Drop middle-class judgment of low-income parenting

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The economic realities poorer parents face call for empathy, better support and institutional change

Low SES parents do their best but their differing priorities can involve a unique logic to what society would consider “normal”. Society often regards their parenting behavior as inferior, or as the cause of children’s poor outcomes.

A look at the parenting divide, and the reasons why lower economic status parents make the choices they do, shows the systemic disadvantages they are up against and what can be done to improve the situation.

WHAT ARE THE CLASS-BASED DIFFERENCES?

In Unequal Childhoods, author Annette Laquintanillo found clear differences in the parenting strategies of parents from high and low SES. She named the high-SES parenting strategy “concerted cultivation”, which describes the intentional ways parents prepare their children’s academic success and progression.

In contrast, the parenting of low SES parents was characterized by “the accomplishment of natural growth”, where children are afforded autonomy early on.

In Singapore, the low SES parenting divide was found similar to that of the US.

The class-based differences were not only apparent in how our interviewees articulated their parenting ideals but also in their experiences of their parents’ parenting growing up.

While explaining why they wanted to parent a certain way, interviewees would often reference to their current circumstances and how their parents had raised them, revealing an intergenerational angle.

In this context between high SES/Harold, a youth worker, and low SES/ Lucy, a retail assistant (with pseudonyms).

Harold spoke of his parents as being highly involved in his education, while not being emotionally present in his growing-up years. Now, as a parent, he sends his children to enrichment classes. But he also mentioned choosing to do as involved and emotionally engaged in his children’s lives, something he felt was missing in his upbringing.

Lucy, in contrast, normalized his absence in his children’s lives because he needed to work long hours to earn enough to support the family.

When he and his wife decided that he would take on extra work so that she could work part-time to take care of the children after school, he spoke of the loneliness and exhaustion of coming home daily to an already sleeping family.

Yet he also said: “The thinking of people in Singapore is, like, they’ve grown up not seeing their father. Because their father has to find money for the family... This is as long as I am working, able to support them, that’s okay, like when I grew up, usually see my father, my father work.”

For Lucy, since his own father was introduced in his life, he more readily accepted his absence in his children’s life.

For Harold, his lack of involvement compelled him to be more involved and he had begrudgingly made it to do so.

The contrast demonstrates one channel through which parental logic is shaped by SES. Many low-income parents have neither the money nor the time to be concerted cultivators, unlike their higher-income peers.

So, even when low-income parents articulate a preference for hands-off approaches in raising children, they might do so because of the lack of resources.

The lack of resources is also an explanation offered by Professor Jon Yeung and Professor Lim Sun Lim for why children from rental housing spend more time on digital devices than children who live in private and landed property (“Mind the gap – income divide in children’s use of digital devices”, ST, Sept 7). Low-income parents have fewer resources to engage their children in alternative activities.

We have also seen a rapid rise in the number of low-income parents engaging their children in music and other extracurricular activities.

While the increased leisure benefits of parents and their children greatly help many low-income parents who work with inflexible hours and poorer leave benefits, it is worth noting the wealth and distribution of public money as it is handed in the form of the universal child benefit, the capital of the future generation, confirming great social inequalities.

We need to reconsider this middle-class judgment of low-income parents’ parenting, instead, we should recognize the greater empathy and, appreciation of their parenting strategies, while also seeking to alleviate structural conditions that disadvantage them.

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