



## PRESS RELEASE

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### CHILL PARENTS MAKE FOR COOL KIDS

**Positive parental control, verbal cognitive ability and self-control creates stronger emotional resilience in children, fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression**

*27 February 2024, Singapore* – A chip of the old block – this old saying takes on new significance in 21<sup>st</sup> century Singaporean homes, where research shows that when parents exercise self-control, do not wrestle with economic or financial difficulties, set clear rules and enforce them frequently, use less harsh punishment, and communicate clearly and effectively, their children will be more mentally empowered and less emotionally stressed under adversity.

The research findings from the Singapore Longitudinal EARly Development Study (SG-LEADS), led by Research Fellow Dr Chen Luxi and Prof Jean Yeung Wei-Jun from the Human Potential Translational Research Programme at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore (NUS Medicine), showed that building a wide array of resources in parents, family, and community before stressful circumstances strike can improve children's resilience and alleviate their emotional symptoms such as anxiety, depression and withdrawal during times of adversity.

The research team studied over 2,600 young children in Singapore across two time periods – Wave One in 2018-2019 before the COVID-19 outbreak and Wave Two in 2021 during the second year of the Covid-19 pandemic. These child participants were aged between 3 and 6 before the Covid-19 outbreak and were tracked until the second year of the pandemic outbreak. There was a noted increase in emotional symptoms such as sadness, anxiety, fear, and withdrawal among the children, from pre-pandemic periods to during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before the Covid-19 outbreak, the research team measured the primary caregivers' verbal cognitive ability, self-control, economic stress and parenting strategies, including how much control they set for their children. These primary caregivers also rated the safety and cohesion in their neighbourhood. The team then went on to assess the children's self-regulation using the Delay of Gratification (DoG) task, which captures children's ability to inhibit the temptation of smaller immediate rewards in order to get larger delayed rewards. Three types of rewards, including balloons, stickers and erasers, were used. Each child was asked to choose to receive either one reward now or more rewards later after the game which would take about 10 minutes. Children's ability to forgo instant gratification and pursue larger long-term goals is an important aspect of self-regulation. These factors are deemed important resources to shape children's resilience to cope with changing situations.

#### Raising cool kids

Chen Luxi, Research Fellow from the Human Potential Programme at NUS Medicine said, "Parents with more advanced verbal cognitive ability, stronger self-control and lower economic stress tended to use more functional strategies to interact with their children, such as setting

clear rules for children and enforce them with guidance, discussions and encouragement, rather than using harsh punishment. These functional parent-child interactions can help children to develop self-regulated behaviours, which further build their resilience. With better self-regulation, children are equipped with greater emotional resilience and are less likely to experience emotional symptoms when faced with adversities.”

From early childhood, the development of self-regulation begins as the child moves from external control from parents to understanding and practicing how to control their emotional and behavioural impulses internally. Parent-child interactions are important processes that influence children’s development of self-regulation during early childhood. Setting boundaries and limits accompanied by guidance, instructions, discussions and encouragement can aid the child in cultivating self-regulating behaviours early. This further alleviates the exacerbation of emotional symptoms over time.

On the other spectrum, harsh disciplinary strategies such as aggressive control, physical punishment and criticism that aims to restrict children’s behaviour have been consistently associated with more mental health issues in children.

### **It also takes a village**

The research also explored the role of community resources in nurturing children’s emotional resilience and mental health. It was found that children who lived in a safer neighbourhood with stronger cohesion and greater social support before the Covid-19 pandemic showed fewer emotional symptoms during the pandemic and experienced less aggravation of internalising problems over time. This finding demonstrated that community resources, including neighbourhood safety and social cohesion, can help improve children’s resilience to cope with unpredictable and stressful situations and achieve more positive outcomes.

“The need for robust community involvement and government support for parents would go a long way towards alleviating parental stress and providing them with as much support to nurture their children using constructive methods,” co-author Prof Jean Yeung, who is also from the Department of Paediatrics at NUS Medicine added, “Self-regulation in early childhood is easily shaped by internal and external environments, given the intricate and complex interplay between the two components. The government needs to continuously invest in a public safety net ahead of adversities, such as thriving neighbourhoods with strong social cohesion, so that our children can grow up emotionally equipped and able to counteract the impacts of adversities that they may encounter.”

This research study was published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, titled [Pre-pandemic family resources and child self-regulation in children’s internalising problems during COVID-19: a multi-level social-ecological framework for emotional resilience](#).

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Our multidisciplinary and real-world approach to education, research and entrepreneurship enables us to work closely with industry, governments and academia to address crucial and complex issues relevant to Asia and the world. Researchers in our faculties, research centres of excellence, corporate labs and more than 30 university-level research institutes focus on themes that include energy; environmental and urban sustainability; treatment and prevention of diseases; active ageing; advanced materials; risk management and resilience of financial systems; Asian studies; and Smart Nation capabilities such as artificial intelligence, data science, operations research and cybersecurity.

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Through a dynamic and future-oriented five-year curriculum that is inter-disciplinary and inter-professional in nature, our students undergo a holistic learning experience that exposes them to multiple facets of healthcare and prepares them to become visionary leaders and compassionate doctors and nurses of tomorrow. Since the School's founding in 1905, more than 12,000 graduates have passed through our doors. In our pursuit of health for all, our strategic research programmes focus on innovative, cutting-edge biomedical research with collaborators around the world to deliver high impact solutions to benefit human lives. The School is the oldest institution of higher learning in the National University of Singapore and a founding institutional member of the National University Health System. It is one of the leading medical schools in Asia and ranks among the best in the world (Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2024 by subject and the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings by subject 2023).

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