

The government should set up a task force to improve parent-child relationships

Introduction

The family is the most basic unit of a society. A good parent-child relationship is important for family harmony and social stability, and it also has a great impact on children physical and mental development of children.

Under Article 18 of “The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child” (UNCRC), the signatory states shall do all they can to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have the common responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. Parents or legal guardians have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern.

The Government has the responsibility to allocate resources to assist parents and enhance parent-child communication, and to ensure a healthy physical and mental development for children. We suggest that the Government set up a task force to improve parent-child relationships.

The current situation of parent-child relationships

Parent-child care means mutual communication and understanding between family members, as well as giving emotional and spiritual support to each other. Most parents care about their children, and the focus and the degree of caring and the way in which care is given all directly affect the parent-child relationship. If parents care about their children in an inappropriate way, such as spoiling them, it will lead to the deterioration of parent-child relationships. Our group has conducted a questionnaire survey and has successfully interviewed 853 children. The survey shows that 78% of the children think that their parents care about them, while 58% of them say that they care about their parents. 53% of the children believe that parent care should include more communication, which shows the importance of parent-child communication. However, 47% of the children communicate with their parents for less than 30 minutes per day, and 68% of their conversations are about their school performance, while only 11% is about personal problems of emotion and only 20% is about interpersonal relationships.

Causes of unsatisfactory parent-child relationships

1. Parents

Most parents are mainly concerned with the school performance of their children, but neglect the feelings of the children. According to a survey entitled “Things of which parents want their children to do more”, 77% of the parents want their children to study more, while only 10% of them want to communicate more with their children. According to another survey entitled “Real communication brings about harmony”, 62% of the parents even use insulting language towards their children. Parents’ deficiency in communication skills, lack of understanding of their children’s needs in different stages of growth, underestimating the importance of parent-child activities and excessive dependency on foreign domestic workers are among the causes of unsatisfactory parent-child relationships. According to the data provided in “Thematic household survey report No. 5”, the number of foreign domestic workers being employed in Hong Kong is increasing steadily, 10% of the families in Hong Kong have employed domestic workers.

Even though parents may understand the importance of caring about their children, they do not do their best in caring, because of their own personal problems, such as marriage problems (according to “Social Development Index 2002”, the divorce rate in Hong Kong is about 40%), economic constraints, working pressure, and unhealthy addictions.

2. Economic Reasons

Hong Kong is a materialistic society and the working time of parents is very long. According to the survey of “Balance between work and life in Hong Kong”, the working class on average works 51.3 hours per week, which is 30% higher than the standard suggested by the International Labor Organization. Overload in working hours indirectly affects their family life and their relationship with their children.

3. Traditional ideas

Chinese parents keep the traditional idea that men are superior to women. The solemn image of the father makes the child feel it difficult to get close to him. According to the survey entitled “Getting together — children and parents”, 65% of the fathers seldom talk to their children; up to 60% of them do not or only spend a little time to play with their children. All this leads to children’s distancing from their parents.

4. Children

According to our survey, if children do not receive care from their parents, 56% of them would talk to their friends or classmates, while only 21% would talk to their parents, which makes it difficult for the parents to know where the problems are, hence no efforts are made to

improve.

Effects of unsatisfactory parent-child relationships

1. Mind

Generally, children who have poor relationships with their parents have more psychological problems. According to “A comparative study of the factors related to parent-child relationships between teenagers in general and teenagers with behavioral problems”, children will feel a lack of security if their relationship with their parents is cold. According to the survey entitled “The offensiveness of parents, parent-child relationships, prejudice-induced hostility and the offensiveness of Hong Kong teenagers”, poor parent-child relationships will lead to an offensive mind in teenagers.

2. Behaviour

Children who have poor relationships with their parents seem to have a greater chance of misbehaviour. According to the survey entitled “A preliminary study of the effects of parent-child relationships and communication on teenagers’ misconduct”, children who

cannot depend on their parents have a greater chance of committing crimes. According to an article published in the “Education Page A15” of *Dakongpao* on 18th Nov. 1991, lack of a healthy parent-child relationship is one of the main factors for the students to commit suicide. The survey entitled “A study of Hong Kong’s night-wandering teenagers’ relations with their family, school and friends, and changes of the mode of their night activities” shows that a tense family relationship will result in a teenager running away from their home.

3. Long term effect

Unsatisfactory parent-child relationships will deepen the differences between parents and child, and worsen the existing generation gap. As time passes, this kind of distorted family relationship will be gradually accepted by society, which will in time become a “taken-for-granted” unhealthy social phenomenon, as well as a bad tradition of ideology. In addition, since some children grow up in an unhealthy environment of unsatisfactory parent-child relationships, they also neglect the importance of the parent-child relationships after they become adults themselves. In this way, their values will be extended to their children who will then bring the problem to their next generation.

Relevant measures and services

The Government has not done enough to improve on parent-child relationships. The Committee on Family Life Education Publicity Campaign and the Parent Education Implementation Team it had established were eventually dissolved and their functions were integrated into other services.

The Department of Health is now promoting a Positive Parenting Programme (3Ps), aiming to enhance parents' confidence in being parents and improve their child-teaching skills. Symposiums, seminars, and group and family activities and exhibitions are organized by the Social Welfare Department and non-governmental organizations so as to enhance family relationships.

Integrated Family Service Centres provide counselling services for families which have difficulties in child teaching or problems in parent-child relationships. If necessary, the cases can be referred to clinical psychologists.

Related programmes have also been launched by non-governmental organizations, such as the Hong Kong Council of Social Service, which is promoting a Family Work Balance Campaign, aiming to create "family-friendly" workplaces so as to promote family solidarity and build a harmonious society.

These measures and services are implemented by different organizations and departments, thus lacking overall and comprehensive planning. Consequently, it remains a

problem to carry out work on parent-child relationships on a comprehensive scale, and progress remains to be made.

Suggestions

1. Setting up a task force

Considering that the current measures are not sufficient enough to improve parent-child relationships, we suggest a task force be established in order to plan and analyze the issues involved. Members of the task force should include representatives from related policy bureaus, government departments, non-governmental organizations, relevant committees, and parents and children.

Functions of the task force include:

(1) Overall planning

The first job of the task force is to work out a long-term goal and a comprehensive plan, and to organize and coordinate existing measures and services, so that all work can be carried

out in a systematic manner, and assistance can also be provided to various organizations in the community.

(2) Promoting the importance of parent-child relationships

Nowadays in our society, quite many parents still do not understand the importance of parent-child solidarity, not to mention the importance of building harmonious families. According to our survey, most of the children hope their parents can participate more in their activities, talk more with them and care more about them.

This task force needs to proactively promote the importance of parent-child relationships, for example by increasing promotion in the media, holding diversified parent-child activities, teaching parents how care can be given to their children, and how family problems can be prevented.

(3) Parent education

Being parents is uneasy, and it is a process of continuous learning. We think that the task force should carry out comprehensive parent education in order to increase the parents' knowledge in understanding the needs of their children while they grow up, and to give

parents appropriate guidance and help them build up positive attitudes. The parents can get guidance and assistance while participating in the programme, and can also share with other parents experiences and skills to communicate with children. Although the Department of Health provides parents with education services, these services do not reach all families. It is also very difficult for a single department to carry out large-scale parent education programmes alone. We think that the Education and Manpower Bureau should participate in such programmes by communicating with schools where the most direct kind of contact with children and parents occurs, so that parent education programmes are carried out in a systematic manner.

Besides, according to our survey, 62% of the children interviewed think that parents should spend more time with their children in parent-child activities as this can improve their relationships effectively. Thus, we suggest that the task force can invite the Education and Manpower Bureau to incorporate parent-child activities in the schools' Parents Day every year. Through these programmes, parents can learn the skills of communicating with their children and increase their time spent in parent-child activities. Children can also understand and learn to be more considerate of their parents.

(4) Urging the Government to restrict working hours

According to the survey on “Balance between work and life in Hong Kong”, the average working time for Hong Kong people is more than 50 hours per week. Parents are too busy to take care of their children, and they even do not have time to be with them. Restricting working hours can prevent parents from neglecting their children’s need because of long working hours. It also gives parents adequate time for rest to avoid their bringing workplace stress back home which may cause unhappiness at home and affect the growth of children. This then helps increase the amount of good time for parent-child communication and for the development of a good parent-child relationship. As mentioned above, many parents overlook their children’s needs because of their own personal problems. The task force should urge the Government to restrict working hours in order to help these parents handle their personal problems.

(5) Studying and improving the social factors which affect parent-child relationships

Nowadays, material life is rich, but with this come many things which affect parent-child relationships such as the problem of working hours. Parents often neglect their children’s needs because their working hours are too long. Therefore, the task force should study the relevant factors that have caused the problem, and then urge society to face and improve the situation. In this way we will be able to provide a good environment for the development of

children.

Conclusion

A good parent-child relationship has a great influence on the development of children. Admittedly, it is a very good thing that the Government is now making great efforts in raising the intelligence level and competitiveness of children. However, we should not overlook the physical and mental development of children. In fact, all parents treasure their own children most, and at the same time, parents are the most needed and trusted in their children's eyes.

What children long to have is not only contentment in material things but also a good parent-child relationship. What they want to get from their parents is care, support and love.

Children are in fact also future parents. To avoid the problem of poor parent-child relationships extending to the next generation and affecting more children, the relationship problems of today should be settled properly. We urge the Government to improve on the poor state of parent-child relationships and provide a healthy and happy environment for the children to grow in.

Therefore, on the behalf of the fourteen Child Councillors of us in our group, I plead to you to pass the motion of "The Government should set up a task force to improve parent-child relationships".

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