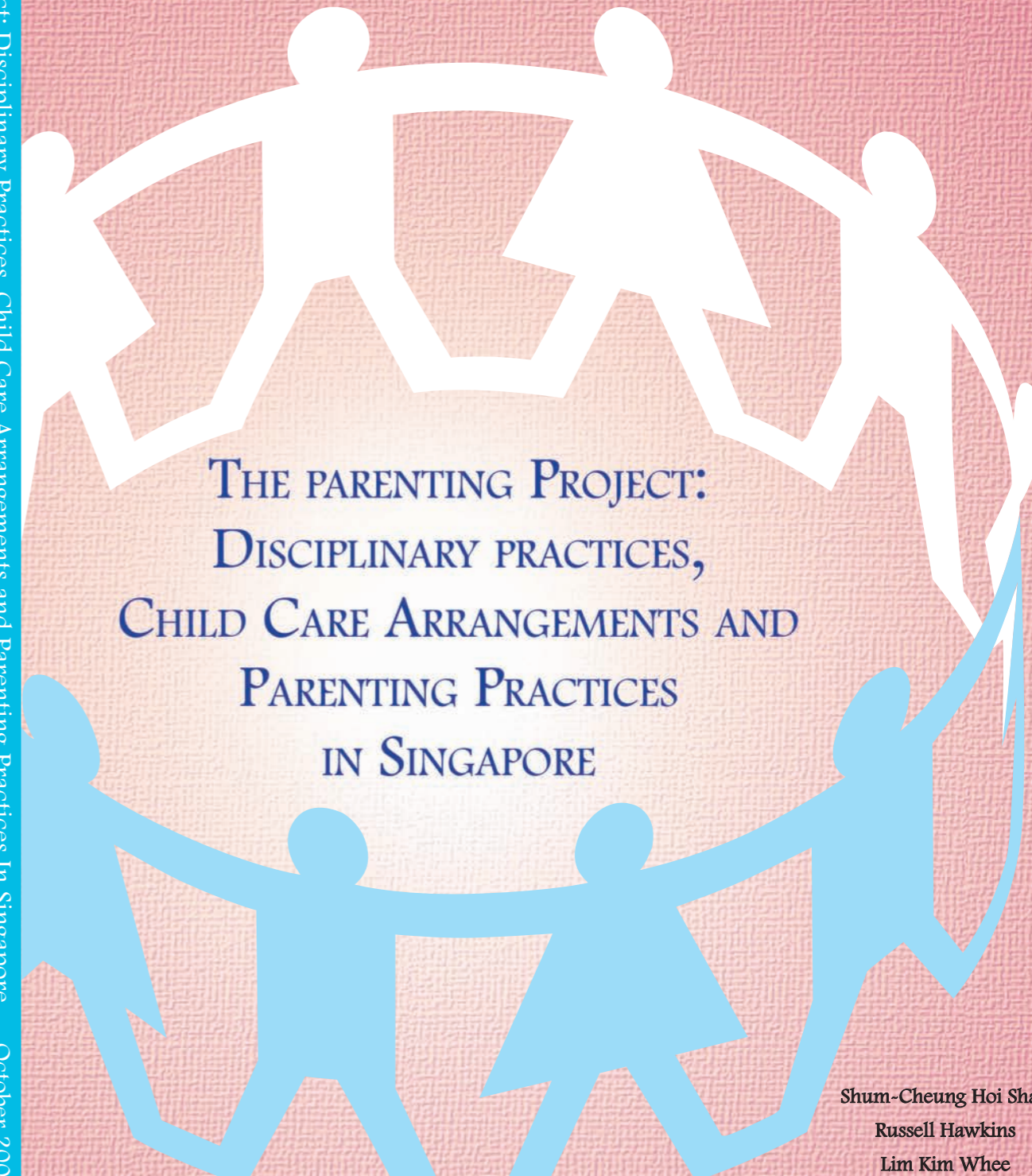




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The Parenting Project: Disciplinary Practices, Child Care Arrangements and Parenting Practices In Singapore October 2006



THE PARENTING PROJECT:  
DISCIPLINARY PRACTICES,  
CHILD CARE ARRANGEMENTS AND  
PARENTING PRACTICES  
IN SINGAPORE

Shum-Cheung Hoi Shan  
Russell Hawkins  
Lim Kim Whee

SINGAPORE CHILDREN'S SOCIETY

Research Monograph No.6

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OCTOBER 2006

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# FOREWORD

## Parenting in Perspective

Raising children in the complexities of modern life is perhaps the most challenging of all jobs, and yet not many parents are well prepared for it. Poor preparedness in stepping into the roles of parents is at the roots of many problems of child abuse and neglect, parent-child relationship problems and dysfunctional families.

All societies hold parents responsible for raising their children. Parents are accountable for their children's health, safety, and socialisation until the time that young people can live without adult supervision and support. Parents cradle children's lives and, for most children, parents are the critical caregivers. Children's small worlds widen as they discover new refuges and new people. Their growth is therefore shaped by successive choirs of siblings, peers, friends, and teachers. Parents also compete with other potentially powerful sources of influence, including Internet, media, and all of the temptations of modern youth culture. In the end, there are but two lasting bequests that parents can leave children: one being roots, the other wings.

Parenting consists of a number of interpersonal skills and emotional demands, yet there is little in the way of formal education for this task. Most parents learn parenting practices from their own parents - some of these practices they accept, some they discard. Husbands and wives may bring different viewpoints of parenting practices to the marriage. Unfortunately, when methods of parenting are passed on from one generation to the next, both desirable and undesirable practices are perpetuated.

When deciding whether to have children, we may envision the joyful, tender moments that we associate with parenting. And such moments are plentiful. However, most parents discover that child rearing is more difficult than they anticipated. Good parenting takes an incredible amount of time and parenting changes our lives forever in a lot of ways.

Ideally, the decision to become a parent should be based on realistic expectations about living with children, the burdens of providing child care, and our own willingness and ability to place someone else's needs before our own. Deciding whether or not to parent raises many fascinating questions. Why have children in the first place? Will I be a good parent? In what ways will becoming a parent change my life? How will it affect my relationship with my partner? What will my children be like?

Upon further reflection, additional considerations arise. What are the financial implications of raising children? Who will care for my children during their infancy and toddler-hood? How will I discipline them? Though we may decide to have children to enrich our own lives, these questions remind us of the profound responsibilities associated with bringing a child into the world. The above questions suggest a polarity: the potential fulfillment of parenting versus the daily challenge and occasional struggle to do it well.

Parenting does not occur in a vacuum. Most parents are preoccupied with the stresses



and strains of their own hectic lives. Unfortunately, adults are vulnerable to multiple stressors, including job dissatisfaction, illness, marital conflicts, and financial pressures. The psychological effects of these stressors often spill over into parenting. Amidst the dramas of their daily lives, some parents lose direction. Many are relieved just to make it through another day. Parents who have one bad day after another and who find that they are not enjoying raising their children, begin to wonder why they had children in the first place, and may then feel guilty for having such selfish thoughts.

To parent effectively, we need considerable support, but we also need direction. We need to know what we are doing, but first we have to decide where we want to go. Many parents eagerly seek child rearing techniques and strategies that they believe will help their children become well behaved and self-sufficient. However, before we can make decisions about methods of child rearing, we have to be clear about our priorities. What types of outcomes are we seeking?

Parents in all cultures share four main goals that indicate desirable outcomes of parenting. They include: good behaviour, competence, good parent-child relationships, and positive self-esteem and self-confidence. Once we are clear of our goals, systematic and comprehensive parent education programmes can then be designed to provide information, skills training, and support to parents at every stage of their child's life, even before they become parents.

Research on parenting is important and interesting. We are concerned especially about the relationship between how parents raise their children and how children "turn out". We hope that the knowledge we acquire about the parenting process will help create optimal family environments in which children are able to achieve their full potential. The major obstacle to the study of the parenting process is its complexity. It is not enough for parents to understand children. They must also accord children the privilege of understanding them.

The publication of this sixth monograph on certain aspects of parenting styles and practices in Singapore marks another major milestone in the history of the Singapore Children's Society. We have previously completed a series of five monographs on public and professional perceptions on various aspects of child abuse and neglect in Singapore. The research will provide useful local information on the current trends in parenting process and navigate us in our advocacy and outreach endeavour. I would like to congratulate all the members of the Research Committee, headed by Associate Professor John Elliott, and the hardworking Research Officers for their great effort in setting a high standard of research in our Society. This is certainly just a new beginning of many more serious research works on growing up safely and happily in Singapore.

Professor Ho Lai Yun  
Chairman, Research and Advocacy Standing Committee  
Vice-Chairman, Singapore Children's Society

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Parenting Project consists of research undertaken by the Singapore Children's Society, with the aim of understanding more about how parents in Singapore bring up their children and how children view these practices. Previous monographs published by the Society had focused on child abuse and neglect issues. The present work supplements these monographs by examining child rearing in ordinary Singaporean families and allows us to better understand normal families as well as those where abuse or neglect is problematic. The information gathered is intended to assist the Society in its mission to improve the well-being of children.

### *Sample description*

More than 1000 interviews were conducted with 533 parents (248 fathers and 285 mothers) and 533 children (262 boys and 271 girls) aged between 10 and 12 years. The children in the sample were the offspring of the parent participants but they were interviewed separately to avoid direct parental influence. The sample included the four major ethnic groups in Singapore – Chinese (68.1%), Malay (19.3%), Indian (8.8%) and Others (e.g., Eurasians, 3.8%) – who were sampled in close approximation to their representation in the local population. All the fathers and 40.7% of the mothers in the present study were employed. Close to 90% of the parents had attained secondary education and beyond.

### *Disciplinary practices*

We wanted to know which types of discipline were used by parents and how effective both parents and children thought each type of discipline was. We were also interested in whether children thought the forms of discipline used by their parents were fair. Consequently parents and children gave ratings on seven types of disciplinary practices with eight different forms of misbehaviour.

Reasoning was deemed to be the most effective practice by both parents and children, while telling a child that he or she is not loved was regarded as one of the least effective practice. Consistent with these beliefs, parents used reasoning most frequently, and seldom told their children that they were not loved. Children also rated reasoning as the fairest practice, while telling the child that he or she is not loved was one of the least fair discipline methods. The match between parents' and children's views on discipline and parental practice is encouraging. It may be that in general, if children accept the legitimacy of their parents' disciplinary practices, they are more likely to behave in an appropriate manner even in the absence of their parents.

While Asian parenting is often described as authoritarian in Western-based literature, physical punishment was found to be relatively infrequently used in Singapore. The use of physical punishment was also deemed to be an ineffective discipline method by parents.

Doing nothing to discipline a child even when he or she has misbehaved was deemed to be one of the least effective methods by both parents and children. As well as being ineffective, children also regarded non-intervention (doing nothing) as being unfair. Fortuitously, parents resorted to this least frequently amongst the various discipline options.

The finding that children perceived non-intervention (doing nothing) as unfair is interesting as it suggests that children not only have a sense of what constitutes inappropriate behaviour, they also recognise that such misbehaviour deserves disciplinary actions by parents.

We were interested in reactions to the use of emotional forms of punishment such as telling a child that he or she is not loved, as well as physical punishment, which is a controversial subject world-wide. In the present study, children rated telling a child that he or she is not loved as an unfair disciplinary practice, while they felt relatively neutral about physical punishment and deemed this to be neither fair nor unfair. It seems significant that children were far more opposed to the emotional form of punishment than to the physical one. This is a clear reminder that parental rejection may be very frightening and upsetting for a child and it may be more consequential than the physical pain inflicted by corporal punishment. One could speculate that children may not develop ideally if they are constantly worried that they are not worthy of their parents' love. Considerable research effort has been dedicated to examining the detrimental effects of physical punishment on children, but in comparison, very much less research has been conducted on the impact of emotional forms of discipline on children. The present study reinforces the importance of further attention to emotional forms of abuse, but is reassuring in that emotional forms of discipline were found to be used relatively infrequently.

### ***Child care arrangements***

Mothers were very often the main caregivers for most children while fathers were less involved in child care. Only a very small percentage of the fathers indicated that they preferred fathers as main caregivers of children (at any age). This could be attributed to the role differentiation between fathers and mothers that is still rather prevalent in Singapore, where mothers are clearly expected to be mainly responsible for child care duties. Parents and children both preferred the mother to be the primary caregiver (at any age). There was thus a close match between actual practice (mother as primary caregiver) and desired practice.

Although mothers were the main caregivers to most children at different ages, a substantial proportion of children under the age of 3 were cared for by non-maternal caregivers, in particular paid workers. Infancy is an important period when the child and the parents form secure attachments. Parents in the present study may have realised the importance of the first years of the child's life in terms of mother-child bonding, as mothers were still the most preferred main caregivers during this period. The present study also found that children who were cared for mainly by parents were happier with their child care arrangements than children who had paid workers as main caregivers (at any age). This further suggested the importance of parents' involvement as main caregivers for children.

### ***Parenting practices***

Findings from the component on parenting practices showed that parents in Singapore frequently showed warmth and acceptance towards their children. On the other hand,

shaming, which involves making the child feel guilty when he or she does not meet the parents' expectations, was the least frequently used practice. Parents and children were consistent in reporting the low usage of shaming. Although shaming was the least frequently used practice, parents and children still reported some use. This shows that shaming as a form of parenting behaviour is still a relevant concept locally, and this may have implications related to the emotional impact of parenting on children.

Lastly, exposure to religion, which has not apparently been a focus in previous parenting studies, was found to be relatively frequently used by parents in the present study. Future studies on parenting practices could include the examples of practices used in the present study, and possibly examine how these practices may link to outcomes in children.

### ***Conclusion***

The Parenting Project considered various aspects of parenting in Singapore, including disciplinary and parenting practices as well as child care arrangements. Together with previous local research on parenting and the series of monographs published by the Singapore Children's Society, a picture is emerging of Singaporean family life involving both normal child rearing and dysfunctional parent-child interactions.

The picture revealed by the Parenting Project is certainly a positive one. The data showed that parents tend to use reasoning as a disciplinary tactic far more frequently than they use other approaches, including physical or emotional forms of punishment. This practice is likely to assist in the goal of efficient socialisation, especially since the discipline types given higher fairness ratings by children were those used most frequently by parents.

The data also showed a conservative picture of child care practice in that women were both the most frequent caregiver of children and were most often considered as the preferred caregiver. The sex-role stereotype of the mother as primary caregiver is certainly active in Singapore. This may be a source of stress especially for working mothers, who have to handle both work and family commitments. Nonetheless, the relatively high level of involvement by grandmothers as main caregivers may have offered some relief to these working parents.

While the overall picture is positive, with parents indicating that they frequently showed warmth and acceptance towards their children, it is noted that some parenting practices such as shaming a child remain in use to a significant extent. This may have negative implications for the emotional well-being of the child.

Finally, the involvement of children in the Parenting Project was an effort to hear from children on issues that matter to them. The present study has shown that it is useful and insightful to compare children's and parents' views on parenting. More research involving children as participants should be encouraged in order for us to understand the concept of parenting from the perspectives of children, who are also key players in parenting relationships. Children's views are interesting and important, and should not be dismissed.



