



## RESEARCH BITES IS CELEBRATING OUR 5<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY AND OUR 10<sup>TH</sup> ISSUE!

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To celebrate this milestone, we have prepared this special issue, featuring the theme of children's voices. Respect for the views of the child, also known as child participation or children's voices, is one of the four guiding principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Learn more about children's voices and the UNCRC in this issue.

We also highlight the importance of children's voices in our Resilience study. By understanding children's perspectives on their experiences, and the impact of income-related stressors on child outcomes, we hope to gain more insights to better serve children in need.

Finally, we explore the common sources of academic stress experienced by children, and provide some practical tips on how parents can engage children in conversations relating to academic stress. We hope that these tips can help children voice out their concerns.

Together, these articles demonstrate our commitment to representing children's voices, and provide practical ways in which we can facilitate and encourage child participation. We hope you enjoy these articles!

– The Research Bites Team

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# Which types of social support promote resilience among children from low-income families?

Feature by Research Officers Toh Sze Min, Noraini Veragoo, and Chew Kuo Min, Kate

Children from low-income families face many daily stressors:



Living in an overcrowded house



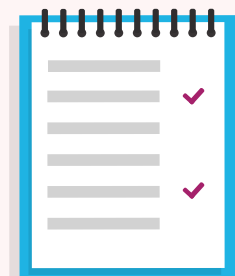
Not having enough food to eat



Seeing or hearing their parents worry about not having enough money for the family

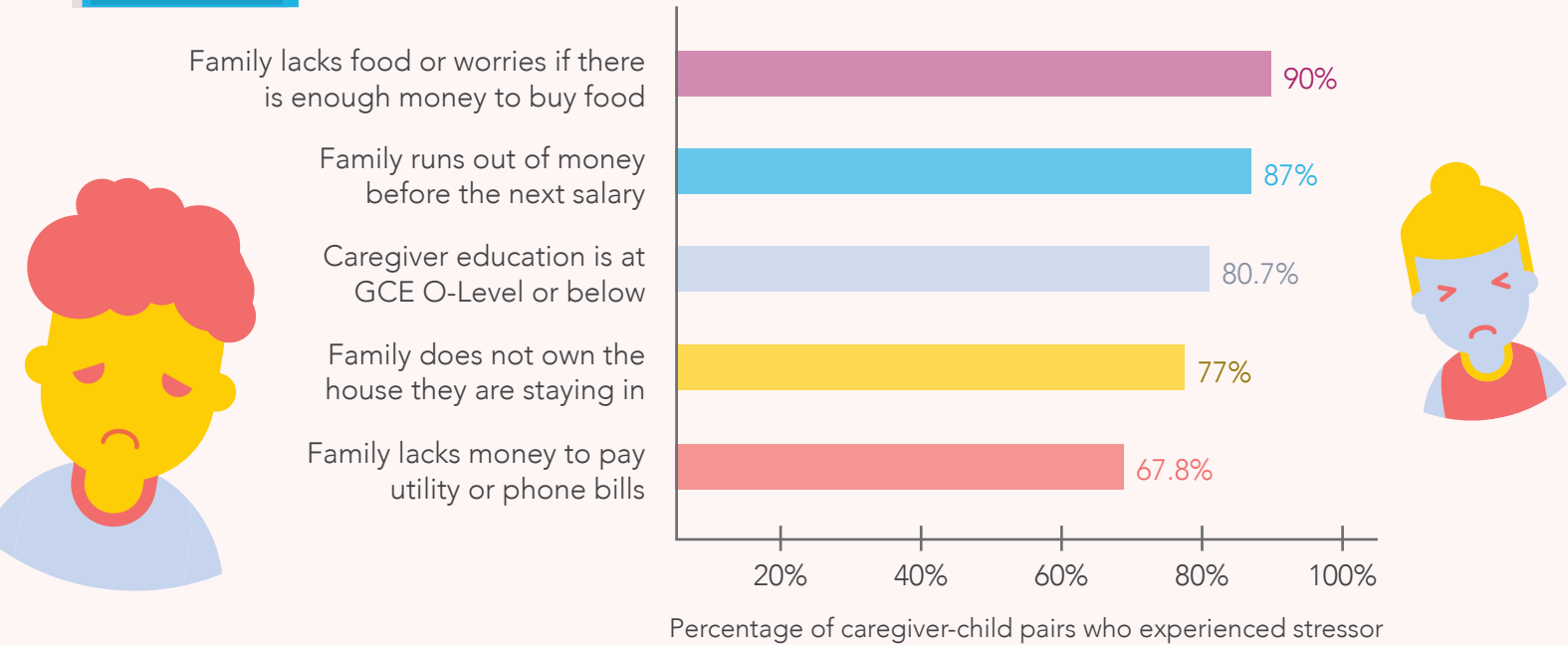
These experiences could increase children’s chances of developing more emotional, behavioural, and attention problems.

At Singapore Children’s Society, we work with many children who grow up in low-income families. Practitioners were therefore interested to find out how social support systems can be harnessed to promote resilience in the face of such stressors. We embarked on this study to find out which types of social support protect children from the negative impact of these stressors.



## What did we ask caregivers?

We asked caregivers questions to determine whether 14 income-related stressors were present or absent in their family. These low-income families faced an average of **6.9 stressors**. The top five income-related stressors reported by caregivers were:



## Who took part in this study?

From 2017 to 2019, Singapore Children’s Society surveyed...


**270**  
caregiver-child pairs from low-income families

**270** children (10 to 15 years old)


**192** caregivers (e.g., parents, grandparents)

These families had a gross monthly household income of S\$4,000 or less, or a gross monthly household income per capita of S\$1,000 or less.


We also asked caregivers to rate their children’s emotional, behavioural, and attention problems such as:




Acting impulsively or without thinking




Being easily distracted




Being self-conscious or easily embarrassed



Feeling depressed



Threatening others



Throwing temper tantrums

Consistent with research done in other countries, we found that children who faced more stressors were more likely to have more emotional, behavioural, and attention problems.

## What did we ask children?

We asked children to list down the people that they sought help from for eight types of social support, and the person’s relationship to them.

Type of Social Support	Question
Reliable Assistance	Who can you count on for help if you really need it?
Emotional Support	Who can you really count on to help you feel better when you are very upset?
Guidance Support	Who can you talk to about your problems and turn to for guidance?
Academic Support	Who can you turn to when you need help with doing your schoolwork, such as math assignments or projects?
Home Support	Who can you turn to when you need help with doing something around the house, such as household chores like making meals and cleaning the house?
Social Integration	Who do you discuss your interests and concerns with?
Companionship	Who do you go to when you want to “hang out” or do really fun things?
Self-Esteem Support	Who values your skills and talents?

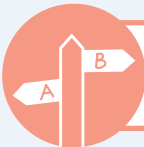
# Which types of social support protected children from the impact of income-related stressors?



Reliable Assistance



Emotional Support



Guidance Support

Out of the eight types of social support that we asked children about, we found that reliable assistance, emotional support, and guidance support protected children against the negative impact of the income-related stressors. When children had more people to turn to for these types of social support, they were less likely to develop problems as a result of the stressors that they face.

## Who were children's sources of support?

For reliable assistance, emotional support and guidance support, children turned to many different people within their social support systems. This shows that all of us can play a part to provide these forms of social support!

Top five categories of people who provided these three types of support to children:

- 1 Friends
- 2 Parents
- 3 Siblings
- 4 Teachers
- 5 Extended family

## Ask the Expert!



In this article, we feature a special guest — Dr. Quah Saw Han, our study advisor.

Dr. Quah is a clinical psychologist with many years of experience working with children and young persons. She is also a parent of two teenagers. We have asked Dr. Quah to share some of her insights on the findings from our study!

We found that children who experienced more stressors had poorer outcomes.

Have you ever wondered why this might be the case? What can we do to support these children and their families?

From what you have observed so far in your work with children and youth, why are children who experience more income-related stressors more likely to develop problems?



When caregivers are in poverty, they become overloaded with responsibilities, such as working, caring for the child, housework, etc.

Like an overloaded truck going uphill, the caregiver's ability to move forward, their parenting practices, and early attachment with their children are compromised.

Inevitably, the child would be unable to meet certain developmental milestones. For example, if the caregiver is overloaded, he or she is unlikely to be attuned to the child's emotions, and the child may develop emotional issues later in life.

If the poverty continues as the child grows older, it is natural for some children to become envious of other peers. For example, when they see their friends being able to eat at McDonald's while some of them do not even know when their next meal will be.

There are many reasons why children develop problems since there are many factors interacting, like genes, environment, temperament, but these are some possible reasons.

## Why is early intervention important in protecting against these stressors?



I'm going to be a bit nerdy and say that it is all about the brain. Research has shown that there are a few very important windows of opportunity in terms of brain development.

It starts as early as during pregnancy with things like good nutrition. In the first 5 years or so, many of the brain circuitries are being developed and stimulated through "serve and return interactions", which are sensitive parental responses to child-initiated interactions. An example is when the child smiles and is being rewarded by a smile back from the caregiver. This is when the early foundations are being laid.

The brain can only develop as well as it can if children grow up in nurturing and stable environments where you have all these serve and return interactions (e.g., incidental teaching, positive bonding experiences). Starting early can help prevent later issues from developing.

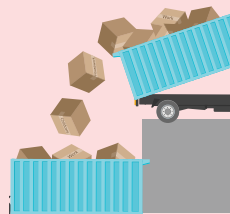
What if the early foundations are absent? Is it then too late to reverse the negative impact of daily stressors?

The brain has the special ability to change and adapt. A lot of the prosocial behaviours or emotion regulation can be learnt. Although it may take longer as children get older, they will still learn, as long as a stable and nurturing environment is provided, with a lot of communication between caregivers and the child. Therefore, it is never too late to intervene!



What can we do to reduce income-related stressors experienced by children from low-income families?

It may seem like oversimplifying things but it is useful to consider how poverty impacts the lower three tiers of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (physiological, safety, belongingness).



One of the impacts, as I've already highlighted, will be the overloaded caregivers. By working with the caregivers and children to find out what would be useful for them, we can help caregivers "offload". What can we do to support them to meet their needs? I am not saying we take over and just give them what they need but to support and empower them to meet those needs.

Firstly, recognise what are their strengths, what skills do the caregivers, or the young people have. Secondly, what are some other foundational support we can provide for them then to meet the needs in a safe and effective way. Ultimately, we are talking about keeping them safe and if it is effective enough, they will be naturally motivated. And then they'd be off, hopefully, to a better life.



Why is it important to understand the impact of specific types of social support, rather than general social support?

Based on our study on resilience, not all types of social support are the same, which is why it is important to really be observing and finding out what the other person needs in order to fulfil some of their needs in a safe way.

For example, with guidance support, someone can teach and help the child with the smaller steps in reaching their goals, help them develop problem-solving skills and regulate the young person's emotions. When you think about poverty and how overloaded the caregiver is, it makes sense that guidance support would be impacted. Providing social support by only listening to the child but not guiding them is not going to be very helpful in this context.



Our findings showed that reliable assistance, guidance support and emotional support buffered the impact of risk factors. Why do you think these three, but not other types of support (e.g., academic support), were effective buffers?



It goes back to what is most helpful for the child. For example, if children are having difficulties with their schoolwork, providing academic support may help the child to improve in schoolwork, but it may not solve the fundamental difficulties that the child has, such as attention problems caused by stressors at home. In such cases, reliable assistance and guidance support may be more helpful.



As a parent, how did you build these three types of social support for your children?

I started from day one: focusing on having positive interactions with them, being attuned to their needs. It involves a lot of communicating. Start as young as possible, validate their feelings where appropriate, and affirm their positive efforts. I find that expectations about schoolwork usually breaks the relationship between parents and children, so I always try to celebrate my children's efforts regardless of the achievement or outcome.



What advice do you have for teachers and practitioners to build these three types of social support with children?



It is about keeping an open mind and listening. Instead of telling, we listen. Make use of teaching opportunities. Many of the best teaching moments are when children fail, not when they succeed. When they are in pain, distress, or when they fail, that is also the time when they are a bit more motivated to change. It is also a good time for us to guide them to think about how they can do things better.

It would be good for teachers and practitioners to have patience. A lot of times I find, among us professionals we ourselves are anxious and impatient, which is not very helpful. I generally try to refrain from putting on the adult fix-it cap. If I can, I will at least ask questions - "So what could you have done differently now that you know this has happened? How can I help you? How can I support you?"



It takes a village to raise a child. Let's pay attention to children from low-income families and actively take steps to reduce income-related stressors for them by facilitating their access to the resources they lack, and providing reliable assistance, emotional support, and guidance support for them.



## What does research say about this?

# Respecting children's voices: How can practitioners promote child participation?

Feature by Assistant Manager Goh Guan Zhen (Advocacy Unit)

On 20<sup>th</sup> August 2020, 60 staff members and interns participated in the ForUM (For U & Me) session organised by the Advocacy and Research Department of the Singapore Children's Society.



The session started with an overview of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) before focusing on child participation, one of the UNCRC's four core principles.

In this article, the terms "child participation" and "children's voices" will be used interchangeably.

## What is child participation?

Under the UNCRC, children are recognised as active contributors and child participation is the right for children to express their views in all issues affecting them.

Adults are to listen and seriously consider children's views in accordance with their age and maturity.

## How can practitioners facilitate child participation?

Practitioners can adopt the Lundy Model of Participation which recommends four components to be established – space, voice, audience and influence.

The model will be discussed with reference to two of Society's services, which our practitioners shared during the ForUM session:

- Youth drop-in centres which promote positive youth development
- Safe and Strong Families-Reunification (SSF-R) programme which helps reunify children in out-of-home care with their birth families

Children are provided with a safe and comfortable platform (physical and online), and dedicated time to express their opinions freely.

For example, youth workers build rapport with the youths whenever they come to the drop-in centres, and intentionally invite them to share their opinions about matters concerning them.



Tip: Adults tend to act as mouthpieces for children, so remember to check in directly with children.

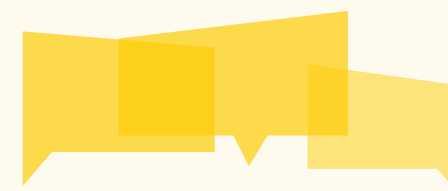


Children are supported to understand issues concerning them. This helps them to formulate and express their views.

For instance, SSF-R caseworkers use storybooks to teach children about safe and unsafe secrets. This enables children to share what they think about keeping secrets and who they could share these information with.



Tip: Younger children may have difficulties verbalising their thoughts. Adults can encourage them to express themselves in other ways, such as through stories, art, or play.

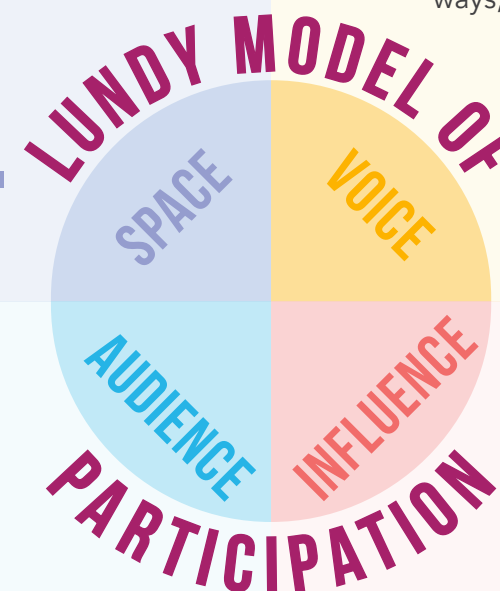


Children are provided an audience consisting of adults who listen respectfully and are willing to act on children's suggestions.

For example, youths at our drop-in centre suggested bowling as a centre activity. After assessing that this was feasible, youth workers collaborated with the youths to organise this event together.



Tip: Be open and receptive to children and youths' feedback and ideas. Encouraging children to express their views does not mean that adults will lose control, or that their authority will be undermined.



Children's views are considered seriously, and acted upon where appropriate. Children are informed about how their views contributed to the decision-making process.

For instance, SSF-R caseworkers incorporate inputs from children to develop a plan to help them be safe and to cope better. They regularly review this plan with the children.

With the children's permission, caseworkers share children's worries with the parents. The parents become motivated to be better caregivers after being more aware of the impact of the home situation on children.



Tip: Give children opportunities to make decisions at home, in school or in the community. Recognise and celebrate their efforts.

## Outcomes of child participation

Children and youths' opinions are important in informing the design of our services. This requires intentional efforts from adults to practice these four components of the Lundy Model of Participation in order to promote meaningful child participation.

As children feel more comfortable to speak up and contribute, their self-confidence is built up. This prepares them to be adults who are more likely to participate in shaping our society.

## What does research say about this?

# What can you do if your child experiences academic stress?

Feature by Senior Research Officer Jerrine Khong and Former Research Officer Lui Zhi Jing

As our children navigate through the education system, academic stress may inevitably become a part of their journey.

Findings from a 2015 study involving students from 72 countries showed that 15-year-olds in Singapore experienced more anxiety about tests and exams than the average adolescent in other countries. In recent years, local news articles also reported that more students are seeking help for school-related stress.

In 2020,

around **20%** of the online chats received by Tinkle Friend, our hotline for primary school children, were school-related concerns such as exam stress and not knowing how to do homework.



**Have you checked in with your child how they feel about school lately?**

In this feature, we look at what are the sources of academic stress and how we can engage our children in conversations to help them cope with these stressors.

## What are some sources of academic stress for children?

According to research findings, children may be stressed when they experience one or more of the following:



Did not meet parents' and teachers' expectations



Did not meet their own expectations



Competition with peers



Heavy workload (School work, assignments given by parents, tuition)



Lack confidence or concentration in their studies

## What happens when children are stressed?

Experiencing a lot of academic stress for a prolonged period of time can have negative impacts on children such as:

- Poorer academic performance
- Increased risk of mental health issues (e.g., anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation)
- Poorer physical health and sleep



When children experience stress, they may exhibit:

- Physical symptoms (e.g., bed wetting, unexplained stomach aches)
- Emotional/Behavioural symptoms (e.g., mood swings, violent behaviours)

## If you notice that your child is experiencing stress, try these steps to help your child:

- 1 Remain calm and listen to your child attentively about their school experiences.
  - Ask your child to share with you what is bothering them
- 2 Empathise with your child's feelings and help them understand that setbacks are temporary.
  - E.g., "It is normal to feel overwhelmed when you have so much to do, but remember that these setbacks are not forever. Let's learn from this and try again."
- 3 Work together with your child to find a solution.
  - Encourage your child to think of what they can do
- 4 Let your child know that you support and love them unconditionally.
  - This is important, because when children feel that their parents' affection for them depends on how well they perform academically, children may feel more stressed.



## For more support, encourage your child to approach a professional.

• **Talk to Tinkle Friend**  
(for primary school children)  
Helpline: 1800-274-4788  
Monday to Friday, 2.30pm to 5.00pm

Online chat: [www.tinklefriend.sg](http://www.tinklefriend.sg)  
Monday to Thursday, 2.30pm to 7.00pm  
Friday, 2.30pm to 5.00pm

• **Talk to a school counsellor**  
• **Drop in at a youth centre to speak to a social worker**  
Find a youth centre near you at [www.childrensociety.org.sg/contact](http://www.childrensociety.org.sg/contact)



# EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

Research Bites is celebrating our 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and what a journey it has been!

Research Bites was first developed as a new platform to disseminate our research findings. Our primary goal for the publication was to present our research findings in an accessible manner so that interested members of the public, professionals, and our own staff can readily access and apply these findings. This continues to be our guiding principle today, and we remain driven to encourage an understanding and appreciation of research. We believe that this is fundamental to providing evidence-based interventions and programmes.

Over the years, we have presented findings from a range of our research, such as the Infancy study, the Resilience study, Cyberbullying, Schools and the Class Divide, and our study on Perceptions towards Child Abuse & Neglect.

More recently, we have developed other types of articles to reach out to a wider audience. Articles under the banner "What does research say?" (such as the article on academic stress in this issue) were developed in recognition that a review of the existing literature can answer many other questions that our colleagues and readers would like to learn more about. There have also been "Research Spotlight" articles (most recently in Issue 6), which present the findings of studies that have been supported by our Research Grant. More recently, we have presented some findings regarding programme evaluation (in Issues 5 and 9), as this is an important area of our work in ensuring the quality of our programmes. We will continue to share our learnings from the evaluation of various programmes at Singapore Children's Society.

Along with Issue 8, we had released a survey to gather feedback from you, our readers. We were very encouraged by the number of responses and variety of suggestions. We will continue to develop new content, and bring you more research findings. On behalf of the team, thank you for all your support.

Yours Sincerely,  
Charlene Fu  
Editor

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