Children's Social and Emotional Well-Being in Singapore

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Children's Social and Emotional Well-Being in Singapore

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iv

ABOUT THE AUTHORS v

LIST OF TABLES vi

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 1
Overview of the study 1
Methodology 1
Key Findings 2
Conclusion 4

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION: THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN 5
The Importance of Children's Perspectives 6
Definitions of Social and Emotional Well-being 6
Measuring Social and Emotional Well-being 7
Social Well-being: Children's Network of Significant Persons 8
Parent-child relationship 8
Grandparent-child relationship 9
Sibling relationship, friendship & school bullying 9

CHAPTER 2 - THE PRESENT STUDY 11
Overview of the Study 11
Focus Groups 11
Pilot Study 12
Procedure 13
Sample Description 14
Measures 14

CHAPTER 3 - FINDINGS 16
Preliminary Data Analyses 16
Data Analyses 18
Children's Social Well-Being 18
Comparing children's and parents' perspectives on social well-being 19
Relationship with Parents 19
Children's and parents' gender 24
Ethnicity 25
Parents' income 27
Parents' employment status 28
Housing types 28
Education levels of children and parents 28
Children with siblings versus children without siblings 28

Children who do not like their parents or have poor relationship with their parents 28
Relationship with Grandparents 29
Children's gender 31
Ethnicity 31
Parents' employment status 31
Children with siblings versus children without siblings 31
Children who do not like their grandparents or have poor relationship with their grandparents 32
Relationship with Siblings and Friends and School Bullying 32
Ethnicity 36
Children's education levels 37
Perceived favouritism towards siblings 37
Children with siblings versus children without siblings 37
Emotional Well-Being 37
Comparing children's and parents' perspectives on emotional well-being 38
Children's education levels 39
Ease of making friends in school 40
Perceived favouritism towards siblings 40

CHAPTER 4 – CONCLUSIONS 41
Parent-Child Relationship 41
Grandparent-Child Relationship 43
Sibling Relationship and Friendship 43
Emotional Well-being 44
Ethnic Differences 45
Limitations of the Study 45
Directions for Future Research 45
Conclusion 46

REFERENCES 47

APPENDICES 52
Appendix A: Demographic Statistics 52
Appendix B: Key Statistics 54
Reliability 54
Factor Analysis 54
One-way ANOVAs, Posthoc Analyses and Paired-Samples T-tests 67
Appendix C: Questionnaire for Parents 85
Appendix D: Questionnaire for Children 96

FOREWORD

This Monograph is the seventh published by the Singapore Children's Society, and continues to reflect the Society's concern with the well-being of children generally, in its widest sense. There is no shortage of research done around the world on the factors that affect the development of children, and their essential psychological needs are well understood. However, knowing what kind of care is developmentally good for children is one thing. Discovering whether it is being provided is another. This cannot be ascertained from research done elsewhere. It has to be done locally. This Monograph is thus an essential contribution to our understanding of the state of well-being of children in Singapore.

The authors have taken care to design the study to include parents and children in the same family. Few studies have been able to do this, yet it is a design that makes the comparison of parent and children's responses especially meaningful. The responses were obtained independently and concurrently, so do not reflect an effort by children to mirror their parents replies. It is therefore reassuring to discover that on most counts there is relatively little discrepancy between responses from parents and children, who both tend to report positively on relationships within the family. As the authors say in their summary of results, "Almost all the children liked their family members and friends, and had good relationships with these significant persons in their lives" (p.4).

This reassuring finding suggests that a proper concern with children who, for one reason or another have difficulties, needs to be kept in perspective. Children can be the victims of bullying, or maltreatment; or they may be lonely; or live anxiously in homes torn by parental disharmony; or they may be simply neglected by parents who are too busy with the necessities of work and daily life. Anyone actually working with children in need can testify to the existence of all these and other problems. Many readers will think of children they know who do not fit the optimistic pattern of the results. However, the findings in this monograph, while they should not lead to complacency, should help us realise that these difficulties tend to be the exception rather than the rule. Furthermore, because good family relationships are a means to buffer the inevitable stresses of life, the prognosis for coping with such stresses is much improved when children like their family members. Families, for such children, are part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

To bring relief and happiness to children in need is the core mission of the Singapore Children's Society. This Monograph is a step in implementing that mission, for by measuring the range of responses it will help to define such children and their needs. They are those children whose responses do not fit the reassuring pattern of the majority, and they will alert us to problems. The authors are to be congratulated for a comprehensive piece of work, which I believe will be of use to a wider readership, and, as the Chair of the Research Committee, it is my pleasure also to thank the Society for its far-sighted commitment to research of this nature. Knowledge of the state of the family in general is very necessary to ground specific service provisions and efforts to realise the mission of the Society, and this Monograph is, I believe, a worthy step in that direction.

Dr John Elliott
Chairman, Research Committee
Singapore Children's Society
13 April 2008

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LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: List of previous monographs published by the Singapore Children's Society 5
Table 2: Housing types of parents in the present study, compared with the Singapore population census statistics 16
Table 3: Additional analyses done for selected variables 18
Table 4: Comparing children's and parents' ratings on social well-being 19
Table 5: Children's and parents' ratings on children's relationship with father 20
Table 6: Children's and parents' ratings on children's relationship with mother 21
Table 7: Children's ratings on father-child relationships, differentiated by whether the children perceived favouritism towards the other siblings 23
Table 8: Children's ratings on mother-child relationships, differentiated by whether the children perceived favouritism towards the other siblings 24
Table 9: Parent-child relationships and differences in terms of parents' gender (parents' perspectives) 25
Table 10: Ethnic differences in parent-child relationship (children's perspectives) 26
Table 11: Income differences in parent-child relationship (children's perspectives) 27
Table 12: Children's and parents' ratings on children's relationship with grandparent 30
Table 13: Grandparent-child relationships of children with or without siblings (children's perspectives) 32
Table 14: Children's and parents' ratings on children's relationship with siblings 33
Table 15: Children's and parents' ratings on children's relationship with friends 34
Table 16: Children's and parents' ratings on children's experience with school bullying 36
Table 17: Ethnic differences in sibling relationships (children's perspectives) 36
Table 18: Children's ratings on their relationship with friends, differentiated by education levels 37
Table 19: Children's and parents' ratings on children's emotional well-being 38
Table 20: Children's emotional well-being, differentiated by children's education levels (children's perspective) 39
Table 21: Items on children's emotional well-being, differentiated by whether they perceived favouritism by mothers towards their siblings (children's perspective) 40
Table 22: Demographic statistics of the present study 52

Table 23: Reliability coefficients of the scales on social and emotional well-being 54
Table 24: Principal component analysis (with varimax rotation) on items on mother-child relationship (children's responses), and the corresponding reliability coefficients 54
Table 25: Principal component analysis (with varimax rotation) on items on father-child relationship (children's responses), and the corresponding reliability coefficients 55
Table 26: Principal component analysis (with varimax rotation) on items on grandparent-child relationship (children's responses), and the corresponding reliability coefficients 56
Table 27: Principal component analysis (with varimax rotation) on items on sibling relationship (children's responses), and the corresponding reliability coefficients 57
Table 28: Principal component analysis (with varimax rotation) on items on friendship (children's responses), and the corresponding reliability coefficients 58
Table 29: Principal component analysis (with varimax rotation) on items on emotional well-being (children's responses), and the corresponding reliability coefficients 59
Table 30: Principal component analysis (with varimax rotation) on items on parent-child relationship (parents' responses), and the corresponding reliability coefficients 60
Table 31: Principal component analysis (with varimax rotation) on items on grandparent-child relationship (parents' responses), and the corresponding reliability coefficients 61
Table 32: Principal component analysis (with varimax rotation) on items on sibling relationship (parents' responses), and the corresponding reliability coefficients 62
Table 33: Principal component analysis (with varimax rotation) on items on friendship (parents' responses), and the corresponding reliability coefficients 63
Table 34: Principal component analysis (with varimax rotation) on items on emotional well-being (parents' responses), and the corresponding reliability coefficients 64
Table 35: Principal component analysis (with varimax rotation) on all items (children's responses) 65
Table 36: Principal component analysis (with varimax rotation) on all items (parents' responses) 66
Table 37: Comparing children's and parents' ratings on social and emotional well-being 67
Table 38: Children's perspectives on comparing their relationships with father and mother 68
Table 39: Children's perspectives on parent-child relationship, differentiated by whether children perceived favouritism towards other siblings 69

Table 40: Children's perspectives on sibling relationships and emotional well-being, differentiated by whether children perceived favouritism by fathers towards other siblings 69
Table 41: Children's perspectives on sibling relationships and emotional well-being, differentiated by whether children perceived favouritism by mothers towards other siblings 70
Table 42: Children's perspectives on parent-child, grandparent-child and sibling relationships, friendship and emotional well-being, differentiated by children's gender 70
Table 43: Children's perspectives on parent-child, grandparent-child and sibling relationships, friendship and emotional well-being, differentiated by children's ethnicity 71
Table 44: Children's perspectives on parent-child, grandparent-child and sibling relationships, friendship and emotional well-being, differentiated by parents' income 72
Table 45: Children's perspectives on parent-child, grandparent-child and sibling relationships, friendship and emotional well-being, differentiated by parents' employment status 73
Table 46: Children's perspectives on parent-child, grandparent-child and sibling relationships, friendship and emotional well-being, differentiated by housing type 74
Table 47: Children's perspectives on parent-child, grandparent-child and sibling relationships, friendship and emotional well-being, differentiated by children's education levels 75
Table 48: Children's perspectives on parent-child and grandparent-child relationships, friendship and emotional well-being, differentiated by whether children have siblings 76
Table 49: Children's perspectives on the difference between the quality of sibling relationship and friendship 76
Table 50: Children's perspectives on friendship and emotional well-being, differentiated by whether children find it easy to make friends in school 76
Table 51: Parents' perspectives on parent-child, grandparent-child and sibling relationships, friendship and emotional well-being, differentiated by parents' gender 77
Table 52: Parents' perspectives on parent-child, grandparent-child and sibling relationships, friendship and emotional well-being, differentiated by parents' ethnicity 78
Table 53: Parents' perspectives on parent-child, grandparent-child and sibling relationships, friendship and emotional well-being, differentiated by parents' income 79
Table 54: Parents' perspectives on parent-child, grandparent-child and sibling relationships, friendship and emotional well-being, differentiated by parents' employment status 80

Table 55: Parents' perspectives on parent-child, grandparent-child and sibling relationships, friendship and emotional well-being, differentiated by housing types 81
Table 56: Parents' perspectives on parent-child, grandparent-child and sibling relationships, friendship and emotional well-being, differentiated by parents' education level 82
Table 57: Parents' perspectives on parent-child and grandparent-child relationships, friendship and emotional well-being, differentiated by whether children have siblings 84
Table 58: Parents'perspectives on the difference between the quality of sibling relationship and friendship of children 84

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview of the study

In Singapore, children's physical, mental and cognitive development and even education on the arts have attracted research and planning efforts. What seems to be lacking is research into social and emotional well-being. As part of its mission to bring relief and happiness to children in need, the Singapore Children's Society has decided to champion children's social and emotional well-being. If children grow up to become happier and more sociable adults, Singapore will also become a better home for all.

This study examined children's social and emotional well-being, as perceived by children and their parents. According to Keyes (1998), social well-being refers to one's circumstance and functioning in society. Individuals with a high degree of social well-being are usually able to connect with others and to form and maintain relationships (Donnelly et al., 2001). As such, social well-being in our study was judged in relation to the quality of relationships between the child and his or her family members and friends. Family members included the mother, father, siblings and grandparents. Friends included all of the child's friends in and out of school.

Emotional well-being was defined as a balance of positive over negative feelings (Keyes, 1998). In the present study, we examined children's experiences of both positive and negative feelings.

We have assumed that if self-reports were favourable (relations were perceived as good, feelings were rated in positive ways) and problems were not mentioned, then social and emotional well-being could be regarded as good. This is not to deny the possibility that some adverse perceptions may exist and be concealed, so that an appearance of greater harmony was presented than really existed. But as other studies have found children and parents very willing to indicate sources of difficulty, it was unlikely that there was enough bias to socially desirable answers to create a limitation on interpretation. This is especially so as there was a general independent agreement among parents and children on most items.

It should also be stressed that because these results were averaged across a large and representative sample, they were likely to be typical, though there will be many individual departures from the average family.

Methodology

Participants were drawn from 906 families, and comprised parents (mother or father) and one of their children, a total of 1812 respondents. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at the participants' homes by trained interviewers from a private research company. There were separate questionnaires for parents and children, and the interviews were conducted separately. It is a particular strength of the methodology of this study that children and

parents were from the same families, yet were interviewed separately; so the analysis is based on data from parent-child dyads. It was stressed to respondents that information was sought in confidence and that identities of participating families would neither be disclosed nor reported.

A systematic random sampling method was adopted. Households were randomly selected from the Residential Listings 2005/2006 (Yellow Pages (Singapore) Limited, 2005). Selected households were included in the study if the following criteria were met:

1. the parent to be interviewed was a Singaporean or Singapore Permanent Resident
2. the child was between the age of six and 12 years, and was a student in a local primary school (excluding special schools or homeschooling).

The sample aimed to be representative of Singapore school children and free from bias by over-representation from particular ethnic groups, schools, catchment areas or socio-economic classes. Quota restrictions based on ethnicity, gender and education level of the child were therefore used, having been determined by reference to census data in the General Household Survey 2005 (Department of Statistics, 2006) and the educational statistics digest (Ministry of Education, 2006).

The questionnaire consisted of both quantitative and open-ended questions, with items related to the quality of the children's relationships with friends, siblings, parents and grandparents, as well as items on children's general feelings and emotions, a total of six scales. Reliability coefficients for these scales ranged from .45 to .79.

Key Findings

The findings suggested that overall, the state of children's social and emotional well-being was positive. Children generally reported good relationships with their family and friends. A vast majority of the children said they often felt happy and had fun, and they seldom cried. Parents' perceptions of their children's state of social and emotional well-being were by and large similar to their children's self-reports.

On parent-child relations, children generally thought that their parents were right to scold or punish them when they did. For instance, 68.9% of the children (608 of them) felt that their fathers were right to do so sometimes or more often, and 90.2% of the children (812 of them) felt the same way with mothers. These findings demonstrated that most of the children did perceive the scolding or punishment as being just.

On the other hand, 49 fathers (10.9%) and 33 mothers (7.3%) seldom or never thought that they were right in scolding or punishing their children. Perhaps for these parents, it was more important to remain objective and calm and to understand more about the situation before deciding how best to discipline their children, so they saw scolding and punishment as failure on their part. As expected, 86.6% of the parents who never or seldom thought that they were right in scolding or punishing children indicated that they never or seldom meted out punishment (71 of them indicated so). Only 13.4% or 11 parents said that they did so sometimes.

Another point to note was that a handful of parents (less than 1%) did not know if they were right in scolding or punishing their children. This reflected the dilemma facing some parents, who struggled to strike a healthy balance between disciplining their children and maintaining a good parent-child relationship.

Two parents (a father and a mother) in the present study felt that their children did not like them, and six parents (four fathers and two mothers) said that they had poor relationships with their children. However, the children of these parents almost always said that they liked their parents and had good relationships with them. This observation was not specific to families belonging to any particular income or ethnic group, though a common characteristic was that there was more than one child in these families. This finding underscored the importance of effective parent-child communication, and also highlighted the problem of a lack of parental insight and confidence of the quality of parent-child relationship.

The finding that an overwhelming majority of the parents (98.3% or 442 fathers; 97.8% or 445 mothers) said they taught their children about good manners and politeness sometimes or more often is heartening, the more so since the children's perspectives were consistent with their parents' self-report.

When the responses of children who had no siblings were compared with those who had siblings, no difference in social or emotional well-being was observed, except that children with no siblings tended to share secrets and feelings with grandparents more frequently, and also argued with grandparents more. The finding suggests that in families with more than one child, the children's social and emotional well-being was neither compromised nor enhanced.

Although children's social and emotional well-being seemed to be good in general, the study has found that 6.4% of the children (58 of them) did not find it easy to make friends. Moreover, 9.6% of the children (87 of them) felt very sad often or very often and 8.4% of the children (76 of them) worried about things very often. Although the percentages were relatively small, they are large numbers in absolute terms if extrapolated nationally. Therefore, it is still a cause for concern that some children in Singapore have problems relating to others, or harbour negative feelings and emotions on a fairly regular basis.

Children's emotional well-being was mostly unrelated to the ethnicity, income or the employment status of the parents, but some income and ethnic differences were observed. Parents from higher income families tended to help their children with homework more frequently than parents from low income families. On ethnic differences, Indian children indicated that their mothers (average frequency 4.1) helped them with homework more frequently compared with Chinese children (average frequency 3.6). Indian children also tended to share secrets and feelings with their mothers (average frequency 3.2), spend time with their fathers more frequently (average frequency 4.2), and have better sibling relations (average frequency 3.7) than Chinese children (average frequencies 2.8, 4.0 and 3.3 respectively). Although the ethnic differences between the Indians and the Chinese were statistically significant, they were very small in absolute figures.

Differences in parents' employment status were also compared. The findings showed that mothers from single-income families spent comparatively more time with their children than mothers from dual-income families. Note that 92.3% of the mothers (409 of them) from these 443 single-income families were stay-at-home mothers, which explains why they could spend more time with their children. However, it is important to emphasise that although a significant difference was observed in statistical terms, children from *both* single-and dual-income families reported that their mothers often spend time with them. Perhaps this finding could ease some of the guilt working mothers can feel about not being able to spend more time with their children. The children in this study clearly did not perceive themselves as being deprived of time with their mothers just because the latter were in the workforce.

Conclusion

In summary, parents and children in the present study had mainly positive perceptions of the children's social and emotional well-being. Almost all the children liked their family members and friends, and had good relationships with these significant persons in their lives. It could be that good social well-being may in some ways contribute to a child's emotional well-being, since having a strong supportive network of family and friends usually does have a buffering effect. However, this study did not address causal factors in these relationships.

On the other hand, our study has also shown that a small proportion of children in Singapore did seem to have relationship issues and experience negative feelings and emotions often. These findings suggest that programmes for enhancing the social and emotional well-being of children are both relevant and needed. For instance, the StrengthKidz programme by the Daybreak Family Service Centre, and the Let Every Aspect Progress programme (LEAP) by the Singapore Children's Society focus on developing positive self-esteem and social skills among children (Singapore Children's Society, 2007).

With the findings of the current study, the Children's Society will be looking at planning more programmes, both preventive and developmental in nature, as well as expanding our public education effort in further enhancing the social and emotional well-being of children in Singapore. This study suggests that identifying the children in need of help might be important, to avoid diluting our efforts by extending them indiscriminately.

Children's Society has compiled the CSEW (Children's Social & Emotional Well-being) Directory in 2004 (which was subsequently updated in 2007) that lists programmes and publications available from non-profit organisations in Singapore. These are programmes that aim at enhancing the social and emotional well-being of children. Organisations may find the CSEW Directory useful as a point of reference to identify possible service gaps to enhance children's social and emotional well-being, and to find out if the needs identified by this study are being met. A copy of the CSEW Directory can be downloaded from the Children's Society's website at http://www.childrensociety.org.sg.