

## **Urge the Government to implement mandatory parent education to prevent child abuse**

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## **I. Introduction**

Our motion focuses on one category of family violence, namely child abuse, and the mandatory education we propose is intended for parents and child carers. Why do we move this motion? We hope to achieve 4 objectives:

1. To draw the attention of society and government to the problem of child abuse.
2. To change the belief of many parents and child carers that “beating and scolding are necessary measures in raising a child” so as to prevent future child abuse.
3. To teach parents and child carers the right ways to bring up children.
4. To enhance communication between parents or child carers and children, and thus to help parents and children build up a harmonious relationship.

Let me briefly introduce our motion first. Generally, family violence includes child abuse, spouse abuse and elderly abuse.

Our motion focuses only on child abuse. By concentrating on just one single issue, we hope to go more deeply into it. For us, children, child abuse is a topic that has a direct bearing on us. We sympathize the victims and their sufferings, knowing that the same misfortune might one day fall on us. Therefore, we all want to do something to prevent child abuse.

What is child abuse? Let us start with the definition.

“As a general guide, child abuse is defined as any act of commission or omission that endangers or impairs a child’s physical/psychological health and development. Such act is judged on the basis of a combination of community standards and professional expertise to be damaging. It is committed by individuals, singly or collectively, who by their characteristics (e.g. age, status, knowledge, organizational form) are in a position of differential power that renders a child vulnerable. Child abuse is not limited to a child-parent/guardian situation but includes anyone who is entrusted with the care and control of a child e.g. child minders, relatives, teachers, etc.” Child abuse includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and psychological abuse.

(Source: *Procedures for Handling Child Abuse Cases – Revised 1998*, Social Welfare Department)

Although Hong Kong culture is a mixture of Chinese and western elements, the traditional Chinese belief that “physical punishment gives you a filial child” is regarded by many as a “golden rule”. Parents and child carers still believe that “beating-and-scolding or suppression” is a “good way” to bring up children. Besides, the sluggish economy depresses many adults, who may take it out on their children. Unfortunately, children cannot defend themselves, being weak and passive.

How can children, living under the shadow of abuse, grow up happily and healthily? Abused children find no warmth in their family. They become alienated from their kins. They may isolate themselves from society or even commit crimes. After they get married and have their own children, they, too, may beat their children on the mistaken assumption that there is nothing wrong with beating one’s children. Many of our young people in future would be affected if this vicious circle were to continue. Therefore, we must work hard to prevent child abuse.

We propose that the Government implement mandatory education for parents, so that parents, child carers and children can learn how to get along with each other. Meanwhile, parents and child carers can learn how the behavior of children changes as they grow up, and thus come to know better how to bring up their children properly.

We think a series of courses and activities can help parents and child carers realize that “beating-and-

scolding or suppression” is a wrong and totally inappropriate way to bring up children. These learning opportunities should enable them to learn the right and positive ways to teach children, so that communication between parents or child carers and children will become more effective.

The problem of family violence is usually overlooked by the public because family violence normally involves individual families and other people might not know about it. Besides, the public is more concerned about problems such as economic depression and unemployment, and tends to ignore the problem of child abuse. Therefore, we move this motion to draw the attention of society to this problem. We look forward to your support.

## **II. The Current State of Child Abuse in Hong Kong**

Let us introduce to you the current situation regarding child abuse.

In order to understand the public’s perception of child abuse, their personal experience of it and their opinions on using education to reduce the problem, we have conducted a questionnaire survey in 4 schools and in various districts. The targets of our survey are parents and children. We have collected 450 valid replies.

According to our survey, close to 50% of the 450 respondents thought that the child abuse problem in Hong Kong was only “moderate”. In fact, the problem in Hong Kong is not “moderate” as most people think. But most respondents do not understand the definition of child abuse, and so they do not realize the seriousness of the problem in Hong Kong. To them, child abuse probably just means beating a child black and blue. Obviously, people’s notion of child abuse is different from the definition mentioned above.

In fact, according to government statistics, the number of newly registered child abuse cases has increased in recent years, from 311 cases in 1996 to 535 cases in 2001. Most cases involved physical abuse. The second most extensive form of abuse is sexual harassment. Most victims are aged between 9 and 14; and most cases happened in Tuen Mun, Kwun Tong and Tsuen Wan. As for the number of active child abuse cases, it has almost doubled – from 690 cases in 1996 to 1,231 cases in 2001. (Source: *Child Protection Registry Statistical Reports 1996-2001*)

You might think that a thousand odd cases is not an alarming figure, but it only represents the cases that have been reported. Actually many incidents have occurred, but nobody has reported them. According to some professionals and students, people do not report cases of child abuse because they may not understand what child abuse is; or they are affected by the traditional idea that children may become good-for-nothings if parents do not give them a good beating when the occasion demands; or they think that it is somebody else’s family matter and will not report it even though they know that child abuse has taken place. Therefore, the official figures cannot truly reflect the seriousness of the child abuse problem.

Moreover, the number represents only those registered cases. There are numerous unregistered and brewing cases. According to the *Annual Reports of Against Child Abuse*, there are hundreds of people calling the organization for help every year. The type of cases most frequently handled by the hotline concerns discipline problems, which have the potential to become child abuse cases. This is followed by cases of physical abuse. Most callers are mothers and relatives of the victims. The number of calls has been increasing gradually, from 482 in 1996 to 736 in 2001. We can see that the child abuse problem in Hong Kong is getting worse.

Some of the 450 respondents claimed that some children they knew had been abused, mainly physically. About 45% of the respondents thought that children who had been abused could seek the

help of teachers and social workers; about 50% of the respondents said that if they knew there were children being abused, they would encourage them to seek help from social workers, or help them to do so. This suggests that most people do not want to get involved for fear of trouble; they would not seek the help of the police directly. Some are not even willing to help the victims by putting them in touch with social workers, but would only “encourage” them to seek help from social workers.

Today’s children will be the future pillars of society. The experience of being abused will have an inestimable impact upon children. The victims may be hurt physically; some may even die in extreme cases. In the past few years, news about injury and death caused by child abuse and family violence has been common. Take the example of the incident that happened on 18<sup>th</sup> February 2003. Three children who had been playing all night at a cyber bar without money were discovered by their father. The father was so angry he took them to a park, told them to kneel down, and then beat them in public as a punishment. The children cried out in pain, a female passerby called the police, and the incident only came to a close with the intervention of the police. In this particular case, physical abuse (beating the children) and psychological abuse (telling the children to kneel and beating them in public) were involved.

(Source: [http://orientaldaily.com.hk/srch\\_result/299516\\_btm.html](http://orientaldaily.com.hk/srch_result/299516_btm.html))

Apart from injuries to their body, a permanent scar may also be left in the victims’ mind. If no suitable counseling or support is provided, it may have a serious impact on their lives, resulting, for example, in low self-confidence, poor relationships with others, a violent personality, or other psychological problems. Therefore, the problem of child abuse must not be ignored anymore, and policies should be implemented immediately to improve the situation. But if we want to solve the problem in the long term, we must start with education.

### **III. The Current State of Parent Education about Child Abuse Prevention**

At present, parent education about child abuse prevention is the job of the Education and Manpower Bureau, the Social Welfare Department and the Department of Health under the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau, as well as other voluntary agencies such as Against Child Abuse (ACA), Breakthrough, Caritas – Hong Kong, The Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs Association of Hong Kong, and other voluntary agencies of different regions.

The Government has recently been promoting preventive education, which is mainly carried out by government departments, voluntary agencies and schools. Preventive education refers to educational work that aims to prevent the problem of child abuse from deteriorating. It helps enhance the ability of society to tackle such problems, and this would hopefully lead to social reforms and the building up a social support network. Preventive education can be divided into three categories: basic, targeted, and remedial. Basic preventive education is oriented towards the public, and conducted mainly through publicity in the mass media such as TV advertising. Its aim is to educate the general public and prevent them from being abusers. Targeted preventive education is for people who are potential abusers. For example, parents who scold or beat their children in public places. This type of preventive education is carried out through district campaigns or group consultations. Remedial preventive education is targeted at people involved in child abuse cases, and aims at providing remedial education after incidents of child abuse have occurred and at preventing future incidents from happening. All these work are mainly carried out by the Social Welfare Department and other voluntary agencies. They provide counseling service to the parents concerned and help them and their family members to cope with emotional and behavioral problems, problems in family relationships, etc.

In recent years, the Government has also been advocating the importance of parent education. In December 2000, the Education Department (merged into Education and Manpower Bureau at present) set up a Steering Committee on Parent Education, with members coming from different sectors of the

community. The Steering Committee has been allocated a sum of \$50 million to formulate a parent education initiative, which includes the preparation and publication of a series of promotion pamphlets, booklets and training manuals to enhance parents' knowledge and techniques on parenting, and to offer a suitable environment and proper guidance for the healthy development of children. Furthermore, the Parent Education Implementation Team was established by the Government in September 2001 to launch the initiative and smooth the way for parent education and related activities to be organized on a territory-wide basis in the next two years.

Since 2002, the Maternal and Child Care Centres have been implementing a parent education program which is designed with reference to the "Positive Parenting Program" in Australia. Under this program, the parents of a newborn in Hong Kong will receive basic counseling. Parents with special needs will be provided with special counseling if necessary. It is estimated that about 40,000 families with a newborn can enjoy this counseling service every year.

Such then are the measures taken by the Government to promote parent education. Regarding people's views and comments on Hong Kong's parent education, we have interviewed officials who are responsible for parent education in Against Child Abuse (ACA) and the School Development Division of the Education and Manpower Bureau. We have also collected other relevant information on this topic and have conducted detailed analysis and discussions. Our views are listed below.

Parent education is currently implemented by individual government departments and organizations. There is no proper mechanism for integration and coordination among them. Some education programs, focusing solely on teaching parenting techniques, are too shallow to exert a transforming influence on the values and attitudes of the parents, who may not even know what are the objectives and real benefits of these programs. And yet, if parent education is to be effective, a lot hinges on the attitudes of the parents towards parent education and the values they hold.

Clearly, Government's promotion of the current parent education initiative is inadequate. TV advertising and pamphlets alone cannot ensure that the message related to parent education is communicated to every family, and parents may not necessarily know where to get assistance. Even if parents or children receive the message, they are often too helpless and the message is often too weak to change the situation. What's more, the majority of participants in the parent education programs run by the Government and voluntary agencies are mothers. Fathers generally do not take part, either because they spend most of their time earning a living, or because of the traditional Chinese view that man should handle external matters while women should look after the home. As a result, the effectiveness of Hong Kong's parent education is undermined.

From the *Review of Family Services* in 2001, we can see that the Government has allocated a large part of the resources to educational work under the remedial category. By comparison, resources on preventive measures (such as parent education) are inadequate. But prevention is always better than cure. Don't wait for an incident to happen or let it become critical! Remedial work may be too late! The Government must put more resources on preventive work.

In what is to follow, we will, based on what we see as the deficiencies in the current measures, discuss the necessity and advantages of what we propose in our motion – mandatory parent education.

#### **IV. The Necessity and Advantages of Mandatory Parent Education**

Family plays a very crucial role in the development of a child. Therefore, a harmonious family and basic parent education are very important. An indispensable part of parent education consists of helping parents to understand the needs of children at various stages of their development. However, the general public is ignorant of parent education, and not many parents and child carers have received

parent education before. Besides, they may not know the techniques of positive parenting and the adverse effect of scolding and beating children. Therefore, the problem of child abuse is becoming more and more serious. It is the urgency of this issue that prompts us to urge the Government to implement mandatory parent education for the prevention of child abuse.

As noted above, a large part of the resources is allocated to educational work under the remedial category. Resources on preventive measures (such as parent education) are relatively inadequate. Besides, publicity campaigns to promote children's rights are not common in Hong Kong. Neither do we hear much about regular researches and surveys on topics related to child abuse. The general public, therefore, are not well-informed on these issues, and this explains their ignorance of the preventive function of parent education. It is only when public awareness in children's rights has been enhanced that we can educate parents about the knowledge, attitudes and skills they need in parenting, and thus safeguard the interests of children.

Mandatory parent education is part of a life-long learning process. It helps establish a harmonious relationship between parents and children, and prevents children from being abused. Through parent education, we could educate the parents about the attitudes needed for good parenting and correct traditional assumptions such as "beating and scolding are necessary measures in raising a child" and "physical punishment gives you a filial child". If we do not pay full attention to the problem of child abuse and solve it at an early stage, the problem will develop into a vicious circle that never ends. This is because abused children may be influenced by the wrong behavior of their parents and become potential abusers when they grow up. The advantage of mandatory parent education is that it deals with the root of the problem of child abuse through continuing parent education so as to minimize its occurrence and achieve both preventive and remedial effects.

According to the theory of the psychologist Erik Erikson, the development of children can be divided into five stages: infancy, early childhood, play age, school age, and adolescence. In each of these stages, the development and needs of children are different. Therefore, parents should equip themselves so as to understand the parenting methods to be used at different stages. For example, children need behavioral training at infancy but more communication in their adolescence. If parents do not understand the developmental needs of children in advance, conflicts will occur easily, leading eventually to child abuse. The theory can be adopted as a model in mandatory parent education and it is applicable to all parenting situations. This is because when every parent has to receive parent education, they will see the validity of the theory and the knowledge will help them use different parenting methods at different stages of their children's development.

In calling for mandatory parent education, we have also considered the interests of society. Some of you may think that our proposal to enforce mandatory parent education would violate human rights. However, according to Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), "The best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration". If parents do not act in the interests of the child, it will result in a series of unfavorable consequences. Unfortunately, most parents only become aware of the importance of prevention after problems have emerged. Furthermore, Article 18 of the UNCRC reads "Parents have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern." For the sake of the next generation, therefore, parents should take the initiative to participate in parent education.

Another advantage of mandatory parent education is its comprehensive scope, which means that every parent will have the opportunity to receive education. The outcome will be especially significant for those parents who are difficult to reach. Most child abusers abuse children because of problems with self-management, such as control of their emotion. Moreover, they often take refuge in the traditional idea of not washing your family's dirty linen in public, and use it as an excuse for not seeking help from others and for ignoring the problem, thus making it difficult for organizations concerned to come

to their rescue. Early identification of the problem is one of the essential methods to combat family violence. In respect of this, mandatory parent education will be effective in reaching parents of different backgrounds. If problems are identified at an early stage, and counseling and support are offered to parents in difficulties, child abuse may come under control and could even be alleviated.

Though parent education is available in Hong Kong, it is not common and few parents appreciate its importance. There is still a considerable number of parents who don't understand the needs of their children at the various stages of their development and growth, nor are they able to control their emotion. Under this circumstance, parents under stress will easily take it out at their children. It is therefore necessary to implement mandatory parent education to raise public awareness of child abuse. The general public must reach a consensus on the importance of parent education to the healthy development of children and of society. The majority of people in Hong Kong are unaware of the UNCRC, and their attention is seldom drawn to this Convention. Moreover, they are not familiar with the concept of child abuse or of parent education. Due to misconceptions, participants of parent education programs are often labeled as "problem parents". Parents in need are thus scared away. We urge the Government to implement mandatory parent education to help increase the popularity and acceptance of parent education in society. The general public will then be able to appreciate the importance of parent education and their worries and prejudice will, hopefully, disappear.

## **V. Dimensions and Guiding Principles of Mandatory Parent Education**

Since parents in general are not proactive enough in seeking advice and the existing parent education initiative is limited in scope and has not been widely introduced, we strongly suggest that mandatory parent education should be implemented. Below are the direction, dimensions, forms and guiding principles to be adopted.

Mandatory parent education takes prevention as its direction. Education itself is preventive work; parent education can help reduce child abuse and prevent potential abusers from abusing children, thus greatly strengthening the current preventive work.

Mandatory parent education should cover three dimensions: attitude, knowledge and skills. Among them attitude is the most fundamental. Why? As is said above, some parents hold traditional beliefs such as "physical punishment gives you a filial child" and "impose discipline on children and you give them good upbringing" and some who abuse their children do not think that they have any problems or need to be educated. If these parents are forced to receive education but do not understand its necessity and importance, they will only complain and treat it dismissively. That will defeat the purpose and a well-intentioned effort will come to nothing. However, if they understand that parent education is for their benefit and for that of their children and is aimed at helping parents and children know each other's needs and situations, they will be more receptive and gain much more from the program.

Deep-seated beliefs, we know, are difficult to change. It takes a long time to get rid of them. But this does not mean that mandatory parent education is not worth doing; whether a certain goal is worth pursuing depends on the need for it. As we have said, child abuse is worsening. Parent education is urgently needed. We should not oppose it just because it is difficult to implement. We believe that parent education will exert a deep influence on the values parents hold and ultimately change them.

How can we change long-established beliefs? Through seminars and sharing sessions for parents so that "veterans of parent education" can come and share their experience. Being parents themselves, the veterans understand the needs of parents and their stories can help bring home the point that parent education is for the benefit of the parents themselves.

While attitude is the fundamental dimension of parent education, knowledge and skills are also

essential. Transfer of knowledge is aimed mainly at helping parents and children understand each other. Focus will be on assisting parents to familiarize themselves with the various developmental stages of children, and the problems and needs that arise at each stage. As for skills, emphasis will be on teaching parents the proper ways of dealing with their children's problems in behavior, emotion, studies, money matters and so forth so that parents will not resort to "beating-and-scolding or suppression" again.

As for the forms mandatory parent education is to take, the most important consideration is that the programs must appear approachable to parents so as not to give them extra burden and pressure. We hope that the programs will be conducted in forms that are relaxing and interesting. For example, audio-visual materials such as movies and music can be used; lessons can also be conducted through dramas, seminars or even home visits. In this way, the participants will feel comfortable and will be willing to take an active role in class and thus become more receptive to the messages of parent education.

What we have just discussed is the general direction. The actual syllabus of mandatory parent education will of course have to be formulated through long-term study and proper planning. Nonetheless, we would like to offer some guiding principles:

1. Mandatory parent education must be provided on a sustained and continuous basis. Since new knowledge evolves every day, any effective education must comply with the principle of life-long education.
2. The running of the programs must be accompanied by regular assessments. The assessments should be comprehensive, systematic and scientific. The opinions of the parents should also be widely collected. Periodic reviews can then be conducted on the practicality and efficiency of the existing programs.
3. We agree with the view, put forward by experts, that of the various developmental stages of children, adolescence is especially important and deserves special attention. It is because at this stage, the adolescents are not yet fully mature in terms of their mental development and are liable to outside influence. They may also have emotional and behavioral problems and need help and advice. Parent education therefore should include ways of helping parents meet their children's needs.
4. Parent education workers need good training. Not only must they be well versed in the subjects they teach and know how to teach parents the necessary skills, but they must understand the parents' situations and limitations. This can ensure efficient transfer of knowledge and skills to the parents.
5. The timetable and the venues for mandatory parent education must be as convenient as possible to parents so as to encourage participation. According to our survey, 35% of the respondents thought that expectant parents should start receiving education even before the mother gives birth to her child; another 30% expressed the view that education should begin when or before the child enters kindergarten. As to frequency, over 30% thought that parents should have a lesson every month.
6. Mandatory parent education should be implemented as soon as possible because parents certainly need time for adaptation. Traditional beliefs cannot be changed overnight; it takes a long time for new concepts to sink in.
7. New immigrants arrive from the Mainland every day while the birth rate in Hong Kong has been low in recent years. According to statistics, the ratio of local children to immigrant children will become 2:1, which means that one in every three children will be from the Mainland. Mandatory parent education must take account of the special needs of immigrant children and their parents so that

programs fit for the local situation can be developed.

8. Although mandatory parent education is designed for parents, children should also take an active role in it because the aim of such education is to protect their interests. They can give impetus to their parents and encourage them to participate in parent education by showing their confidence in it. This will be more effective than government promotion and will help eliminate parents' doubts and worries.

## **VI. Mandatory Parent Education: Reservations and Actual Problems**

We do know that mandatory parent education requires a vast amount of resources. But since we are child councilors, we consider it our duty to give voice to the needs and wishes of children. And we firmly believe that this motion should be moved. From the standpoint of children, this proposal is worth implementing even if the Government has to pump resources into it.

Actually, the Government spends a lot of money on remedial work every year to alleviate domestic violence and other problems. Mandatory parent education is a kind of preventive work. If effectively implemented, it can greatly ease the problems resulting from child abuse, such as youth problems. In the long run, this can substantially reduce government expenses on remedial work.

As has been said above, most of the measures employed by the Government now are remedial in nature and preventive work is obviously inadequate. Consequently, the number of child abuse cases in Hong Kong continues to rise. This is because the remedial measures mostly target the families where child abuse has happened but neglect the parents and children of average families and the high-risk group of potential abusers. As a result, the correct messages cannot reach all parents and their children. Moreover, the families receiving remedial help are labeled as "problem families" and the stigma turns parents off assistance and counseling, thus reducing the effectiveness of the measures. In contrast, the mandatory parent education we propose entails no such problems. It not only can ensure the full participation of parents, but it can also help parents understand that it is everybody's need and duty to receive education and obtain correct information. The problem of labeling will then be solved.

Some people may be worried that when the proposal is carried out, it will meet with a lot of objections, especially from the parents. But in fact, most of the parents who abuse their children turn to violence only as the last resort or because they do not know anything about child abuse and its consequences. These parents want to make a good job of parenting but they often find themselves in a helpless position. Or it could be that promotion about counseling services for parents is so inadequate they have no idea at all how to seek help. They really need a proper channel to obtain correct information. Mandatory parent education is the very channel which can bring the right messages to all parents and provide them with assistance and guidance. That is why we believe that most parents will support this proposal.

Certainly there will be some parents who would be influenced by their own values and would insist that they have no problems and need no education. There will also be others who would hate being forced to receive education because they do not have the time or do not want to spend time on it. Even if all these parents are compelled to participate in parent education programs, they probably would not have the patience to listen, or they would forget everything right away.

We understand what these parents think. That is why we suggest that the Government should put efforts into promotion to help them appreciate the objectives and benefits of the initiative. We also hope that the Government will ensure coordination in policy to drive home the messages of parent education. Through sustained and comprehensive education, parents will surely gain insight into good parenting. In the long run, parent education can enhance the relationship between parents and children, and that is the ultimate goal of this motion.

Many people may ask: “Why should parent education be made mandatory?” The answer is that the strengths of mandatory parent education are its comprehensiveness and extensiveness, which can make sure that the messages of child abuse prevention reach all parents. From the standpoint of children, we believe that since parent education is beneficial and needs to be in place, we should make it mandatory to ensure full participation. Moreover, mandatory parent education, like the nine-year compulsory education, is a measure to protect the interests of children. Through education, parents will learn to stop using violence on their children.

Of course, the word “mandatory” may be frowned upon by people who think that such education will hamper the freedom of parents by leaving no choice for them. But it is a measure which can protect the interests of children. While enjoying their freedom, parents should also consider the well-being and the rights of children. This motion is moved for the well-being of children!

## **VII. Conclusion**

It is our firm belief that children are the future pillars of society and that we have an important role to play as members of the community. Imagine what would become of us if we were abused. Battered, traumatized, deeply hurt in both the body and the mind, we would be future pillars of society no more. So, please pay serious attention to child abuse. Please do not turn a blind eye to children’s need for a healthy upbringing. Healthy children make a healthy society. Only when supported by its pillars can a society develop and prosper.

The mandatory parent education we propose today will be an effective cure for child abuse. As children, we can see the education need of parents and those who take care of children. Although it is not easy at all to change a deep-seated belief, education can give parents a good understanding of healthy parenting and this will certainly lead to the abatement of child abuse. Education is a long-term investment and effective in eradicating wrong beliefs. We are convinced that it can also enable the correct concepts to take root in the minds of the public.

We urge you all to give serious consideration to this motion and vote for it.

We, students from Kwun Tong Maryknoll College, La Salle College and two Child Ambassadors, move the motion “**Urge the Government to implement mandatory parent education to prevent child abuse**” be passed.

### **Acknowledgements:**

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