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

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

Theresa Tan
Senior Social Affairs Correspondent

Children between three and six years old with a foreign-born mother and a father born in Singapore show more behavioral problems compared with their peers, whose parents were both born here because of financial and other stresses at home, a study has found.

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 $1,880, compared with $2,884 for families with both parents born here.

Compared with Singapore-born mothers, foreign-born mothers experience 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 mothers.

She said their children’s behavioral 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 stresses at home, children of the mothers are more likely to be more punitive or less warm parents, with children being associated with more “exaggerating behavioral problems”.

She conducted a nationally representative study of 2,099 children aged between three and six with NUS sociology PhD student Shuya Li. In total, they interviewed the 2,099 mothers of these children.

The study—titled “Do children in cross-national families have more behavior problems and the difference of I.Q. between the two groups is statistically significant, she explained.

Prof Yeung said: “The point is not to blame children’s behavioral problems on the foreign-born mothers.”

She added that children with both parents born here show the same level of behavioral problems as their peers with a foreign-born mother and a father born in Singapore—if both types of families have the same income and similar level of emotional distress.

“It is important for policymakers to focus on interventions that manage the family’s household income, which may help alleviate emotional distress and family conflict,” said Prof Yeung, director of the study, Madam Zalaha Ahmad, centre director of AMP’s Marriage Hub.

“Financially stressed households might not be able to provide the necessary social support for their children,” she added.

The rise in financial stress and other household challenges may be significant, she said.

“While children might be content in the moment, it is important to provide the necessary support for children to grow in a safe and nurturing environment.”

Ms Elisa Ng, head of research and development at Focus on the Family Singapore, and family and marriage support, said: “When we talk about the importance of parents interacting 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 to managing the financial and other household challenges.”

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