

FAMILY MATTERS

That healing touch

It takes a village to raise a child, even more to heal one with emotional damage

SINGAPORE – The OCBC-TODAY Children's Fund focuses on the emotional needs of children. Many people assume that help should focus solely on the child, but building up a child's self-esteem, confidence and emotional well-being is also dependent on changing the family environment.

For a charity like the Singapore Children's Society (SCS), the beneficiary of the Fund, its work often goes beyond its scope and involves anything from helping a family solve its financial problems so that the child can have a safe and stable home, to helping a child find a purpose in life.

Dr Carol Balhetchet, Senior Director at the SCS' Youth Service Centre (Toa Payoh) and a Clinical Psychologist, tells us more.

How important is emotional welfare for children?

It's like a child's immune system, which is what keeps him strong enough to fight off diseases. Emotional well-being is the defence mechanism that keeps him stable and healthy. It makes the child confident and resilient so that he can fend off emotional or mental attacks. For instance, if he's called names in school, emotional well-being enables him to bounce back.

A child's emotional well-being comes from his growing years in his family. If he feels loved, accepted and wanted, he grows confident, strong and ready to explore the world outside this first environment. The second and third environments are the school and community, where the child will suffer setbacks. If his grounding is strong, he will bounce back.

What happens when a child's emotional needs are not met?

He will not feel loved. Although he cannot understand where the feeling is coming from, he won't be strong enough emotionally. Such children won't feel motivated. They won't feel liked and won't think twice about bullying other children ... because the instant gratification makes them feel stronger. They get short-term gratification from hanging out with troublemakers outside school and petty offences, just to get the high of being in control of their lives.



Dr Carol Balhetchet, Senior Director at Singapore Children's Society, Youth Service Centre (Toa Payoh). PHOTO: KOH MUI FONG

* LEND A HELPING HAND

The OCBC-TODAY Children's Fund was set up to help children from distressed families who have suffered the effects of neglect or even abuse. Donations will be capped at S\$1.5 million each year – S\$1 million from public contributions and S\$500,000 from OCBC's commitment to give S\$1 for every S\$2 raised. This helps ensure that other charities, especially smaller outfits, also have the chance to benefit from the generosity of donors.

Visit www.ocbctodayfund.sg or call the SCS fundraising department at 6273 2010 to donate and make a difference in their lives.

Do you have any success stories?

A 13-year-old was brought to juvenile court by his mother and stepfather for a Beyond Parental Control application. We found that he didn't see the point of going to school or being at home. He was smoking and drinking with friends at void decks before it progressed to petty theft in the malls.

It turned out his biological parents had divorced when he was about nine years old. With the new family came more siblings. His mother was preoccupied with them and he was left out, gradually withdrawing and becoming almost invisible at home.

We directed his case to BeaconWorks, a diversional rehabilitative programme under the SCS. We tried to repair the relationship issues, focusing on individual roles within the family, like working with his stepfather on how to be a step-parent and making his mother aware of sibling rivalry.

His mother adjusted her schedule to spend more time with him, and his parents gave him tasks like coaching his siblings in football so he'd feel more included.

We also asked the child to find something that stimulated his interest. He wanted to repair motorcycles. Initially, his parents didn't allow it as they wanted him to stay in school, but we worked with them to assess the situation. He was not interested in school and every time he didn't do well, his self-esteem was knocked further. So why not find an alternative he was interested in?

This was one case where we had to accept that the child was going to drop out, even though we normally encourage them to stay in school. We felt he may eventually want to return to school on his own accord.

On his own, he later found a polytechnic offering a mechanic's course, and his family participated in figuring out how they could help pay the fees.

How crucial are counselling and therapy?

In 1997, when I first thought of joining SCS under the home statutory supervision programme, we were more like probation officers. It wasn't very structured therapeutically. When I joined SCS in 1998, one of the things I put in place was clinical intervention. Therapy is like medication. I felt that the emotional part of the person needed to be opened up, laundered and put back into place.

The child was also no longer the only focus ... we also helped the parents. When the child returns to his parents, he is more likely to fail again if the parents have not been rehabilitated.

What's most fulfilling about your job?

Seeing the children do well. I have always loved children because I find them the most vulnerable and I want to protect the under-

“I recently attended a children's charity fair to watch my team from RoundBox (a drop-in centre targeting youths at risk) perform. One of the band members went into the audience and brought a handicapped child on stage to dance. I said: 'This is the reason I'm doing what I'm doing.' I felt like a proud mother.”

Dr Carol Balhetchet
SENIOR DIRECTOR AT SINGAPORE CHILDREN'S SOCIETY,
YOUTH SERVICE CENTRE (TOA PAYOH)

dog. After I joined SCS, I was posted to the Youth Service Centre (Toa Payoh) and I found out I wasn't working with young children but with teenagers.

Eventually I realised that everyone felt sorry for the younger ones. Everyone wanted to help as they thought the children were cute and vulnerable. Nobody seemed to want to get close to the teenagers.

That wasn't fair, so I thought I should fight for them. They are vulnerable but they put on an artificial front as a defence mechanism. My loyalty to them has lasted 16 years.

I recently attended a children's charity fair to watch my team from RoundBox (a drop-in centre targeting youths at risk) perform. One of the band members went into the audience and brought a handicapped child on stage to dance.

I said: “This is the reason I'm doing what I'm doing.” I felt like a proud mother.

PRODUCED BY THE TODAY SPECIAL PROJECTS TEAM