Children's SOCIETY
Caring for the Future

ISSUE 14 • FEB 2023

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What Encourages and Prevents Youths from Seeking Social Support?

Feature by Research Officer Toh Sze Min

What encourages youths to seek support from their social network and what might prevent them from doing so?
In our first study on resilience in children from low-income families conducted between 2017 and 2019, we found that three forms of support protected children from the negative impact of income-related stressors. These were reliable assistance (children being able to count on someone for help when they really needed it), emotional support (children being able to count on someone for help when they were very upset), and guidance support (children having people to talk to about their problems and turn to for guidance) (see Research Bites Issue 10). We also found that children sought help from both their informal social support networks (e.g., friends, parents, siblings, extended family) and their formal social support networks (e.g., teachers, counsellors). In our follow-up study, we were interested to understand what encouraged or prevented youths from reaching out to their formal and informal networks for support in times of difficulty.
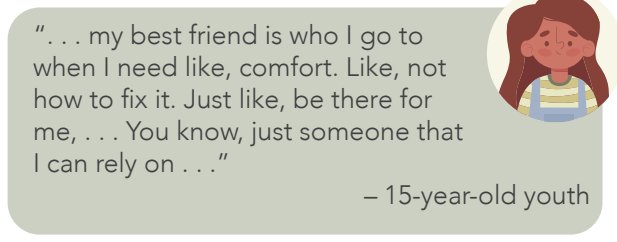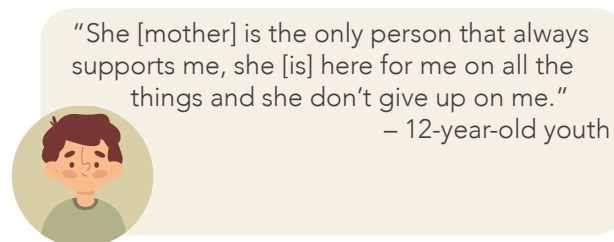
Who took part in this study?
We interviewed 25 parent-child pairs from low-income families between 2020 and 2021. The youths were between 12 and 17 years old. Although we interviewed both parents and youths, this article will focus on what the youths shared during the interviews.
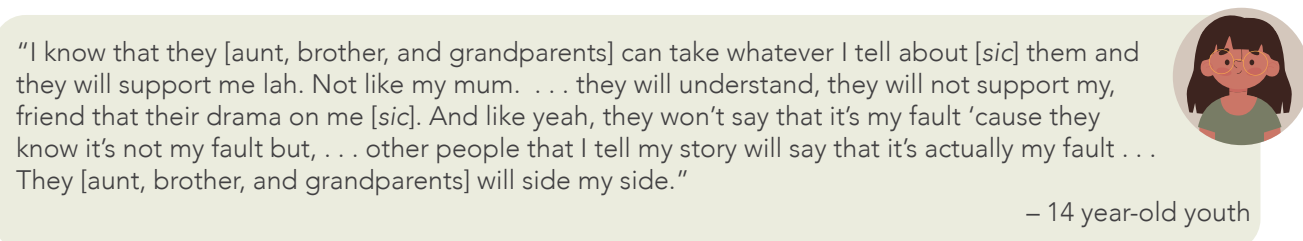
What encouraged youths to seek support?

1. Availability of reliable support

Youths tended to seek support from someone, who based on past experience, was available, trustworthy, and supportive. For instance, some parents assured youths that they would always try their best to help and support them. This encouraged youths to count on parents for support when faced with difficulties or challenges. Also, youths often sought support from their peers who were there for them and provided a safe space for them to share their feelings vulnerably.

> "She [mother] is the only person that always supports me, she [is] here for me on all the things and she don't give up on me."
> — 12-year-old youth

> ". . . my best friend is who I go to when I need like, comfort. Like, not how to fix it. Just like, be there for me, . . . You know, just someone that I can rely on . . ."
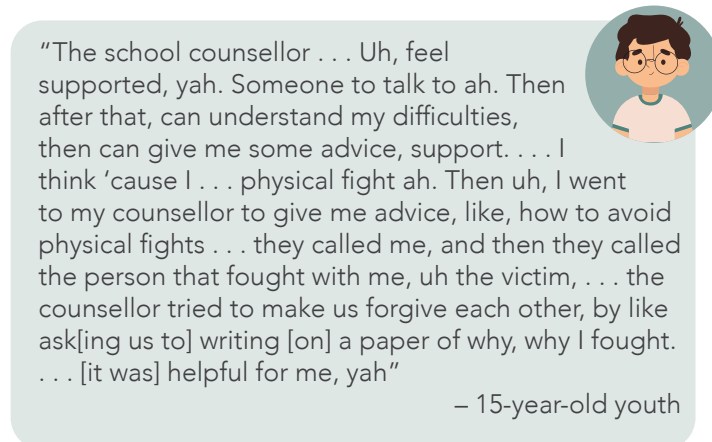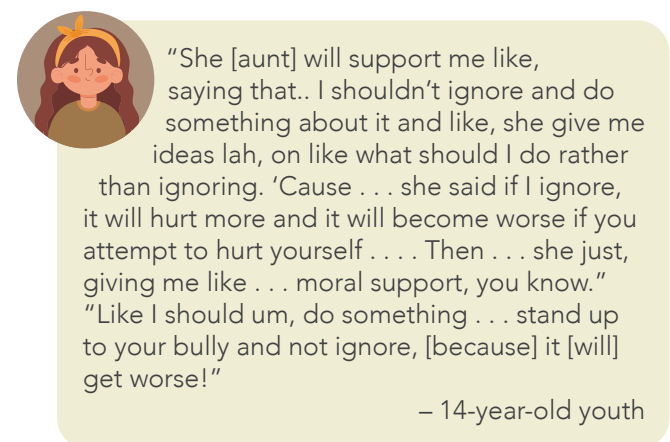> — 15-year-old youth

2. Empathy for youths' experiences: Understanding from the youths' perspective

Youths felt supported by those who did not blame or judge them, but instead tried to understand the situation from their point of view. When youths were shown empathy, they felt heard, acknowledged, and not dismissed. This encouraged them to continue to share openly about their struggles, and to also calm down and problem-solve rationally. They were then not afraid or ashamed to share their problems with the same people in the future again.

> "I know that they [aunt, brother, and grandparents] can take whatever I tell about [sic] them and they will support me lah. Not like my mum. . . . they will understand, they will not support my, friend that their drama on me [sic]. And like yeah, they won't say that it's my fault 'cause they know it's not my fault but, . . . other people that I tell my story will say that it's actually my fault . . . They [aunt, brother, and grandparents] will side my side."
> — 14 year-old youth
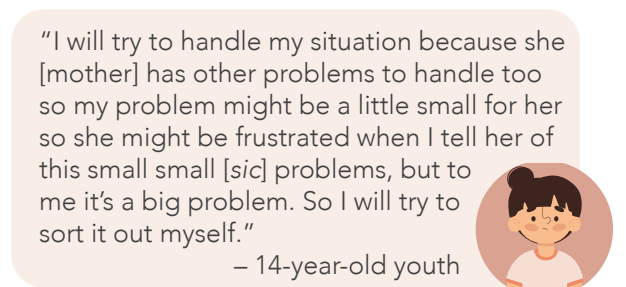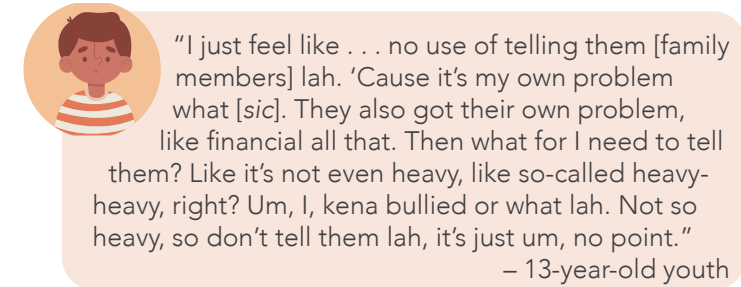
3. Active support and guidance for the youth

When youths were guided and given ideas on how to solve their problems, instead of being told to ignore the problem or being criticised and scolded for their actions, youths felt that they were more equipped to problem-solve. As the support was helpful and congruent with their needs, it encouraged youths to go to the same person again when they needed guidance and advice.

> "She [aunt] will support me like, saying that.. I shouldn't ignore and do something about it and like, she give me ideas lah, on like what should I do rather than ignoring. 'Cause . . . she said if I ignore, it will hurt more and it will become worse if you attempt to hurt yourself . . . . Then . . . she just, giving me like . . . moral support, you know."
> "Like I should um, do something . . . stand up to your bully and not ignore, [because] it [will] get worse!"
> — 14-year-old youth

> "The school counsellor . . . Uh, feel supported, yah. Someone to talk to ah. Then after that, can understand my difficulties, then can give me some advice, support. . . . I think 'cause I . . . physical fight ah. Then uh, I went to my counsellor to give me advice, like, how to avoid physical fights . . . they called me, and then they called the person that fought with me, uh the victim, . . . the counsellor tried to make us forgive each other, by like ask[ing us to] writing [on] a paper of why, why I fought. . . . [it was] helpful for me, yah"
> — 15-year-old youth
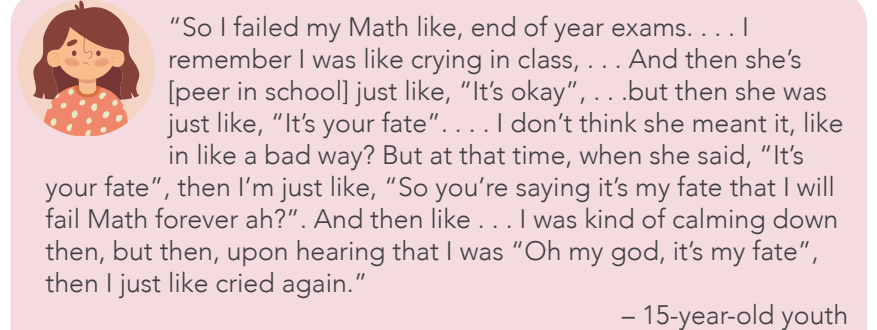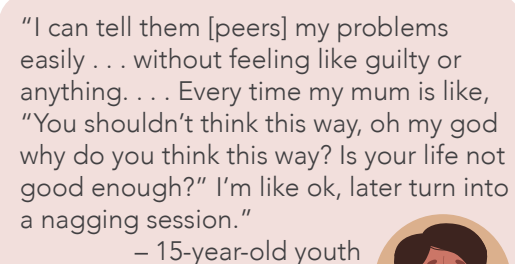
What prevented youths from seeking support?

1. Youths' fear of burdening others

Some youths chose to keep their problems to themselves or tried to resolve their problems on their own as they perceived that their family members, teachers, or friends had many other concerns (e.g., financial difficulties, problems at work, other students, mental health). Youths usually faced problems in their peer relationships, or were experiencing bullying in school. Although these problems were important to the youths, they were worried that sharing about their problems would burden their family members, teachers, or friends further, and make them irritated or angry.

> "I just feel like . . . no use of telling them [family members] lah. 'Cause it's my own problem what [sic]. They also got their own problem, like financial all that. Then what for I need to tell them? Like it's not even heavy, like so-called heavy-heavy, right? Um, I, kena bullied or what lah. Not so heavy, so don't tell them lah, it's just um, no point."
> — 13-year-old youth

> "I will try to handle my situation because she [mother] has other problems to handle too so my problem might be a little small for her so she might be frustrated when I tell her of this small small [sic] problems, but to me it's a big problem. So I will try to sort it out myself."
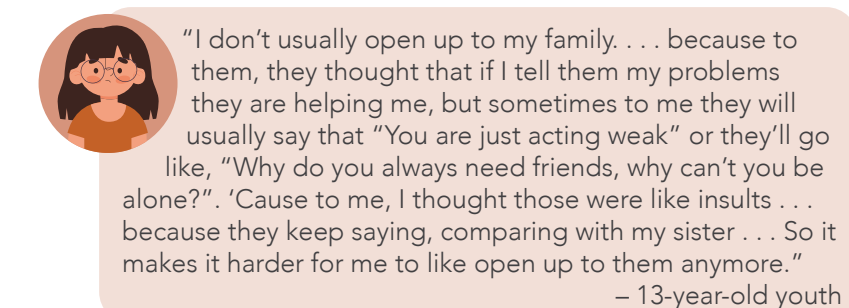> — 14-year-old youth

2. Emotional invalidation from others: Having their thoughts and feelings minimised or dismissed

When the youths shared about their feelings and problems with their parents or friends, some of the responses received were very unempathetic and hurt the youths deeply. When their emotions were invalidated, it made the youths feel unimportant and that it was wrong to feel a certain emotion. They also felt helpless about the problems that they faced. These encounters discouraged them from approaching the same people for support again.

> "I can tell them [peers] my problems easily . . . without feeling like guilty or anything. . . . Every time my mum is like, "You shouldn't think this way, oh my god why do you think this way? Is your life not good enough?" I'm like ok, later turn into a nagging session."
> — 15-year-old youth

> "So I failed my Math like, end of year exams. . . . I remember I was like crying in class, . . . And then she's [peer in school] just like, "It's okay", . . .but then she was just like, "It's your fate". . . . I don't think she meant it, like in like a bad way? But at that time, when she said, "It's your fate", then I'm just like, "So you're saying it's my fate that I will fail Math forever ah?". And then like . . . I was kind of calming down then, but then, upon hearing that I was "Oh my god, it's my fate", then I just like cried again."
> — 15-year-old youth

3. Mismatch between the support needed and the support received

When youths sought support from their peers, school counsellor, or family members, some of the advice that they received were not helpful as it did not match the youths' needs. For instance, some youths who experienced bullying in school were feeling distressed and upset. When they sought support from their family, they were told to ignore their peers or not to befriend the bullies. However, this advice was incongruent with the youths' need for belonging and affiliation with their peers.

> "I don't usually open up to my family. . . . because to them, they thought that if I tell them my problems they are helping me, but sometimes to me they will usually say that "You are just acting weak" or they'll go like, "Why do you always need friends, why can't you be alone?". 'Cause to me, I thought those were like insults . . . because they keep saying, comparing with my sister . . . So it makes it harder for me to like open up to them anymore."
> — 13-year-old youth

> "'Cause her [peer] advice don't make sense. . . . I ask for life advice, she give me boyfriend advice."
>
> "Yeah because they give me boy advice, I never ask for them."
> — 15-year-old youth

Seeking support from others can help youths to better manage the major transitions and stressors in their adolescence and develop adaptive coping skills that are essential for their mental well-being in adulthood. Particularly for youths growing up in adverse circumstances, support seeking could protect them from the negative impact of their environments, and it is essential for youths to seek support.

We hope that parents, peers, relatives, and youth workers who are part of the youths' formal and informal social support systems can encourage youths to seek social support in their times of need by:
1. Taking the time to listen to the youths, assuring them that it is a safe space to share, and thanking the youths for sharing their difficulties or experiences.
2. Empathising with the youths' experiences and validating their emotions (e.g., "It makes sense that you feel upset, I would feel upset in that situation too").
3. Asking them what support they require and how we can assist them, instead of assuming that we know best about the support that they need.

Letter from Editor

Dear Readers,

2022 marked the return to normal after the COVID-19 pandemic with the easing of measures such as limits on group size and vaccine-differentiated measures. As we return to "normal", it is important to consider what we have learnt during the pandemic.

Over the last two years, there has been increasing attention paid to mental health, particularly that of parents and caregivers. This was partly due to the increased stressors brought about by the Circuit Breaker and other measures that limited our social interaction. The topic of youth mental health was further thrust into the spotlight in July 2021 when a student at River Valley High School allegedly murdered a school mate.

With an increasing recognition of the importance of mental wellness, we have also seen more research attention placed on the topic. One key milestone is the Institute of Mental Health's (IMH) announcement that they will be launching the National Youth Mental Health Study to understand the prevalence of mental health conditions experienced by youths, and to understand the factors associated with these conditions.

In this issue, we present several pieces of our work that contributes to understanding the issue of mental health among our Children and Young Persons (CYPs).
The first article shares findings from our Resilience study, which focusses on the factors that encouraged or discouraged youths from seeking help from others around them. Help-seeking is a crucial step for anyone facing difficult circumstances, and addressing the challenges, fears or stigma surrounding help-seeking could be crucial in helping youths safeguard their mental well-being.

In our second article, we interview Ms Vivyan Chee, the Head of Oasis for Minds Services (OMS), Singapore Children's Society's new service dedicated to support youths in their mental health needs and concerns.

Finally, while there has been increasing attention on the mental health and well-being of youths, there has been less attention on children's mental health. To better understand children's concerns about mental health, we looked to the chats logged via Tinkle Friend on the topic. Tinkle Friend is a national toll-free helpline and chatline aimed at providing advice, support, and information to primary school children. We share some key findings and recommendations in our third article.

The mental health of our CYPs is an important topic deserving of continued discussion and attention. We hope that you will find these sharings insightful, and that they provide you with some useful suggestions.

Regards,
Charlene Fu
Editor

Ask the Expert: Supporting Children & Youth's Mental Health

Feature by Research Officers Nabilah Binte Mohammad and Janet Joe

Addressing mental health concerns is critical at any age, but it is especially important to address them in children and adolescents who are experiencing rapid growth and development. Promoting psychological well-being, and ensuring access to mental health care helps children develop the resilience to cope with obstacles and grow into well-rounded, healthy adults.

Acknowledging the lack of youth-centric community-based mental health services, a new programme was set up in 2022 to boost community-based support for youth with mental health conditions.[1] Singapore Children's Society – Oasis for Minds Services (OMS) is among the four social service agencies to be trained by Institute of Mental Health (IMH) to manage these cases.

We recently spoke with Ms Vivyan Chee, Deputy Director, and Head of OMS, to learn more about the state of our youths' mental health and what can be done to support the well-being of young people. Vivyan's background is in psychology and counselling, and she has been with the Singapore Children's Society for eleven years. Her earlier experience in the organisation was in juvenile justice, where she worked with at-risk youth. Following that, she began working with children and youth who were placed in out-of-home care and typically faced child protection concerns.

What is mental health to you?

People frequently associate mental health with disorder and disease. On the other hand, when we think about physical health, we think about exercise, nutrition and taking care of our skin and body. Although they are both concerned with health, our attitudes & perceptions are very different. To me, mental health is equally important and interrelated with physical heath as they both contribute to our overall health. Just like life has its ups and downs, the state of our mental health will fluctuate as well, and it is normal.
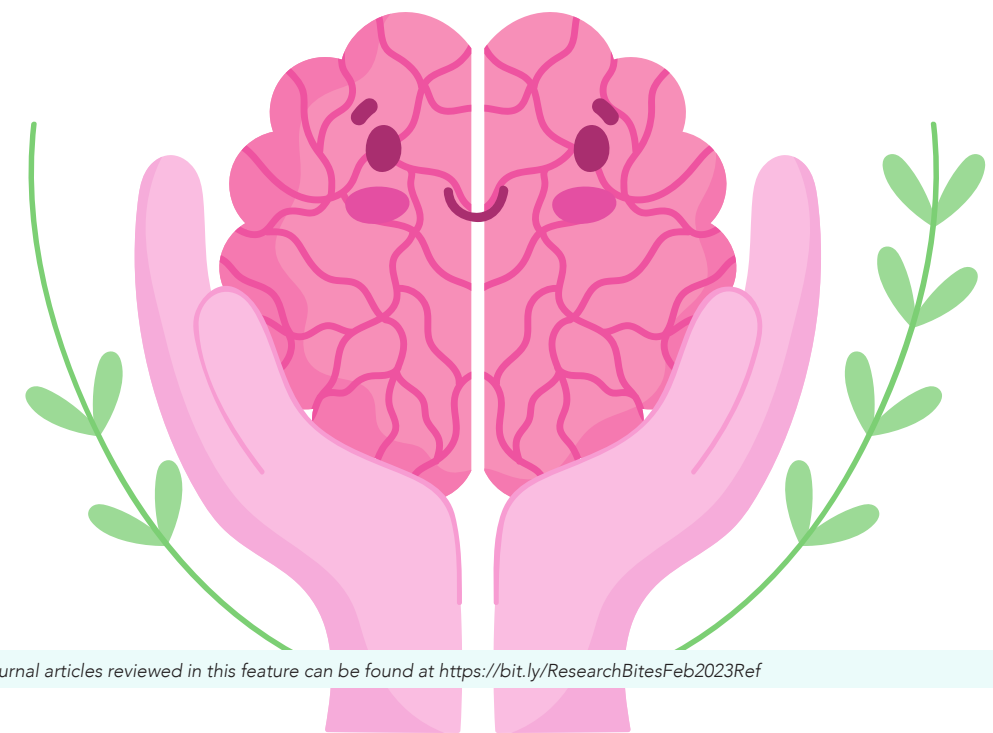
According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) definition, health is "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity"[2]. By extension, mental health is more than just the absence of mental disorders. It is described as "a dynamic state of internal equilibrium" that involves the capacity to apply essential social, emotional, and cognitive skills to navigate effectively through life and the world[3].

Components of mental well-being[3]

Emotional well-being

Adopting a positive attitude, having interests and passions in life, feeling happy and calm.

Social well-being

Having a sense of belonging, feeling of self-worth that you matter in the larger scheme of things.

Functional well-being

Developing skills and knowledge, and ability to make good decisions.

Definitions aside, what is more important is that mental health exists on a spectrum. Throughout our lives, we are most likely experiencing different degrees of mental health and well-being. For example, you may have a diagnosed mental illness and still achieve a sense of positive well-being with treatment compliance. Having an illness may not necessarily be a permanent debilitating aspect of your life. However, there are also many who may seem 'healthy' without a diagnosis but may experience different levels of psychological distress throughout their lives. Hence, focusing solely on mental illness and relying only on medical interventions does not acknowledge the diversity of human mental health experience. In adopting the view of mental health as dynamic, we can better promote and protect our rights to mental health.

Do children and youth face mental health challenges?

Certainly. Mental health affects all of us even before we are born. Research from the GUSTO (Growing Up in Singapore Towards Healthy Outcomes) study revealed that distress during pregnancy, regardless of the levels of distress, can affect children's emotional and cognitive developmental outcomes[4].

Every transition in life carries risks and young people are especially vulnerable because they are undergoing profound biological, neurological, identity and social transitions. If they lack the skills and support systems to navigate these transitions, they are more likely to face mental health challenges.

Sometimes, youths' attempts to cope may be misinterpreted. For example, an adolescent might lose interest in school, and it would be easy to conclude that he/she is disengaged. However, he/she might be struggling with transitions that cause psychological distress which can make paying attention in school challenging.

Hence, I think one of the biggest misconceptions is when children with emotional-behavioural issues are labelled as "misbehaving or difficult children". Like an iceberg, there could be underlying issues driving a child to behave in a certain way.

During adolescence, youths go through a phase where they are no longer children but are not adults yet. In addition to this awkward phase, they are also trying to make sense of their identity and self-worth. Other than normal developmental challenges, my team considers the impact of living in a volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous and hyperconnected (VUCAH) world as "modern mental health concerns". Youths' challenges have become complex as the world is changing rapidly and negative news demands our attention.

Young people in Singapore might not be articulating this yet, but there has been a growing uncertainty towards their future. News of climate crises and scarcity make it hard to be hopeful for the future. Adolescents often associate academic achievement with their self-worth. When they don't meet expectations, they tend to form a very negative self-image and it becomes challenging to consider different pathways of success. Aside from that, social media can sometimes influence them to look a certain way or appear happy all the time. It depicts an unrealistic version of reality, and yet, young people believe that this is how they should live.

The youths we have spoken to share that they often feel dismissed by the adults in their lives because their concerns are different from their parents' own adolescent experiences. Some parents, teachers and school counsellors struggle to relate and might even become more controlling or limiting in the process. Sometimes these adults seem so busy that youths choose to not "trouble" them and suffer in silence instead.

Do you think there is a stigma surrounding mental health issues?

In some ways, the pandemic has normalised conversations about mental health, and revealed that all of us are susceptible to mental health challenges. I observed the tendency to view mental health as a binary; you are either well or unwell. Hence youths do not seek help because they consider themselves as "not that unwell". Those who are "that unwell" are perceived as "the other". However, this is inaccurate as our mental health status is on a spectrum and early intervention ensures a better prognosis. Stigma associated with help-seeking makes things worse for the people affected. It becomes difficult for them to speak about their mental health challenges without the fear of judgement from people around them. According to UNICEF, children reported that the rejection, misunderstanding, and discrimination associated with stigma can be more damaging than the mental health challenge itself[3].

Our national de-stigmatisation efforts have influenced mindsets in more positive ways. Youths are more courageous to speak up now. However, as a practitioner, I am concerned whether the environment, including social media and the people in it, will be able to respond appropriately to our youths. To be clear, social media is neither good nor harmful. While there are advantages, we should be aware of potential negative impact on youths.

Also, I feel that the media sometimes misrepresents persons with mental health conditions. For instance, the news tends to report crimes related to mental health issues while a much smaller proportion of news cover mental wellness or recovery stories. Certain popular drama series portray mental health issues and maladaptive coping mechanisms as incredibly cool or tragically beautiful. Having information and open dialogues at our fingertips has given us the language to process our internal experiences but misinformation or misuse of information can be problematic. It might intensify negative feelings and concerns, making it difficult for youths to recover and gain wellness. We should be mindful of this.

Due to stigma and various systemic issues, too many children and young persons are struggling in silence and are often misunderstood or mislabelled as "weak", "soft", "bad". Other than exacting a toll on them and depriving them of their rights to health, poor mental health would sap societies of human potential and result in the loss of human capital. Neglecting their mental health would mean compromising their capacity to learn, work, relate and contribute to society. We will likely be observing increased rates of poor school attendance, unemployment, suicide, etc.

Are there any particular sections of the population that are at high risk/vulnerable in terms of being affected by mental health challenges and accessing resources? Do demographics or family functioning affect their chances of facing mental health issues?

The mental health of CYPs is shaped by the interplay of biology and exposure to experiences and environments. The ones most vulnerable will be those exposed to more risk factors over longer period of time, in poor social, economic and environmental circumstances. While we might not be able to address and mitigate all risk factors, I think it is more important to build the child's assets (intrapersonal factors) and resources (environmental factors). For example, developing their emotion regulation, problem-solving, coping, and social skills, advocating for mental health-friendly school environments and promoting responsive parenting. CYPs' mental health needs require a systemic response.

Risk factors

- Adverse childhood experiences*, sedentary behaviour, poor sleep hygiene, and substance use
- Factors beyond control (e.g., stigma, poverty, climate crises, pandemics)

Protective Factors

- Nurturing and supportive parents/family[3]
- Strong formal and informal network

Adverse childhood experiences are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years)[5]

How can parents, teachers and peers play a part in promoting mental health among children and youth?

For parents and teachers, start with taking care of your own well-being. When we demonstrate how we care for ourselves, we become good role models for our children to watch and learn. We will also have more emotional bandwidth to attend to their mental wellness. Do not underestimate the power of day-to-day interactions as they become the foundation to form long-lasting trusting relationships. It is quite similar for peers too. When peers are more open to form emotional connections, they will inspire more courageous dialogues and eventually foster kindness. Every person is contributing to the child's mental wellness. I would strongly encourage us to normalise help-seeking behaviours.

Finally, I will urge us to put on a systemic lens on mental health issues. It requires effort and kindness from all of us, not just the psychiatrists and psychologists, to provide care and support for the children and youth facing mental health challenges. We should focus on enabling them to tap on their strengths, feel empowered to make decisions, and manage their mental health concerns.

Supporting Children's Mental Health: Lessons from Tinkle Friend

Feature by Former Research Officer Clarissa Choo and Research Officer Jace Chia

Concern for youth mental health has been on the rise in the last year. While increased attention has been given to mental well-being among young people, little is currently known about children's concerns regarding their mental health, and their help-seeking experiences. With that in mind, we analysed chats that children had with Tinkle Friend about their mental health.

Tinkle Friend is the national toll-free helpline (1800 2744 788) and chatline for primary school-aged children in Singapore. Children reach out to Tinkle Friend anonymously for support, advice, and information on a myriad of issues, especially when feeling lonely or distressed. In order to understand what children were saying about mental health concerns, we randomly selected 57 of chats children had with Tinkle Friend about their mental health. As the chats are anonymous, the identities of the children remain unknown.

Key findings

Out of 9423 online chats in 2020 and 2021, 668 chats were regarding mental health concerns. Of these, 57 online chats were then randomly selected for analysis.

Three sources of stress for children were identified from the analysis.

- **Expectations of achievement:** pressure caused by expectations that children place on themselves, and/or that parents place on them to do well academically or attain certain ideals
- **Family-related stressors:** family-related triggers of stress including family conflict, harsh discipline, fear of family violence, divorce, being compared to siblings, and parents displacing work-stress on children
- **Peer issues:** distress from feeling socially excluded, having friendship issues, being bullied and gossiped about by peers

Based on the findings of the Tinkle Friend analysis, here are some recommendations on how adults can better support children's mental well-being.

Recommendation 1

Acknowledge and validate children's perspectives and be empathetic to their experiences.

Many children shared that they often felt very dismissed and invalidated when sharing their difficulties or struggles with the adults in their lives. Parents and teachers tended to downplay children's difficulties, saying that the children's concerns were not serious, or that children are too young to have mental health struggles. Children's sharing also indicated some unempathetic responses from the adult figures in their lives, such as being laughed at or scolded for sharing their thoughts and feelings.

To best support children, adults can consider these recommendations:

- **Validate children's difficulties:** While children's problems or sources of pain and fear might seem small or trivial to adults, these problems are experienced as very real and painful by children. It is important for adults to recognise that children's feelings of sadness and pain are real, and not to dismiss their concerns as trivial.
- **Respond empathetically:** Communicate to children that you understand what they are sharing about their struggles. Do not berate them or laugh at them.

Recommendation 2

Model to children that there is no shame in mental health struggles or help-seeking.

There were two aspects of stigma around mental health that children shared with Tinkle Friend:

Having Mental Health Difficulties	Seeking Help
Children experienced stigma around **having** mental health difficulties. There was a lot of embarrassment and shame preventing children from sharing their mental health struggles.	The **act of help-seeking** for mental health support was also stigmatised. Children feared being seen by their peers and family as "attention-seeking". They were fearful of receiving parents' judgmental reactions, as some parents seemed to believe that people who seek help are weak.

To combat stigma, it is important that adults consider the following recommendations:

- **Start talking about mental health:** Encourage conversations about mental health. Share with children that experiencing mental health difficulties is not something to be ashamed of, model by sharing your own experiences with mental health, and create a safe space for children to talk about mental health.
- **Normalise and encourage help-seeking:** Communicate to children that help-seeking is not an act of weakness, encourage children to seek help if needed, model by speaking openly about help-seeking as a potential avenue of support and support them through the help-seeking process.
- **Familiarise yourself with the resources available:** Get to know the mental health landscape so you know where to look for help for your child if needed. Some resources are appended at the end of the article.

Recommendation 3

Recognise that children have psychological needs and strive to meet these needs.

To flourish, children need to have their basic psychological needs satisfied[6]:

Competence	To have mastery over skills and in dealing with the environment
Autonomy	To have the power to make their own decisions and choices
Relatedness	To forge close supportive relationships with others

For children using Tinkle Friend, these psychological needs were often not met. Many children described having low self-worth, and not feeling competent to measure up to the weight of expectations. There was also a lack of autonomy, in the way that parents heavily monitored and controlled their activities. Children articulated a strong distrust of parents, peers and teachers, and spoke about feeling isolated and lacking supportive relationships.

Adults can recognise the importance of psychological needs and prioritise meeting these needs:

- **Build children's competence:** Affirm children's efforts, encourage them to explore and grow their own interests. Support children's learning through the use of scaffolding or setting short-term goals together.
- **Give children autonomy:** Give them space and time to make their own decisions and have ownership over their own choices. Listen to children when they offer their opinions. Include children in the decision-making process for matters that concern them (e.g., family matters).
- **Foster their sense of relatedness:** Connect more with children and model to them what a close relationship looks like. Encourage them to forge close and connected relationships with friends, family members, and other adults in children's lives.

Proactively strengthen children's sense of safety to share things.

The children who chatted with Tinkle Friend often shared that they did not have anyone in their life to talk to about their difficulties. They stated that they only trust Tinkle Friend to listen to them, and were not comfortable with sharing their troubles with their teachers or parents. The reasons that they gave for that discomfort included the fear of being dismissed, scolded or feeling like their parents or teachers would not care to listen. Some children were also worried that their parents might share the child's problems with other family members.

For children to feel safe enough to tell parents and other adults about their struggles, it is important that adults consistently show children that they are interested in what the children share and can be trusted to respond well.

To strengthen children's feelings of safety to share, adults can:

- **Make time to listen to children share about their thoughts and feelings:** Actions speak louder than words. Show children that their feelings and experiences matter to you, so that they feel comfortable sharing with you.
- **Keep what they share to yourself:** It is important that children feel like their confidentiality will be respected. Never discuss a child's struggles with others without their consent or agreement unless it is to seek professional assistance, such as from a doctor, psychologist, or counsellor.

Conclusion: Just like physical health, mental health is important for children's well-being and thriving. Through the four recommendations above, we hope that adults will be better equipped to support their children in ensuring their mental well-being.

Please visit https://bit.ly/ResearchBitesFeb2023Ref or scan the QR code below for more resources to learn about mental health and how you can better support your children's well-being.
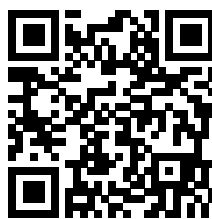
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