

Investing in at-risk kids from age zero to level them up

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The Straits Times, 4 August 2017

One child has a mother who is a 21-year-old housewife. Another has parents who quarrel often, and his mother, a 34-year-old odd-job worker, suffers from depression.

Both children were enrolled in KidStart, a pilot government scheme aimed at breaking the poverty cycle by intervening early in the lives of these children and their parents. The support includes prenatal screening, home visits for babies' nutrition and care, playgroups for those aged one to three, and dedicated staff at pre-schools who focus on keeping these children in school.

To qualify, a child has to be a Singaporean from a low-income family, aged up to six and living in one of five areas where the scheme is being piloted. The need for such intensive parental hand-holding in Kreta Ayer, Bukit Merah, Taman Jurong, Boon Lay and Geylang Serai points to how some poor, young families struggle to keep up with the rest of society and face a real risk of being left behind.

The Government recently announced its intention to make KidStart permanent, with Minister for Social and Family Development Tan Chuan-Jin telling *The Straits Times* in an interview that "for certain family circumstances, we know it is challenging and the probability of perhaps poorer outcomes for the children as they grow up will be higher. So we want to make sure that we intervene".

Why does such intervention matter, and why start at age zero?

These are questions that Singapore and many other countries have been grappling with for decades. The weight of evidence has over the years swung in favour of investing in early intervention as it yields rich social returns.

Success Factors

Growing up poor poses many disadvantages for a child, and it is not just about having fewer toys and fewer enrichment classes. Poverty sets a child on a course with a higher probability of poorer life outcomes.

One report that fleshes this out was issued in 2012 by the Brookings Institution's Centre on Children and Families in the United States.

It lists a lack of means to pay for nutritious meals and adequate health support for children born into poverty, as well as the psychological stress parents suffer from living in poverty which causes them to develop depression and anxiety. That in turn negatively affects their interactions with their children, as it can contribute to them adopting a more punitive parenting style.

American child psychologists Betty Hart and Todd Risley found that the gap between rich and poor kids starts from age zero.

They studied how parents spoke to their children, and found that parents who are professionals gave their children an advantage with every word uttered. Their children were exposed to more words - words that were more complex and more encouraging.

Local scholars who have weighed in on this issue include Dr Mathew Mathews, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, who wrote in a commentary last year that poor children may live in harsher environments that do not provide the preparation middle-income children receive to be school-ready - such as being equipped with foundational literacy-related skills, conversational abilities and behavioural habits, including self-regulation and the willingness to cooperate.

"These disadvantages make it hard for them to thrive in school environments, for they do not start at the same level as their middle-class peers and may not catch up over the primary school years. And this ultimately affects their self-esteem and subsequent motivation to reap academic success," he wrote.

Children who fare badly in school are more likely to end up with inferior jobs and lower salaries.

But early intervention has been shown to be effective in mitigating against this downward spiral, with the first three years of a child's life particularly crucial as brain connections are formed then.

The pre-school years also matter because the bonds developed then between children and parents, and other key nurturers such as pre-school staff, affect a child's sense of well-being and involvement in activities.

A local study of 130 children, funded by the Lien Foundation and carried out by pre-school training provider Seed Institute in 2013 and 2014, found that allocating one teacher to every two to three infants was better than having a few teachers collectively take care of 12 to 15 children.

Children in the former group were happier, settled into childcare more quickly and were involved for longer periods with interesting activities. The findings of the study led pre-school operator NTUC First Campus to change the way it allocates teachers to infants.

The Circle of Care programme, piloted in 2013 by the Lien Foundation and charity Care Corner, brings together pre-school teachers, social workers, education therapists and health professionals to help more than 140 at-risk children in 10 pre-schools, and has shown positive results. The children in the programme had higher rates of pre-school attendance and better reading and numeracy skills.

The Singapore experience thus far seems to corroborate the findings of long-term studies in the US which found that intervening early produced lasting effects that benefit the child and the rest of society.

Two studies in the US - the Perry Pre-school Project in Michigan in the 1960s and the Abecedarian Project in North Carolina in the early 1970s - are particularly noteworthy as they followed children into their adult years.

In the first project, involving 123 children aged three and four who were living in poverty, one group received high-quality pre-school education, while a control group did not. Almost all the

project participants still living at age 40 were interviewed later, and the study found that those who received pre-school education had higher earnings, committed fewer crimes, were more likely to hold a job, and were more likely to have graduated from high school than those who did not have a pre-school education.

Renowned American economist James Heckman said every dollar invested in the programme produced a 7 to 12 per cent return.

Mr Edwin Yim, director of Awwa Family Service Centre in Singapore, believes the lasting impact of such intervention is due to the instilling of values which at-risk children may not otherwise learn.

"Values like resilience can go a long way, such that when people get a job, they can hold on to it. And when they get married, resilience also helps them cope with marital conflicts," he said.

For all these reasons, KidStart - which is now at the pilot stage and has an initial goal of reaching 1,000 children in three years - includes home visits from when a child is born until he or she turns three, to ensure they receive good nutrition and care. From ages one to three, these children and their parents will also attend community-based playgroups facilitated by people trained in early childhood development. The aim of these playgroups is to help caregivers improve their parenting skills and to nurture bonds between them and their children.

The final component of KidStart is more support for selected pre-schools so they have the resources to help parents and improve the children's school readiness.

Looking ahead

Minister Tan wants to expand KidStart beyond the five locations where it is now in place even before the pilot phase ends, if there are resources available.

A spokesman for Early Childhood Development Agency, which manages the scheme, explained that the pilot phase is to "test and refine the use of evidence-based programmes, duration of support, modes of delivery and other aspects of implementation to ensure that the programme makes a sustained and positive impact on the children".

Besides a geographical expansion, one important area for the authorities to consider is the duration of support.

Would the benefits last beyond when the children turn six and "graduate" from KidStart?

The Circle of Care scheme was extended to continue supporting beneficiaries till they reach Primary 3, to ensure that the gains attained in their early years do not fade out.

Starting with the Primary 1 batch of about 40 children this year, progress reports prepared by pre-school teachers, educational therapists and social workers are shared with the primary schools that the children go to.

The collaboration is also deeper at two primary schools that received about a dozen of the Primary 1 children.

Globally, there have been some pre-school schemes which saw positive impact in the initial phase, but those faded out within several years.

To be sure, there are various ways for at-risk children to level up and progress through the education system.

These include the Ministry of Education kindergartens where one-third of the places are reserved for children from low-income families, and the learning support programme in English and mathematics for those who lag behind in primary school.

But given that the move to primary school can be a huge transition for children - studying in a different place, with different hours, friends and teachers - having coordinated support between the KidStart beneficiaries' pre-schools and primary schools could be very useful.

Circle of Care programme manager Lynn Heng said: "The continuity of support from one system to another can help to stabilise uncertainty or major transitions for vulnerable children.

"If this continuity of support for children of poverty can exist in primary school, it will further solidify the foundation built in the early years."

Now that the Government has decided to make KidStart a permanent scheme, efforts must be made to ensure it reaches all children who need it, and to intervene in ways that leave a lasting impact on them and on the wider society.

No doubt the authorities will need to grapple with finite resources and guard against overhelping, as there is always a risk that excessive hand-holding and support will breed dependence in the parents.

Still, the bottom line remains that every child matters and deserves a decent start in life and a shot at making good.