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POLICY BRIEF (ISSUE 2)

The Role of Family and Community Support on Children's Mental Health during Adversity

Key points

- The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges to children's emotional well-being. Young Singaporean children experienced more internalising problems during the pandemic compared to the period before its outbreak.
- Chen and Yeung¹ studied 2,619 children aged 3 to 6 and their primary caregivers in 2018 – 2019 (pre-pandemic) and in 2021 (during the second year of the pandemic).
- Parents' verbal cognitive ability, self-regulation, and low economic stress prior to COVID-19 were associated with fewer internalising problems in children, including less anxiety, depression and withdrawal, during the pandemic.
- Setting and enforcing clear rules and using less harsh discipline can strengthen children's emotional resilience and alleviate their emotional symptoms during adversity.
- Parental resources and functional parenting practices were also linked to children's stronger self-regulation, including a greater ability to delay instant gratification.
- Children's self-regulation serves as a protective factor at the individual level, helping to shield against emotional symptoms and mental health challenges during difficult times.
- Neighbourhood safety and social cohesion before adversity strikes can help mitigate the aggravation of children's internalising problems during adversity.

SG-LEADS

[Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study \(SG-LEADS\)](#) includes 5,005 children under the age of 7 and their primary caregivers in 3,476 households in the baseline, representing all ethnicities and socioeconomic status in Singapore². This study utilised data from two waves of SG-LEADS with 2,619 children aged 3 to 6.

Research findings

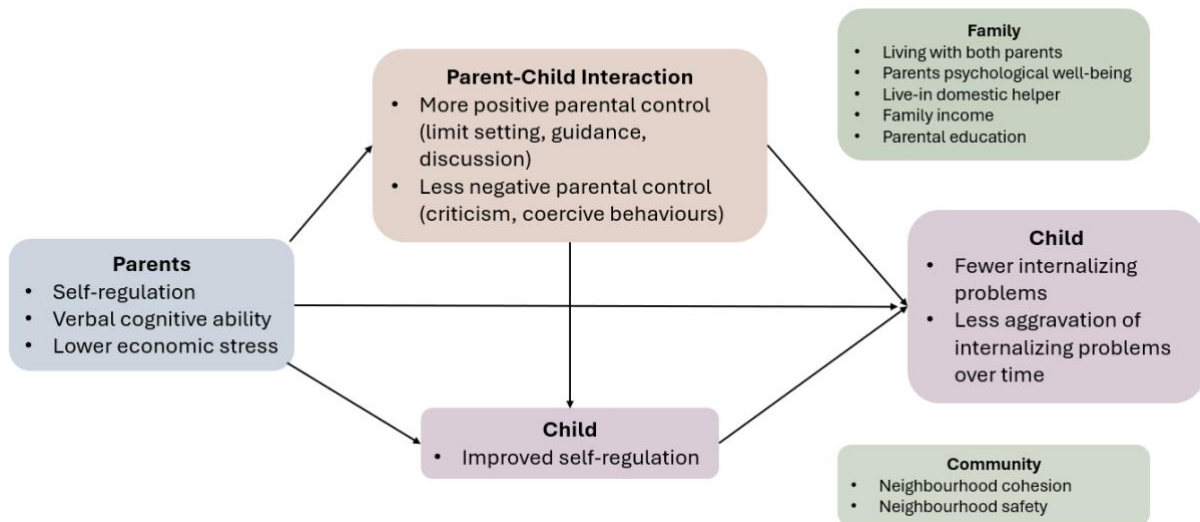
The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted family dynamics, daily routines, social interactions, as well as parents' work and child-care arrangements, creating a period of stress and uncertainty. These disruptions exacerbated children's internalising problems, including depression, anxiety, and withdrawal. Chen and Yeung (2023) explored how children's emotional well-being and resilience — their ability to maintain or improve well-being through challenging circumstances — can be supported through resources at the child, parent, family and community levels.

Primary caregivers' various resources — such as verbal cognitive ability, self-regulation, and low economic stress — were associated with children's fewer internalising problems and less increase in emotional symptoms over time.

Functional parent-child interactions are protective factors for children's emotional resilience. Parents with cognitive, psychological, and economic resources used more positive parenting strategies (such as enforcing rules with guidance and discussion) and fewer negative control methods (such as spanking, scolding, grounding, and taking away privileges). These practices reduced children's emotional symptoms and enhanced their abilities to recover from stress.

Parental resources and positive parental control nurtured children's self-regulation, which can enhance children's emotional resilience and psychological well-being. Other family resources, such as parental education, family income, living with both parents and having a live-in domestic helper pre-pandemic predicted fewer children's emotional symptoms during the pandemic.

At the community level, neighbourhood safety and social cohesion before COVID-19, predicted fewer child internalising problems during adversity, underscoring the importance of strong ties and supportive environments in promoting children's mental health during challenging times.



Policy recommendations

- Resources at the child, parent, family, and community levels should be strengthened before adversity occurs, to foster children's emotional resilience in the face of stressful or uncertain circumstances.
- Early childhood education, training, and intervention programs should incorporate the development of a child's self-regulation skills to build a strong foundation for socioemotional development and resilience against future adversity.
- Supports to parents with low education, high financial hardships and low self-regulation are essential for promoting family functioning and child well-being.
- Family-based interventions that improve functional parenting practices, such as effective communication, providing autonomy support and positive control, can improve children's mental well-being and socioemotional development.
- Community resources including neighbourhood safety, social support and cohesion should be enhanced to empower families and promote resilience in times of adversity.

References

1. Chen L, Yeung W-JJ. Pre-pandemic family resources and child self-regulation in children's internalizing problems during COVID-19: a multi-level social-ecological framework for emotional resilience. *Frontiers in Psychology* 2023;14. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1203524.
2. Yeung W-JJ, Parasaba LJM, Chen X, Chen L, Lee YS, Tan J. Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG LEADS): Wave 1 study guide. Centre for Family and Population Research. September 2020 (https://fass.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2022/08/W1_StudyGuide.pdf).

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