Source: *The New Paper,* p4
Date: 22 June 2016

NUS study on intrusive parenting

‘Don’t push kids too far’

Children with intrusive parents may become overly critical of themselves, and such tendencies are reportedly linked to depression or anxiety.

Parents who have high expectations of their children’s academic performance may urge them to achieve good grades or over-react when they make mistakes, but this may lead to unintended consequences, says a National University of Singapore (NUS) study.

The five-year study, conducted by researchers from the NUS department of psychology, examined how “bad” perfectionism develops in primary school children.

Assistant Professor Ryan Hong, who led the study, noted that when parents become intrusive, the children may form the impression that what they do is not good enough.

“As a result, the child may become afraid of making the slightest mistake and will blame himself or herself for not being ‘perfect’, he said. “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.”

The NUS study, which was conducted from 2010 to 2014, assessed seven-year-olds from 10 primary schools. In each family, the parent who is more familiar with the child was involved in the study.

Prof Hong said: “Our findings indicate that in a society that emphasises academic excellence... parents may set unrealistically high expectations on their children.

“As a result, a sizeable segment of children may become fearful of making mistakes. Also... they can become disinclined to admit failures and inadequacies and seek help when needed.”

While other studies on maladaptive perfectionism have focused mainly on adolescents and college students, this study demonstrates the link between parental intrusiveness and self-criticalness among younger children.

Prof Hong noted that parents should be mindful not to push their children too far.

He said: “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 advised parents not to blame the child for failing to perform up to expectations. Instead, they should first praise the child for his or her achievements.

Parents should also take the opportunity to turn mistakes into learning exercises by helping the child to learn from them.

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