

Foreign-born mums' kids show more behavioural issues: Study

Don points to financial and other stresses that affect parenting in cross-national families here

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Children between three and six years old with a foreign-born mother and a father born in Singapore show more behavioural problems compared with their peers whose parents were both born here because of financial and other stresses that affect parenting.

In a recent study, Professor Jean Yeung found that families with a foreign-born mother and a father born here have the lowest monthly per capita family income of \$1,580, compared with \$2,586 for families with both parents born here.

Compared with Singapore-born mothers, foreign-born mothers experienced significantly more psychological stressors, more financial stress and more family conflict, added Prof Yeung, the founding director of the Centre for Family and Population Research at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

These women also have lower educational levels and lack social support, compared with the Singapore-born mums.

She said their children's behavioural issues are because of "lower family income, which tends to relate to more economic hardship and higher levels of emotional distress and conflicts".

"With these stressors at home, the primary caregiver of the child is more likely to use more punitive or less warm parenting behaviour, which in turn is associated with children having more externalising behaviour problems."

She conducted the nationally representative study of 2,658 children aged between three and six with NUS sociology PhD student Shuya Lu. In particular, they interviewed the 2,259 mothers of these children.

The study – titled "Do children in cross-national families have more

behaviour problems?" – was presented early last month at the Population Association of America 2021 annual conference.

According to the 2019 Report of Registration of Births and Deaths, about one in three babies born that year was to a non-Singaporean mother.

Prof Yeung conducted the study given the significant number of babies here who have mothers born overseas and the fact that there was a lack of research examining the impact their mother's origins may have on the children's development.

Her previous study showed that families with a Singapore-born husband and a wife who was born overseas fall behind local families in terms of income and social support, factors which could affect the child's development.

Drawing on data from the ongoing Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG Leads), which aims to understand factors that promote a Singaporean child's early childhood development, her study also found that:

- Close to six in 10 children have both parents who are born in Singapore, while 18 per cent have a father born here and a mother born overseas.
- Children with a foreign-born mother and a Singapore-born dad have more "externalising behaviour problems", compared with children whose parents are born here.

They may show disobedience, lose their temper easily or tell lies, among other examples of such behavioural problems.

Prof Yeung's study used a checklist of about 30 items to measure a child's behaviour. The mothers were asked how often their child displayed a particular behaviour.

Children with a foreign-born mum and a Singapore-born father scored an average of 5.6, compared with the 5 scored by children whose parents were born here.

A higher score indicates more be-



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haviour problems and the difference of 0.6 between the two groups is statistically significant, she explained.

Prof Yeung said: "The point is not to blame children's behaviour problems on the foreign-born mothers."

She added that children with both parents born here show the same level of behaviour problems as their peers with a foreign-born mum and dad born in Singapore – if both types of families have the same income and same level of emotional distress at home.

"It will be important for policymakers to focus on interventions that can reduce the economic hardship or alleviate emotional distress and family conflicts (for all families)," said Prof Yeung.

Responding to the study, Madam Zaleha Ahmad, centre director of AMP Marriage Hub, said low and insufficient income increases various stresses at home, affecting parenting negatively.

She added: "Children often tend to repeat patterns of conflict that they have seen in their parents' relationship in their own interactions, because this is what they have grown used to."

Ms Elisa Ng, head of research

and development at Focus on the Family Singapore, said marital and parenting support, such as through counselling and courses, should be made more accessible, especially for families with a foreign wife.

This is needed to strengthen family relationships and improve the developmental outcomes for the children.

Ms Tan Bee Joo, group lead of

Family Services at Singapore Children's Society, said if punitive parenting is the primary way a parent interacts with the child, the parent-child relationship is often adversely affected and it could affect the child's sense of self-worth.

"For instance, parents may turn to using punitive methods to get their children to comply (with the wishes of) the adults as a quick fix

amid managing the financial and other household challenges.

"While children might (be compliant) in the moment, it sends the message to the children that using such punitive methods are acceptable. In turn, the children might do the same to others to win arguments," she added.

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