

POLICY BRIEF

Giving children the best start:

Evidence from Singapore's longitudinal cohorts on how families shape child mental well-being

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Key points

- Parenting is an important influence on children's mental well-being, socio-emotional development and resilience.
- Parenting does not occur in isolation. Parents' psychological well-being, family resources and caregiving support shape parenting practices and children's mental well-being.
- Children's executive function and language abilities may buffer the effects of parental distress and family adversity, making them potential targets for intervention.
- Promoting child mental well-being requires a whole-family approach that:
 - supports parental well-being,
 - strengthens families' social and economic resources to enable positive parenting, and
 - builds children's developmental capacities.

A family-centred perspective on child mental well-being

Child mental well-being is a growing concern in Singapore. In the Youth Epidemiology and Resilience Study led by the National University of Singapore, more than one in three youths aged 11 to 18 reported clinically significant internalising symptoms such as those associated with anxiety and depression, while more than one in four reported emotional and behavioural difficulties.¹ These challenges affect educational attainment, social functioning and contribute to rising healthcare costs.² This brief brings together evidence from the Growing Up in Singapore Towards healthy Outcomes (GUSTO) and Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG-LEADS) cohorts to examine how family environments shape child mental well-being.

The role of parenting

(i) Supportive parenting promotes emotional well-being

Parenting practices characterised by warmth, responsiveness and support for children's autonomy (such as considering the child's desires before asking them to do something) appear protective for child mental well-being. In GUSTO, children of mothers who used supportive parenting practices had fewer depressive symptoms, compared to those of less supportive mothers.³ Those with fathers who showed warmth and affection, and encouraged independence had fewer depressive symptoms and a more positive self-concept.⁴ Support for children's autonomy also appeared to buffer the effects of maternal anxiety and distress on children's social anxiety symptoms.⁵

(ii) Harsh parenting is associated with poorer emotional well-being

In contrast, harsh parenting practices, characterised by physical discipline, verbal hostility or punishment without explanation, are associated with poorer emotional and behavioural outcomes. In GUSTO, harsh parenting in early childhood was associated with more severe externalising problems such as aggressive or rule-breaking behaviours.⁶ Paternal coercion, intrusiveness, corporal punishment and criticism were also associated with higher levels of attention and behavioural problems in children.⁴

Parents' psychological well-being shapes parenting

Parents' psychological well-being can influence their capacity to provide consistent, responsive and supportive care. In GUSTO, positive maternal mental health, such as self-

confidence and optimism, was associated with greater use of authoritative parenting styles, characterised by warmth, responsiveness and guidance. In contrast, poorer maternal mental health, such as symptoms of depression or anxiety, were associated with more authoritarian parenting (such as using physical punishment to discipline the child) and permissive parenting (such as inconsistent rule enforcement).⁷ Supporting parents' well-being may therefore promote child well-being by strengthening parenting practices.

Parenting is shaped by resources, support and experiences

(i) Socioeconomic disadvantage affects child well-being through parenting

Evidence from Singapore's cohorts suggests that socioeconomic circumstances may influence children's mental health in part through their effects on parenting. GUSTO children from families of lower socioeconomic status or lower parental educational attainment had lower scores on measures of resilience. This relationship was partly explained by lower parental warmth and greater parental rejection.⁸ Similarly, in SG-LEADS, parents with greater cognitive, psychological and economic resources were more likely to use positive parenting practices, and less likely to rely on harsh discipline. Their children demonstrated stronger self-regulation and fewer internalising problems.⁹

(ii) Parenting practices are influenced by the support available to parents

Support from family members and other caregivers may also shape how parents interact with their children. In GUSTO, mothers who received childcare support from maternal grandparents demonstrated more positive, and less authoritarian parenting (such as using physical punishment and verbal hostility) than mothers without such support. Similar benefits were not observed across other forms of childcare support, such as from paternal grandparents or domestic helpers.¹⁰ These findings suggest that the nature of support available to families may be as important as the provision of support itself.

(iii) Parenting practices may be transmitted across generations

Parenting practices are also shaped by parents' experiences. GUSTO mothers who had experienced physical discipline from their own parents were more likely to view such practices as acceptable and effective. Mothers' attitudes towards physical discipline also

partly explained the association between their childhood experience of physical discipline, and their use of physical discipline in the next generation.¹¹

Developmental skills serve as pathways to mental well-being

The effects of parenting and family environments on children's mental well-being may be shaped in part by children's developmental capacities, including executive function and language ability.

(i) Executive function

Executive function refers to a set of cognitive skills involved in self-control, emotional regulation, working memory and flexible thinking. Executive function appears sensitive to parenting behaviours. In GUSTO, authoritative parenting (such as warmth, responsiveness and guidance) was associated with stronger performance on tests of executive function,⁷ while harsh parenting was associated with poorer performance on executive function tasks.⁴ Similarly, in SG-LEADS, more frequent punishment predicted children's poorer working memory performance,¹² while positive parenting was associated with stronger performance on executive function tasks.⁹

Executive function may also explain associations between parental mental health and child mental health. In GUSTO, higher levels of maternal depression and anxiety symptoms in pregnancy were associated with poorer child performance on tests of executive function early childhood, which in turn was associated with higher depressive symptoms in later childhood.^{13,14}

(i) Language skills

Early language abilities may represent another pathway linking family experiences to child well-being. In GUSTO, positive maternal mental health in pregnancy was associated with stronger early language abilities, which in turn was associated with fewer depressive symptoms in later childhood.¹³ Children with stronger language abilities in early childhood also demonstrated more positive self-concept later in childhood.¹⁵

Developmental skills can also help protect children from the effects of adversity. In GUSTO, children with stronger self-regulation skills appeared less vulnerable to behavioural problems associated with maternal anxiety and parenting stress.¹⁶ These findings suggest that strengthening children's developmental capacities, including executive function and language abilities, may help to reduce vulnerability to family adversity and support mental well-being.

Policy Implications

(i) Adopt a family-centred approach to child mental well-being

Singapore's cohorts have demonstrated that promoting child mental well-being requires supporting the adults that care for the children. While existing perinatal health services increasingly recognise the importance of maternal depression and anxiety, opportunities remain to strengthen a life-course approach to parental well-being. This could include greater attention to positive mental health, fathers' well-being and the continuity of parenting support beyond the postnatal period. Parenting programmes that strengthen responsive caregiving, warmth and support for autonomy may also serve as avenues for maximising child mental well-being.

(ii) Enable families to provide supportive care

Parenting does not occur in isolation. Economic hardship, limited resources and weaker support networks may reduce parents' capacity to provide consistent supportive care. Efforts to reduce financial stress, support parental education and strengthen caregiving networks may help to create conditions that enable positive parenting practices, and should be viewed as complementary approaches to promote child mental well-being.

(iii) Strengthen children's developmental capacities

Developmental skills such as executive function and language ability may act as pathways through which family adversity affects children, while also helping to protect against its effects. As these skills are potentially modifiable through interventions delivered in early childhood settings, schools and parenting programmes, they may represent an additional pathway to improve mental well-being, and reduce the impact of family adversity.

Findings from Singapore's longitudinal cohorts highlight the central role of family environments in shaping children's mental well-being. Parenting practices, parental well-being and the resources available to families all contribute to child outcomes. Improving children's emotional development therefore requires action at multiple levels: supporting parents, strengthening family environments and building children's developmental capacities.

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About the Cohorts

Growing Up in Singapore Towards healthy Outcomes (GUSTO) is Singapore's largest and most comprehensive birth cohort study. It follows 1,247 mother-child pairs from pregnancy into adolescence, providing critical insights into how early-life exposures shape later mental health and developmental outcomes. It is conducted in collaboration with KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH), National University Health System (NUHS), National University of Singapore (NUS), and A*STAR IHDP.

Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG-LEADS) is a nationally representative multi-wave cohort study tracking the development of over 5,000 children across thousands of households in Singapore. It examines how family, community and broader social factors - including caregiving arrangements, preschool education, digital behaviours and family dynamics - shape children's cognitive, social-emotional and health outcomes.

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