

**The government should improve current policies to enhance  
the mental health of children**

**Child Councilors:**

Chan Chun Hei Elden  
Chan Sin Yi Rina  
Chan Tsz Ki Kitty  
Cheung Ka Ho Timothy  
Fu Ming Wai Vivica  
Ho Chi Chung Bob  
Hou Hiu Wan Dorothy  
Kam Chun Hao Jacky  
Lam Ho Fai Henry  
Lau Hok Him Brian  
Lee Lai Ping Mamie  
Lo Man Chun Alex  
Mak Crystal  
Ng Cho Yan Janette  
Suen Althea  
Tong Kelly  
Wong Ho Cheung Alex  
Yan Lut Hang Lillian

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## **Introduction**

Children in Hong Kong appear to be the precious gems of their parents. Yet, does it mean every aspect of their health is well cared for, including mental health? Numerous surveys suggest that anxiety and depression are common among children in Hong Kong. Most of those suffering from the illnesses do not realize the seriousness of their problem, and the people closest to them are even unaware of it, hence, making the situation worse.

According to Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), children have the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for treatments and rehabilitation of health. Statistics provided by the Hospital Authority indicate that the number of patients who have behavioural and mood disorders during childhood and adolescence surged from 3,677 in 2007-2008 to 4,295 in 2008-2009. Due to acute shortage of psychiatrists and psychologists, excessively long waiting time for treatments in public hospitals, and inefficient use of resources, the physical and mental development of children at this crucial stage of life, their academic studies, as well as social and daily lives are under threat. The mental health of our children is going downhill.

In face of the above, we, the Child Councillors, want to raise public concern of the issue by urging the government to improve current policies to enhance the mental health of children.

## **Current situation**

At present, there are approximately 880,000 primary and secondary school students in Hong Kong. Experts estimate that about 10% of them may need psychiatric services. New cases of child psychiatric patients are increasing every year. The figure rose by 581 from 2008 to 2009. The issue must be dealt with in a serious and prompt manner. Subject to all kinds of pressure in life, children and adolescents in Hong Kong are vulnerable to various kinds of emotional and mental disorder, mainly, anxiety, depression, autism, attention-deficit hyperactivity and psychosis.

Presently child psychiatric services are largely provided by public hospitals under the Hospital Authority. Only a small number of child psychiatrists are practicing in private. In general, child and adolescent psychiatric patients are referred to public hospitals for treatments as private psychiatrists are charging much higher fees (varying from \$800 to \$5,000 per session). As a result, more than 90% of the child psychiatric patients are getting treatment in public hospitals, and are relying heavily on services provided by the government. The quality of psychiatric services in public hospitals will therefore have significant, long-term impact on them.

Current psychiatry services are constrained by limited government funding each year. In terms of staffing, there are only 19 child psychiatrists, 8 clinical psychologists, and less than 200 Community Psychiatric Nurses in all public hospitals. It is increasingly difficult for the small team of staff to cope with the rising demand. Children and adolescent patients in need often have to wait in a long queue to get consultation (1 to 3 years on the average), making it impossible for them to receive proper treatment before the condition gets worse. Moreover, there is a severe shortage of facilities for child and adolescent psychiatric services in public hospitals. Although the Hospital Authority is providing a total of 4,000 hospital beds for patients in need, only a small number of them are allocated to child patients. In some hospitals, child psychiatric patients have to share the same ward with adult patients. However, the kind of services, care and facilities required by child patients differ vastly from those required by adults. Such arrangement will have a direct impact on the quality of care given to

the child patients, and thus, affecting the progress of their recovery.

A former mental patient told us in an interview that it was improper for the government to place children and adult patients, and patients of mild and severe condition together in the same hospital ward. Have gone through such undesirable situation, he reproached that the resources put in by the government were far too little. With such limitation, medical treatment given to the youngsters can hardly be effective and in time, leading to deterioration of their condition. These children are often labelled by the schools as “naughty kids”; they are often punished and are constantly under criticism. Their social lives are being affected day in and day out.

Although public hospitals are providing psychiatric services to child and adolescent patients, findings of our survey conducted on parents, teachers and school social workers show that nearly half of the interviewees have never heard of such services. Furthermore, these people, who have frequent contact with teenagers, are themselves ignorant about the issue of mental health. As a result, youngsters in need are unable to receive proper treatment in a prompt manner. In view of the aforesaid situation, our group would like to make the following recommendations for the government’s serious consideration in order to improve the mental health of children and teenagers in Hong Kong.

## **Suggestions**

### **1. Enhancing publicity of the services provided by government and non-government organizations**

Under much resources constraint, the government and subvented non-government organisations (NGOs) are providing limited psychiatric services to the public. Yet, the community is largely unaware of these services. As a result, young people suffering mental health problems and their parents do not know how to and where to seek help, leading to the exacerbation of the problem. In view of this, we believe the government should step up efforts in promoting the existing services.

We suggest that the government could publicize its current psychiatric services through the media including the press, and the television and radio, so that the public will know where and how to seek help when needed. In addition, the government could cooperate with NGOs to set up a one-stop service hotline managed by social workers or other trained personnel, who will give advice to those calling for help or refer them to the relevant services run by nearby public hospitals or NGOs. In this way, patients will be able to access the correct information, and receive assessment and treatment in a more speedy manner, without having to wait for a long time in a government queue, or waste time on trying to locate the appropriate services themselves by other means. At the same time, resources can also be used more effectively to help the teenagers in need.

### **2. Increasing staff and facilities in public hospitals**

Shortage of staff in public hospitals is prolonging the waiting time of patients seeking medical treatment, and hence, worsening their health due to the delay of treatment. Experts warn that precaution is the most effective cure. Many psychiatric patients who are diagnosed of the illness in adulthood did not receive proper treatment when they were young. The earlier a patient gets treatment, the greater chance he or she will be cured. Psychiatric patients who are suffering from serious mental illnesses may hurt themselves or other people, thus posing a potential threat to the society. As a precautionary measure, allocation of resources should not focus only on adult psychiatric services. The Hospital Authority should also allocate more resources to psychiatric services for children and teenagers.

The increase in resources includes not only funding but staffing as well. More clinical psychologists and psychiatrists should be recruited, and university graduates of related disciplines should be retained to serve in the public sector. In addition, the government should set up child psychiatric wards in public hospitals and provide appropriate facilities and services for child patients in accordance with the *Charter for Children in Hospital*. It is hoped that by shortening the waiting time of psychiatric patients, the quality of treatment provided in government hospitals will be improved and the mental health of children and teenagers will be cared for in an early stage.

### **3. Strengthening peer education**

Once entering puberty, teenagers tend to stay closer with their friends while feeling alienated from their parents. In such circumstances, friends are more likely than parents to discover the emotional or mental problems of young people. In view of this, we propose that peer education on mental health should be strengthened.

First, schools could organize seminars and distribute information pamphlets prepared by doctors, teachers or social workers who have the relevant knowledge and training as means to educate young people about mental illnesses, so that they will be able to help identify peers who may be suffering from the illness, and know better how to deal with the situation. This will also help correct the negative concept about psychiatric patients. Secondly, the government could organize peer sharing sessions for young people and workshops where former psychiatric patients can share their experiences. Through the activities, students will be able to gain a deeper understanding about mental health and the importance of early treatment. Lastly, the government could adopt an interactive approach to disseminate information on mental health by using popular media among children, such as online games and “education buses”. All these are ways to strengthen peer education on mental health.

### **4. Strengthening education for parents, teachers and the general public**

Apart from peers, parents and teachers are the people who are in frequent contact with teenagers. Yet, most of them lack the knowledge to identify teenagers who may be suffering emotional and mental disorders. Delayed diagnosis is worsening their condition. We believe that parent-teacher associations (PTAs) should work closely with the schools to promote education among parents and teachers in this aspect.

Firstly, in order to enhance teachers’ knowledge on mental health, we suggest that the government should urge the schools to send teachers (at least those responsible for student discipline and counseling) to workshops on mental health. The attendance hours of these programmes can be included in the total training hours of Teacher Development Courses. Secondly, we suggest that the government should encourage the PTA of each school to organize seminars run by medical professionals to educate parents about mental health.

### **5. Formulating clearly-defined government policies**

As mentioned above, the government is providing limited psychiatric services for young patients. At present, there are however no clearly defined policies or goals for improving the mental health of children and teenagers. We therefore propose that the government should follow examples in other countries by setting out clear objectives to address the issue of child mental health in Hong Kong. The government should also increase the transparency of its policies on child psychiatric services by publishing reports every year to inform the public of the results and evaluation of the existing services to proactively improve the quality of its services.

## **Conclusion**

The World Health Organization predicts that by 2020 depression will become the world’s

second most threatening disease, following heart disease. More and more children and teenagers are suffering from mental illnesses. The markedly growing trend deserves much attention. The problem of mental health among children and teenagers is alarming in the society. The problem is seriously threatening their personal development, both physically and mentally, affecting their studies as well as social and daily lives. Immediate actions must be taken to raise government and public concern of the issue.

Precaution is the most effective cure. Early diagnosis and proper treatment are the most practical and effective ways to solve the problem. It is our hope to draw the attention of the government and all sectors of the community to the problem by moving this motion, so that children and teenagers in Hong Kong will be able to lead a happy and healthy life. On behalf of the 18 Child Councillors in my group, I move that the motion 'The Government should improve current policies to enhance the mental health of children' be passed.

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