **Loss of job due to poor health**
Some caregivers had to stop working due to existing health issues.

"[…] He was working as a security officer, what to do? He collapsed in the working place, then after that they terminated him know." (Caregiver D)

Children's preferences for unhealthy food

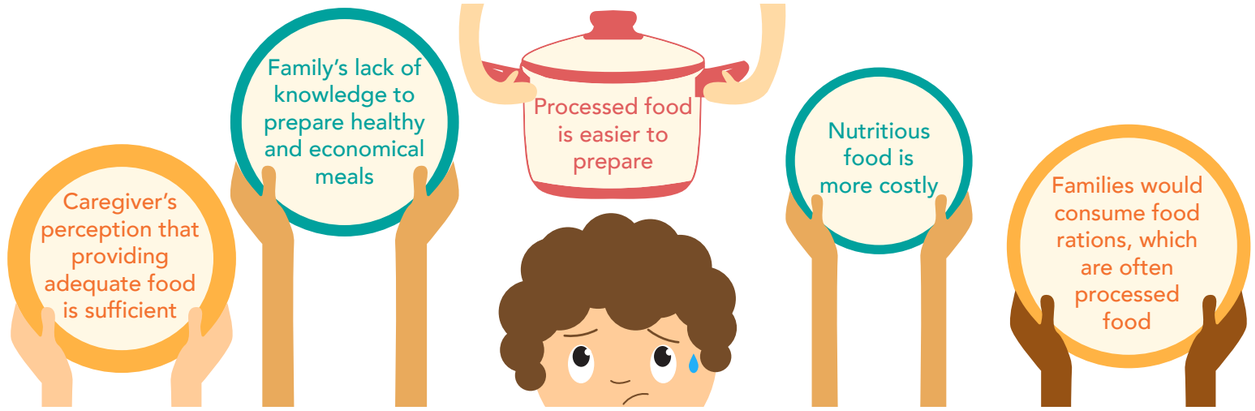
✓ **Difficulties in promoting healthy food consumption**
Some caregivers had difficulties promoting healthy eating habits (e.g., eating vegetables) and regulating unhealthy food preferences (e.g., sugar-sweetened beverages) among their children.

✓ **Caregivers catering to unhealthy food preferences of children**
Some caregivers tended to give in to children's unhealthy food preferences as they wanted to prevent food wastage or show appreciation for their children's help.

"Some people say that it is (e.g., curry chicken, sambal sardines) not healthy food lah *for them also because it's not much, veggies […]. Because if I try change to other things, sometimes will never eat also, waste. Then I have follow what they like uh." (Caregiver B)*

"I can see that [my kids] are quite understanding. They help me a lot also I mean the house… So that is the only chance for me to repay them back." (Caregiver C)

We shared our findings with our practitioners who reflected that there were other possible reasons for food insecurity. Some of these reasons were...



Children and caregivers experienced food insecurity differently

Children's experience

Although we found that most children had enough access to food, they were not consuming nutritious meals due to their food preferences and their families' financial situation.

Caregivers' experience

Conversely, when finances were tight, caregivers faced increased stress as they had to simultaneously manage various needs of the household (e.g., food and utility bills). Caregivers would skip meals or eat smaller portions to ensure that children had sufficient food. Meals were usually high in carbohydrates and proteins to keep their family members full and to prevent food wastage.

Current initiatives to address food insecurity

Social service agencies (SSAs) and food aid organisations have created new initiatives to provide healthier food options to their clients. These initiatives include providing food pantries, community fridges and ready-to-eat meals. While some of these initiatives provide fresh produce to low-income families, most still rely on food rations and processed food.

How can SSAs help to address food insecurity?

We asked our practitioners if there may be other ways to address the issue of food insecurity. Some suggestions proposed include:

Empowering clients to make healthier food choices

- Provide families with knowledge on healthy eating and equip them with skills to prepare nutritious, healthy and affordable meals.
- Discuss with caregivers some alternative ways of rewarding children instead of indulging them with unhealthy food.

Providing opportunities for caregivers to upgrade their job skills

- Enhance job skills of caregivers so that they can earn a higher income
- A higher income would allow caregivers to have greater financial capacity to afford healthy and balanced meals

Rethinking the provision of food aid

- Where possible, request for healthier food options from donors so that clients are able to prepare healthier meals
- Provide supermarket vouchers to caregivers so that they can afford healthier food options

How can I do my part as an individual?

If you are thinking of making a donation-in-kind, you may consider donating a variety of items. For instance:

Donate fresh produce instead of processed food

Fresh produce may be donated to community fridges as they are more nutritious and may be costly for caregivers to purchase.

Donate non-food items

Providing daily necessities (e.g., laundry detergent, soap, baby diapers etc.) may help to offset household expenditure and allow families to have a larger budget for food.

Conclusion

Based on our findings and discussion with practitioners, we recognise that a multi-pronged approach is necessary to alleviate food insecurity for low-income families. SSAs & stakeholders can work with families to increase awareness on the importance of healthy eating. Programmes can be implemented to motivate families to consume healthier food.

SSAs should also aim to provide healthier food ration options or provide cash vouchers to empower clients to purchase healthier food. In the long term, improving clients' employability through upskilling will also enable families to have higher purchasing power. This will allow them to acquire sufficient food and potentially afford more fresh food options.

Please send your feedback and requests to: **researchbites@childrensociety.org.sg.**