

# Volunteers cheer move to study reasons why some kids lag behind

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National University of Singapore (NUS) undergraduate Gary Lau made it to university this year, but as a child growing up in a troubled home environment, he did not think he would ever do well enough in school to make it to university.

The 27-year-old, who recently started on his degree studies in social work, grew up in a single-parent household after his parents divorced when he was three years old. His mother took custody of him and later had a boyfriend, but the man abused her physically and they broke up when the boy was 12.

Mr Lau also recalled how he had no friends and was often bullied. That was when he picked up smoking, and joined a gang at age 13. He got his first tattoos at 14 and dropped out of school soon after.

It was only after a stint in Boys' Town that he vowed to change his life.

While doing his national service, he also decided to continue his education and sat his N-level exams privately. He eventually made it to the Institute of Technical Education, Nanyang Polytechnic and, finally, NUS. He said that through primary school, his teachers tried to help him, but he still went astray.

"My family and I faced many problems, but the main problem was I grew up in a single-parent household without any supervision. I had no one to discipline me or guide me."

Based on his own experience of starting and running a free tuition service for disadvantaged children, called Happy Children Happy Future, he cheered the Government's move to set up an inter-agency task force to study the underlying causes of why some children fall behind in school.

Mr Lau agrees with the panel



Mr Gary Lau, who runs a free tuition service for disadvantaged children and himself faced adversity in his youth, agrees that the key to helping children who fall behind is to go beyond the academic aspect.

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"Often, like me, they may fall behind not because they are unable to study, but because they are affected by many problems. Many of them lack self confidence and think they will never make it and just give up. Their parents are faced with more urgent problems, such as being jobless or having no money to pay the rent. So, they don't prioritise education."

Other volunteers working with young children agreed that there is a need to study the underlying causes and take a more holistic approach in helping the children and their families.

Ms Michelle Yeo, 29, who co-founded children's literacy charity ReadAble five years ago, agreed that when children do poorly in school, there are underlying causes.

She said volunteers at ReadAble who run weekly reading and language arts classes for children ages

two to 12, in a rental flat neighbourhood in the Chin Swee area, do engage many of the families to understand the problems they face. They refer some of the families to other social work agencies.

"When children are in an unstable environment, they are subject to intense, chronic stress, called toxic stress, and this affects their development greatly." She is heartened by the show of political will to help children from underprivileged homes, but added: "If we are really committed to lifting up these children, then we must be prepared to offer help on many fronts."

Mrs Lynn Heng, programme adviser to the Circle of Care which gathers educators, social workers and health professionals to support underprivileged children, said an important part of the scheme is parent engagement and education.

"It is important to help the parents. They are the primary carers of a child. In the Circle of Care pro-

gramme, parents are given the support they need to help their child – and themselves," she said, adding that the centres run talks and workshops for parents which result in them becoming more involved in their children's learning.

Launched five years ago by Lien Foundation and Care Corner Singapore, the programme, which has since been extended to 10 pre-schools and two primary schools, brings together teachers, social workers and education therapists to identify the root causes of a child's difficulties and provide help.

Last year, doctors and nurses from the National University Hospital joined the team to conduct medical screening for children at the pre-schools.

Said Mrs Heng: "The causes are varied and complex, but sometimes a child can be lagging behind because of a medical problem that can be dealt with. But because of their more urgent financial worries, the parents don't seek help and it can go undetected. That's why there's a need to look at the underlying problems and offer help on many fronts."

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