



Traced back to its causes, inequality in society can be seen as at least partially a consequence of differences in childhood learning and development, says the writer, who is director of the Centre for Family and Population Research. Studies show that investing in early childhood is an effective way to reduce social inequality. ST PHOTO: JASMINE CHOONG

PopulationMatters

Reducing inequality with early childhood development

A family's language and economic circumstances affect early childhood development. A study aims to tease out just how.

Wei-Jun Jean Yeung

For *The Straits Times*

Experiences early in life have profound and enduring influences on an individual's developing brain, social behaviour and health. A family's economic resources shape the nature of many of these experiences – yet, the extent to which they affect children's development remains debated among scholars. Although a child's learning in the early years occurs mostly at home, daycare, community and government support also matter. As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child.

A study which my centre is about to begin aims to shed more light on this. The National University of Singapore's Centre for Family and Population Research is launching a national study this month to learn about how Singaporean young children are developing.

The Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study, funded by the Ministry of Education, will use different methods to understand the factors that may promote or impede children's early development.

A total of 5,000 randomly selected children under the age of seven will be involved in the study, which includes family resources and relations, parenting attitudes and practices, social support, childcare arrangement and government policies. Special attention will be paid to children in disadvantaged families.

POOR CHILD, DISADVANTAGED ADULT

Research has shown that poor children lag behind affluent children in language, memory, executive functioning and social-emotional development, with corresponding differences in neural structure and function in brain regions that support these skills. As adults, poor children are likely to experience a range of unfavourable labour market and health outcomes.

Why this is the case is not well understood. Proponents of poverty reduction policies point to the many ways in which economic hardship affects parents' ability to provide for and interact with their children.

Critics argue that what matters most is not the money itself, but other factors correlated with

poverty, such as being raised by a single mother, low parental education, parenting practices, childcare arrangements, neighbourhood quality and parents' mental health.

Traced back to its causes, inequality in society can be seen as at least partially a consequence of differences in childhood learning and development.

A big concern of Singapore policymakers is the possibility of "a cycle of poverty". Specifically, some youth from disadvantaged families will do poorly in school and integrate poorly into Singapore's increasingly high-skilled labour market. Studies show that investing in early childhood is an effective way to reduce social inequality.

The rapidly ageing trend that has resulted from persistently low fertility levels means that by 2030, the ratio of working-age population to a substantially larger older population will be less than one-third of that in 1990.

A promising long-term developmental strategy for a sustainable ageing society is to promote human development, starting from early childhood.

ISSUES TO INVESTIGATE

Given Singapore's multiracial, high-immigration and family-focused policy context, there are pertinent issues to investigate. For example, how does living in a family that uses multiple languages affect children's development? Or growing up with parents from a different cultural background?

Most Singaporean young children are exposed to two or more languages. Up to 30 per cent are exposed to three or more languages regularly, including dialects such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, or Teochew. Although bilingualism is widely reported to modify cognitive, social and linguistic developmental neural pathways, the implications of different bilingual environments on later social-emotional and cognitive development remain unclear. For example, how languages used at home affect a child's school readiness is not well understood.

Transnational marriages between Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans account for a substantial proportion (35 per cent to 41 per cent from 2005 to last year) of all marriages involving citizens. These marriages also tend to have multiple socio-economic disadvantages, including insecure immigration status (of the foreign spouse), financial needs, the lack of access to formal and/or informal support systems, and family tension. Thus, dissolution rates among these couples are higher than in other marriages. Despite the high prevalence of such households, how growing up with

parents from different cultures affects children's development is not well understood.

Another area of research is in studying children's early social skills and moral development.

Research elsewhere shows that kindergarten pro-social skills were significantly and uniquely predictive of key young adult outcomes across multiple domains of education, employment, criminal activity and mental health.

One such skill that can be trained is cooperation, a vital aspect of human behaviour and vital to Singapore's future in fostering greater sensitivity and trust towards others.

Previous research found that pro-social video-game use was positively associated with pro-social behaviour and empathy in children. One study even found that the proportion of cooperative individuals increased significantly immediately after a short moral lecture.

Children as young as 15 months already show preliminary ability to reason about mental states and act in accordance with such reasoning. More studies are needed on these in Singapore, to guide the education of young children.

Another big concern in Singapore is how to help pre-school children from disadvantaged families.

Current research shows that pre-school education intervention can have high payoffs. Singapore can justly be proud of the fact that enrolment rates in pre-school education are nearly universal, and income-based subsidies reduce the cost to nearly negligible amounts for lower-income households.

However, educators, policymakers and social workers have noted that a subset of young

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children from especially disadvantaged families tend to have very poor attendance. It is important to understand how to incentivise such parents to send children to pre-school.

Many Singapore parents build up financial assets for their children. Research findings in matched savings programmes in the United States show that effects go beyond accumulating assets to include improved outlook, planning and attitudes (such as higher expectations of parents for their children's education) and improved social-emotional development of children.

Social protection in Singapore is distinctive in focusing primarily on asset building, such as the Central Provident Fund Baby Bonus and Child Development Co-Savings Scheme.

However, low-income families need more help to participate in matched savings to break out from the poverty trap and improve life chances. Community support for financial education and having access to targeted savings schemes are likely to incentivise them to save. It is important to understand whether savings early in life increase families' investment in children, raise parents' expectations for educational attainment, improve parental behaviours, or promote child development.

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Grandparents and domestic workers also play significant roles, and this needs to be examined. In addition, educators and parents are concerned about how technology influences children's early development and whether this will contribute to a widening gap between social classes.

The results of the Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study, led by scholars from seven disciplines, will help inform parents and policymakers in addressing these challenges preventing children from reaching their full potential.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

Wei-Jun Jean Yeung is director of the Centre for Family and Population Research, National University of Singapore, and the principal investigator of the Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study. Population Matters is a monthly column by researchers from the Centre for Family and Population Research.