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NUS STUDY ON KIDS WITH 'BAD' FORM OF PERFECTIONISM

Children with intrusive parents face higher risk of depression, suicide

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SINGAPORE – Push your child too hard in his studies and chances are he could become overly critical of himself, which puts him at higher risk of developing symptoms of depression, anxiety and even suicide.

This was the finding of a study, touted by the National University of Singapore (NUS) as the first for children of primary-school-going age who develop maladaptive perfectionism — commonly known as the "bad" form of perfectionism.

"In a society that emphasises academic excellence, which is the situation in Singapore, parents may set unrealistically high expectations on their children. As a result, a sizeable segment of children may become fearful of making mistakes," said lead researcher Ryan Hong, from NUS' psychology department.

"Also, because they are supposed to be 'perfect', they can become disinclined to admit failures and inadequacies, and seek help when needed, further exacerbating their risk for emotional problems."

The study tracked 263 seven-year-old pupils from 10 primary schools and one of each of their parents between 2010 and 2014.

In an experiment, they got each child to solve puzzles within a deadline and told the parent that he or she could help, whenever necessary.

Parents who taught their child to solve the puzzle through guiding questions were deemed to be non-intrusive, whereas parents who retracted moves made by their child were marked as highly intrusive. Each child was reassessed at ages eight, nine and 11.

Forty per cent of the children reported low and stable levels of self-criticalness throughout the study while 36 per cent scored high at the start. For those who had high levels of self-criticalness, 22 per cent became less preoccupied with mistakes and imperfections over the years, while the other 14 per cent became increasingly concerned over them.

Children with intrusive parents were three times more likely to fall into the category of children with high and increasing self-criticalness.

They were also two times more likely to fall into the category of those with high and, subsequently, decreasing levels of self-criticalness.

Another group of children (24 per cent) initially reported low levels of self-criticalness, but their score ended up increasing over time.

Attributing this to their parents exhibiting "intrusive and controlling" behaviour, such as meting out harsh punishments, Assistant Professor Hong said: "It squares with the idea of Asian culture. Parents expect a lot from (their) kids when it comes to schoolwork. And when parents expect a lot, kids may get the message that they need to be perfect in everything they do. They cannot make mistakes."

He added: "Over time, such behaviour, known as maladaptive perfectionism, may be detrimental to the child's well-being as it increases the risk of the child developing symptoms of depression, anxiety and even suicide in very serious cases."

> "Children should be given a conducive environment to learn, and part of learning always involves making mistakes and learning from them."
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> **Asst Prof Ryan Hong**
> LEAD RESEARCHER

Asst Prof Hong urged parents to be mindful of not pushing their children over the edge.

"Children should be given a conducive environment to learn, and part of learning always involves making mistakes and learning from them. When parents become intrusive, they may take away this conducive learning environment," he said.

The study's findings were published in the Journal of Personality in March.

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