

A Law to Make you Love your Child?

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Experts discuss whether Britain's proposed Cinderella Law would work here

Under a new law proposed in Britain, if you starve a child of affection, you may go to jail.

It is called the Cinderella Law and it means that guilty parents could face up to 10 years in jail, the maximum term in child neglect cases. (See report above.)

Should such a law be introduced here and would it work?

In Singapore, when it comes to physical and sexual assault or exploitation, children are well-protected under the Children and Young Persons Act.

Mr Alfred Tan, the executive director of the Singapore Children's Society, favours having a similar "Cinderella Law" here.

He said the number of emotional abuse cases may be "extremely, extremely low", but this could be because emotional abuse is difficult to pin down.

"Unlike sexual and physical abuse, emotional abuse does not leave behind any evidence, as it often happens over a period of time behind closed doors," he said.

But he pointed out that clear parameters of what constitutes emotional abuse should be set out.

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser agreed with Mr Tan's view that such a law would be tough to enforce, unless there are "clear, visible signs of child abuse or neglect".

"I believe there is a place for such a law in Singapore, but the challenge is in enforcing the law," he said.

But Mr Seah Kian Peng, who chairs the social and family development Government Parliamentary Committee, said that not everything has to be legislated.

Such a law is something to keep in mind, though.

"From my own understanding, I don't think there are many of such cases," he said. "I hope even in the future, there will never be a point where such a law needs to be enacted."

'FUTILE'

Law Professor Walter Woon, who pushed through the Maintenance of Parents Act in 1995 when he was a Nominated MP, called the British idea "futile".

"No one can mandate that a parent love his/her child. It would be impossible to set a standard in practice," said Singapore's former Attorney-General.

Mr Danny Teo, the programme executive at Centre for Fathering, questioned the difficulty in defining emotional abuse.

The 38-year-old father of one said that rather than a law, it should be the parents' duty to tend to their children's emotional needs to ensure that their child is emotionally safe and well.

Mr Yap Teong Liang, a family lawyer, raised some issues about the law that have to be ironed out. One challenge he foresees is the question of truth.

"Where do you draw the line when it comes to emotional abuse? It could happen for years, or on the flip side, the children could simply just be unhappy with their parents. That could well turn around as an abuse of the legislation, which is unfortunate," he said.

Safeguards and clear parameters of emotional abuse must therefore be in place for this law, he said.

Mr Yap also highlighted the potential negative psychological impact on the children who inevitably have to testify against their parents in court.

Parents approached by The New Paper approved of the law, but questioned the feasibility of it.

"How do you enforce something that does not leave evidence?" asked housewife Evelyn Tan, 40, a mother of two.

Housewife Madam Lydia Lee, 32, a mother of one, agreed.

"It is easier said than done. Laws to protect children are always good, but it has to be well-executed so people don't abuse the system."

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— Sociologist **Tan Ern Ser**