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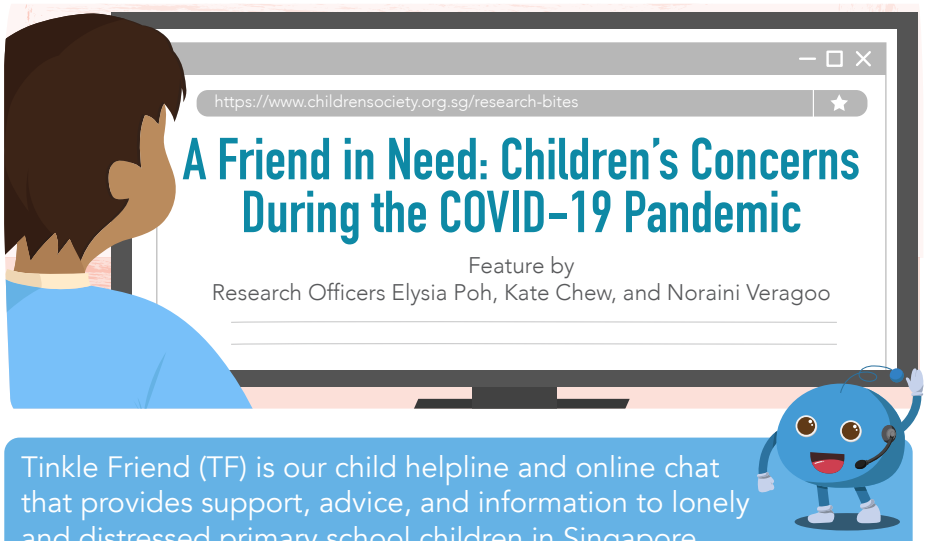
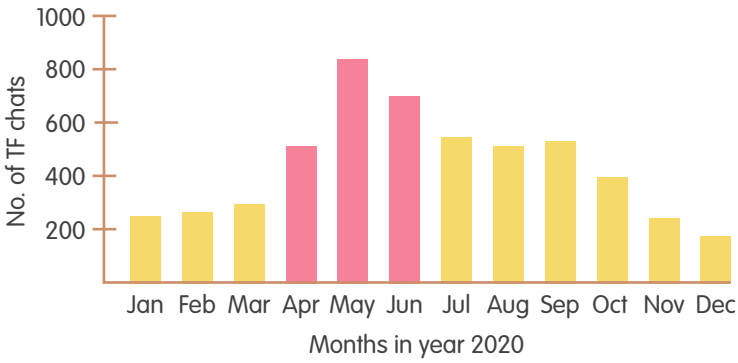


Tinkle Friend (TF) is our child helpline and online chat that provides support, advice, and information to lonely and distressed primary school children in Singapore, especially in situations when their parents or main caregivers are unavailable. Since it was established in 1984, TF remains the only national child helpline and online chat service.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic swept through the world, and Singapore went through a Circuit Breaker between April and June. To represent children's voices and understand their experiences during this period, we analysed some TF online chats. We hypothesised that COVID-19 restrictions would limit children's social interactions and access to their sources of social support. Thus, we analysed the chats relating to peer and family relationships, as our past study on Resilience (see Issue 10) has shown that peers and family members are children's main sources of social support.



Between April and June 2020, when students went through full home-based learning, early school holidays, and staggered return to school, there was a surge in the volume of online chats as compared to previous months. The increased TF publicity in schools and children's decreased access to social support from their schools could have contributed to this surge. We randomly selected 20% of online chats on peer and family relationships from April to July for analysis.

A Friend in Need: Children's Concerns during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Feature by Research Officers Elysia Poh, Kate Chew, and Noraini Veragoo

Despite being in the midst of a pandemic, children's primary concerns were about academic-related stress and social relationship issues. The quotes in this article were taken directly from children's chats.

Academic-related stress

- **High adult expectations**

  Adults (e.g. parents, teachers) had overly high or unrealistic expectations of children's academic performance, thus contributing to children being distressed.

- **Excessive control**

  Parents exerted excessive control over children's access to leisure and social activities with friends in an attempt to ensure their children focus on their academics.

> "I also feel down as sometimes I do quite good in my studies but they say that I'm a failure and *[it]* makes me sad because I expected maybe just a praise from them."
>
> 10-year-old child

> "Well sometimes I study a lot, and I think I deserve just a 15 minute break, but they won't let me. So I usually steal the phone and if they caught me with the phone I just lie and say that I wasn't playing it."
>
> 10-year-old child

Relationship difficulties

- **Blurred work-family boundaries**

  During the Circuit Breaker period, parents experienced increased stress and work demands. This affected parents' interactions with their children.

- **Parents' use of hurtful language**

  Parents sometimes used words that caused hurt to their children when they were unhappy with their children's behaviour.

- **Peers undermining child's reputation**

  Children reported that friends would gossip about them, or talk negatively behind their backs which affected their reputation.

> "Sometimes when I'm in a zoom lesson (actually now it's not zoom) my mom comes in and she gets angry. I think she is frustrated at the Circuit Breaker too, but I am not sure."
>
> 11-year-old child

> "One time just because I did not bring my homework my mother almost chased me out of the house, and when my grades dropped my father called me a loser and threatened me to go to my relatives in Malaysia and kneel down at them apologising saying I am a disgrace to the family."
>
> 12-year-old child

> "More people around me don't trust me, think I'm really moody, they *[friends]* talked bad bout *[sic]* me on IG *[Instagram]*, saying they should shoot me."
>
> 12-year-old child

Barriers to seeking social support

- **Negative past experiences**

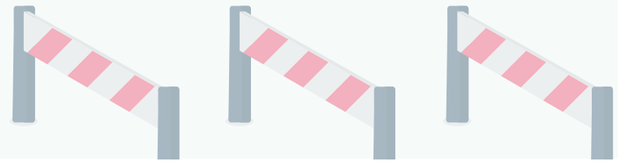
  When children approached adults or friends for support, they were met with negative responses. This prevented children from seeking their support again.

> "They *[teachers]* will still contact my parents, and that will make it worse. […] I trusted them no *[not]* to call my parents, they did anyways so what's the point."
>
> *12-year-old child*

- **Interactional patterns between parent and child**

  Existing unhealthy parent-child interactions such as poor communication, trivialisation of children's difficulties and lack of parental affection prevented children from seeking parental support.

> He *[Father]* would even get angry at me and raise his voice! WHAT KIND OF LIFE IS THIS. WHY DO I HAVE TO SUFFER. I ALWAYS DON'T VOICE OUT MY OPINION."
>
> *13-year-old child*



Reflections

We embarked on this analysis to understand children's experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we examined whether major changes that affected children, such as school closure and parents working from home, impacted children's access to social support. We had expected that children would chat with TF about concerns regarding COVID-19.

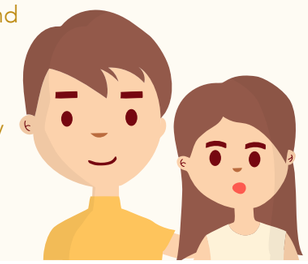
However, we found that children mostly shared about their day-to-day struggles. There were fewer chats pertaining to difficulties directly related to the pandemic and associated restrictions. These results could be interpreted in two ways.

First, it is possible that children adapted quickly, and could cope well with the sudden changes in restrictions. Second, the restrictions could have exacerbated existing difficulties or challenges in the relationships between children's peers and family members.

The analysis also revealed additional findings regarding children's help seeking behaviours. Some children highlighted that they were unwilling to seek support from adults or friends due to negative past experiences and poor communication practices.

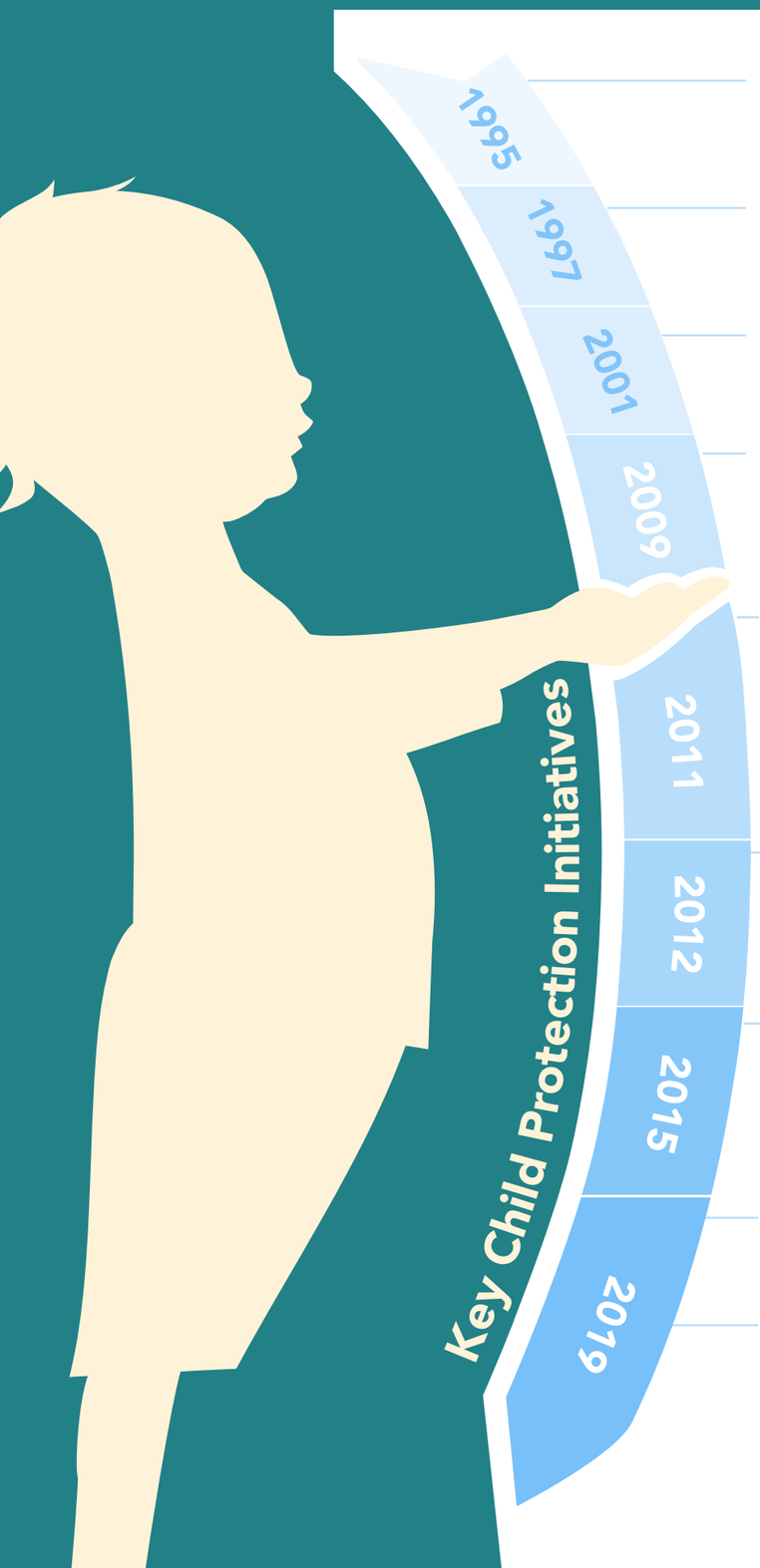
This points to the importance of adults, such as parents and teachers, being more attuned to children's thoughts and feelings in order to establish and maintain trust. When children seek help, confidentiality should be upheld as long as their safety and well-being are not compromised.

Moving forward, we will continue to examine children's chats with TF to identify trends and emerging issues that children are experiencing.



Understanding Perceptions of Child Abuse and Neglect in Singapore: Our Progress and Future Directions

Feature by Former Research Officer Lui Zhi Jing



1995 — Singapore acceded to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

1997 — The Inter-Ministry Workgroup on the Management of Child Abuse was established.

2001 — Singapore amended the Children & Young Persons Act (CYPA) to include emotional maltreatment as a form of abuse.

2009 — The Ministry of Social and Family Development launched a public education campaign on family violence, comprising media publicity, roadshows, and carnivals.

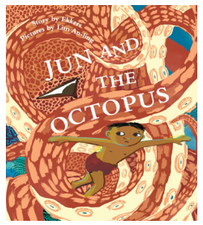
2011 — A child sexual abuse prevention programme, KidzLive: I Can Protect Myself, was launched in 2000 by Singapore Children's Society.

2012 — The Inter-Ministry Workgroup was restructured into the Inter-Ministry Workgroup on Child Protection, allowing more stakeholders to be represented.

2015 — The Structured Decision-Making system, a suite of evidence-based tools, was launched to guide professionals' decision-making in child protection efforts.

2019 — The CYPA was revised to extend the age limit of children protected under the law from 16 to 18 years old.

Jun and the Octopus, a storybook to help parents discuss child sexual abuse prevention with their children, was published by Singapore Children's Society.



Singapore Children's Society has been providing services to suspected victims of child abuse and neglect since 1988. Early on, we saw the importance of conducting research to better understand the issue in the local context. We conducted two sets of studies on the public's and professionals' perceptions of maltreatment, first in 1994 and 1997, and again in 2010 and 2011.

Over the years, Singapore has also implemented various child protection initiatives. These initiatives provide context for understanding our study findings, and point us towards possible future directions. In this feature, we review major child protection milestones in Singapore, and discuss the lessons we learnt from the perception studies.

Lessons from our child abuse and neglect perception studies: Implications for policy and research

Through our studies, we learnt if and how perceptions differ over time, and how perceptions differed across professional groups and the public. We comment on how these findings could inform future policy and research on the issue.

1 Perceptions of child abuse and neglect have been shifting over the years.

We asked participants to rate ambiguous behaviors, such as "never hugging child" and "making child study long hours". In 2011, more participants chose tentative responses (i.e. "could be abuse") to describe such behaviors compared to 1994, where more respondents chose definite answers (i.e. "is abuse" or "is not abuse"). This signals a change in public perceptions towards child abuse and neglect behaviors, which could have been a result of public education, and changes in the legal system.

This encourages future studies to collect data on how each child protection initiative helps to change the societal perceptions, and to monitor if these perception changes are moving in desired directions.

2 Perceptions of child abuse and neglect across professional groups and the public remain inconsistent.

When a behaviour or situation is seen as less abusive or serious, it is also less likely to be reported. Inconsistencies in how such behaviors are perceived thus mean that even if cases of suspected abuse are reported, they might not be acted upon by the relevant professionals.

Singapore's Inter-Ministry Workgroup can ensure the consistency of training frameworks across professional groups (e.g., medical personnel, social work practitioners, police officers) and strengthen open communication across professional groups on how decisions are reached in cases of suspected abuse.

3 Future research on knowledge and reporting processes of child abuse and neglect is particularly important.

In the literature, there is little consensus on which specific behaviours constitute abuse. As such, we were unable to compare the perceptions of our professionals and the public against any societal standards of acceptability. This makes it difficult to evaluate how we are doing as a society and what can be improved.

There is, however, a large amount of research findings on various child abuse and neglect behaviours and their consequences on victims. Studying the public and professionals' knowledge of child abuse and neglect would allow us to identify knowledge gaps easily and target these gaps through interventions, such as training and public education.

To learn more about our child abuse and neglect perception study, please visit this link https://tinyurl.com/ResearchBitesJul2021Ref

Developing Social Emotional Competencies with the PATHS programme

Feature by Research Officers Toh Sze Min and Noraini Veragoo

Social and Emotional Learning is increasingly becoming an area of focus in children's development and education. In order to develop children's personal and social well-being from a young age, the Ministry of Education included Social and Emotional Learning as part of students' Character and Citizenship Education starting from primary school. Besides learning these skills in school, it will also be helpful for children to practise these skills in other environments, such as in their student care centre, or with their families.

In this feature, we introduce what Social and Emotional Learning is, its benefits, and also share the evaluation outcomes of an evidence-based Social and Emotional Learning programme – Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) – that is currently being implemented at our Student Care Centre (Student Care @ Children's Society).

What is Social and Emotional Learning?

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), Social and Emotional Learning refers to the process where children gain knowledge and skills to build the five key social and emotional competencies that are listed below.

Self-awareness

Being able to identify and understand their own feelings, thoughts, values, their strengths and limitations, and how it affects their behaviour in different situations.

Self-management

Being able to manage or regulate their own feelings, thoughts, and behaviours in different situations.

Social awareness

Being able to understand others' perspectives and empathise with others from different backgrounds or cultures.

Relationship management

Being able to form and maintain positive relationships with others, by communicating, working collaboratively, and resolving problems constructively.

Responsible decision-making

Being able to consider various factors such as the advantages, disadvantages, and the consequences of their actions, in order to make choices for the well-being of self and others.

Why is it important to develop social and emotional competence?

Children who have greater social and emotional competence tend to have:

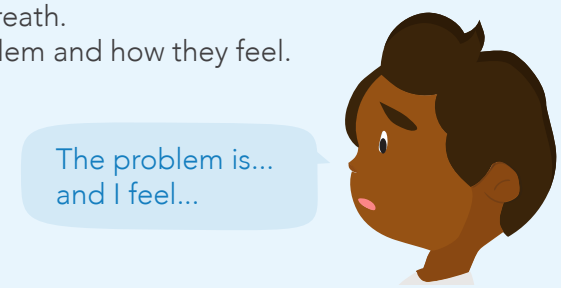
Developing social and emotional competence is especially helpful and protective for children who are vulnerable to numerous risk factors (e.g., poverty, adverse childhood experiences) and children who display more dysregulated behaviours (e.g., acting impulsively, self-harm).

How does Singapore Children's Society promote children's social and emotional competence?

The PATHS programme is an evidence-based social and emotional learning curriculum that focuses on developing the five CASEL competencies in children. Since 2019, our staff members have been conducting weekly sessions of the programme for primary school students who attend our Student Care Centre.

Posters on emotion regulation strategies have also been put up so that children can be reminded of these techniques. Staff members would then make use of teachable moments to remind children of the techniques learnt. For example, the 'Turtle' technique below can help children who feel angry to calm down.

1. Stop what they are doing and wrap their arms around themselves like a turtle shell.
2. Take a long deep breath.
3. Talk about the problem and how they feel.



Since the PATHS programme started, SCC staff rated students every 6 months on three key behavioural areas that the PATHS curriculum was designed to affect. From June to December 2020, children who participated in the programme showed positive outcomes in the three areas:

- Significant reduction in aggression and disruptive behaviour
- Significant improvement in concentration and attention
- Significant improvement in social and emotional competence

Developing children's social and emotional competence from a young age is important as this can enable children to identify and express their feelings in a better way. Children can also practise positive coping skills that can help them in times of stress. Let's continue to encourage children as they learn and practise new skills from their Character and Citizenship Education curriculum or other Social and Emotional Learning programmes that are offered to them.

Information on the PATHS programme can be found here: https://pathsprogram.com/

Please send your feedback and requests to: **researchbites@childrensociety.org.sg.**