

POLICY BRIEF (ISSUE 8)

Strong Families, Connected Communities: Supporting Young Children's Well-Being

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Key Message

Strong parent–child relationships and connected neighbourhoods are important resources for young children's well-being.

Evidence from the Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG-LEADS) shows that both strong family relationships and neighbourhood cohesion were associated with fewer behavioural problems among young children. Before COVID-19, neighbourhood cohesion was particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged families and communities. During the pandemic, however, this protective advantage weakened.

The findings point to a policy principle:

Invest in relationships as infrastructure—within families, across neighbourhoods, and especially where resources are most limited.

Study At a Glance

The study followed 2,206 children across 30 planning areas in Singapore, using nationally representative SG-LEADS data collected in 2018–2019 (before COVID-19) and 2021 (during the pandemic).

It examined children's externalizing behavioural problems in relation to:

- **Family social capital:** parent–child closeness, parental warmth and positive behavioural guidance.
- **Community social capital:** neighbourhood cohesion, including whether neighbours knew, trusted and cared for one another.

The study also examined whether these relationships differed by family and neighbourhood socioeconomic status (SES).

What Did We Find?

1. Strong family relationships matter consistently

Children experiencing greater parent–child closeness, warmth and positive behavioural guidance had fewer behavioural problems both before and during the pandemic.

Family relationships also showed a stronger association with children's behaviour than neighbourhood cohesion.

The takeaway: For young children, supportive family relationships provide a fundamental layer of protection.

2. Connected neighbourhoods can help reduce disadvantage

Before COVID-19, greater neighbourhood cohesion was associated with fewer behavioural problems, particularly among children from low-SES families and low-SES neighbourhoods.

This suggests that when socioeconomic resources are limited, trusting and supportive neighbourhood relationships can provide an additional source of protection.

Importantly, community cohesion does not replace strong family relationships. The study found no significant compensatory relationship between family and community social capital.

The takeaway: Community cohesion may help compensate for socioeconomic disadvantage, but it does not substitute for strong families.

3. During crises, community protection can become harder to access

During COVID-19, the influence of neighbourhood context weakened substantially. More importantly, the protective association of neighbourhood cohesion shifted: instead of benefiting disadvantaged communities most strongly, it was evident mainly in middle- and higher-SES neighbourhoods.

This suggests an important distinction between having community resources and being able to mobilise them. When normal social interaction is disrupted, disadvantaged families may have greater difficulty maintaining neighbourhood connections and accessing support.

The takeaway: The families who benefit most from community resources in normal times may also be most vulnerable to losing them during a crisis.

What Should Policy Do?

1. Strengthen families' capacity to build positive relationships

Early-childhood policy should recognise relationship quality as a developmental resource.

Parenting and family programmes should support parental warmth, communication, shared activities and constructive behavioural guidance, with additional support reaching families facing greater economic or caregiving pressures.

The broader objective is not simply to teach parenting skills, but to create conditions that enable parents to build and sustain positive relationships with their children.

2. Invest in relationships, not only facilities

Singapore has invested extensively in neighbourhood amenities and community facilities. The findings suggest that relational infrastructure matters too.

Community spaces and programmes should create repeated opportunities for families to meet, build familiarity and trust, and develop networks of mutual support.

The policy question should therefore extend beyond:

- What facilities and programmes are available?
- Do they help families build lasting connections with one another?

3. Prioritise disadvantaged communities

Because neighbourhood cohesion was particularly beneficial to disadvantaged children before the pandemic, community-building may have important potential to reduce inequality.

Community support should therefore be universal, but more intensive where families have fewer economic and social resources.

This could include more active outreach, facilitated parent networks and repeated opportunities for families with young children to interact rather than assuming that supportive neighbourhood networks will develop on their own.

4. Build crisis-ready community networks

COVID-19 demonstrated that community resources are useful only when families can access them.

Community resilience planning should therefore include ways to maintain connections with families during periods of disruption, identify families becoming socially isolated, and link them quickly to formal and informal support.

The goal should be:

Do not allow families who rely most on community support in normal times to become the most disconnected during a crisis.

The Broader Lesson

Singapore's investments in children's development have traditionally focused on important forms of physical and institutional infrastructure—housing, healthcare, preschool education, schools and community facilities.

This study highlights another form of infrastructure:

Relationships.

Strong family relationships provide young children with a first layer of protection. Connected neighbourhoods can provide another, particularly for children growing up with fewer socioeconomic resources.

Building a resilient and equitable environment for children therefore requires investment in both:

Strong families. Connected communities. Support that reaches those who need it most.

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