# Research Bites

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SOCIETY
Caring for the Future

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# Lessons from Evaluating the Choo Choo Train Programme

Feature by Research Officer Elysia Poh and Head of Research Dr Charlene Fu

At Singapore Children's Society, we regularly evaluate our programmes. Evaluation is important because it allows us to:
• ensure that our clients are benefitting from our services
• improve our services based on the evaluation results

One challenging aspect of evaluation is designing or choosing a good measure. It could take several programme runs to refine the measures to suit the audience of the programme. Designing measures is especially challenging when working with young children.

Choo Choo Train (CCT) is a programme that aims to inculcate moral values in five- and six-year-olds through moral stories and activities. In this article, we hope to share what we have learnt in our evaluation journey, and outline some steps we took to improve on our evaluation measures.

To evaluate CCT, we examined if children learned the moral values that were taught. We used a variety of tasks that measured children's verbal responses, children's behaviours, and teachers' observations. We designed new measures and adopted others from past research. By comparing scores before and after the programme across multiple measures, we aimed to gain a holistic understanding of the effectiveness of CCT. However, these measures have their limitations.
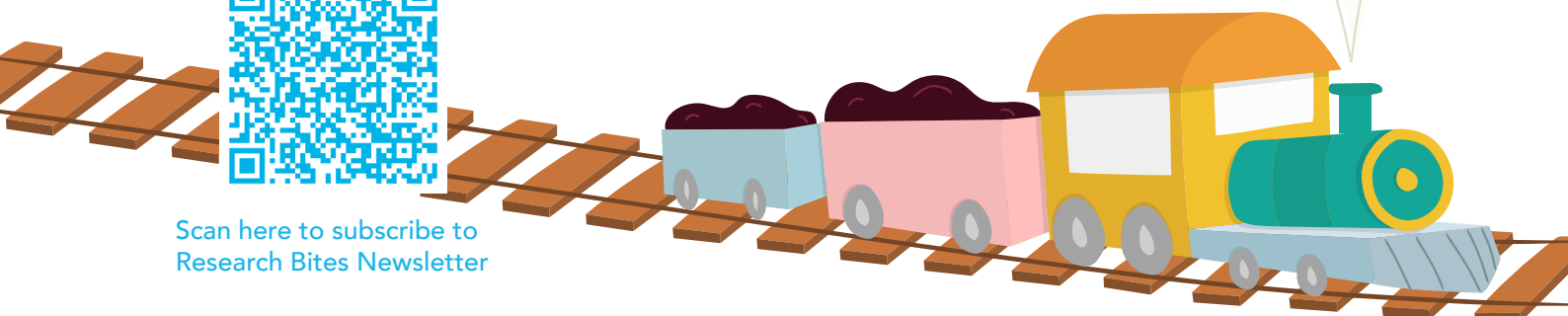
## Measure: Scenario-based questions (Application)

We designed this measure to test children's abilities to apply the moral values that they learned. Children were asked how they would respond as a character in scenarios that were similar to those in the CCT stories.

Example scenario:
John found some stickers that he really likes. He doesn't know whose stickers they are, and there is no one around.

(a) Pretend you are John, what would you do?
(b) Why?

### Takeaways

We found that five-year-olds had lower scores than six-year-olds. To succeed at this task, children must be able to apply the moral values while imagining themselves as the character in the scenario. This requires advanced cognitive skills and may be too challenging for younger children.

Hence, we simplified the task for younger children.

**Simplified to**

## Measure: Scenario-based questions (Knowledge)

We designed this task to test children's knowledge of the programme materials. Questions were based on scenarios taken directly from the stories taught during the sessions.

Example scenario:
Eli went to Pat's house. Pat's mother said 'hi' to Eli but Eli did not say anything.

(a) Did Eli do the right thing?
(b) Why?
(c) What should Eli do?

### Takeaways

Scores for both five- and six-year-olds improved, with the younger group showing larger improvements. This suggests that application scenario-based questions were more suitable for testing six-year-olds, and knowledge scenario-based questions were more suitable for five-year-olds. This difference in results may be due to children's evolving and developing cognitive capabilities. Thus, it is important to consider their developmental levels and cognitive capabilities when designing tasks for young children.

## Measure: Teacher's classroom observations

Most of the evaluation measures focus on children's responses. When children are tested, they may feel compelled to respond in a way that is viewed favourably by others. Therefore, it was important to also capture the views of independent observers, i.e. the teachers. Teacher's ratings could further reveal if children demonstrated the values learnt from CCT in their classroom behaviours.

Teachers rated how often they observed behaviours aligned with the values taught in CCT, such as:
• Telling the truth
• Comforting a classmate who is crying/ upset
• Cleaning his/ her area after use

### Takeaways

Teacher's ratings for some values improved, suggesting that children managed to learn and apply some values taught in the programme. While teacher ratings are often used in research and evaluation, some of the moral behaviours we asked teachers to rate may not be easily observed in a classroom setting. For instance, for teachers to rate how often a child told the truth, they would first have to observe the child in situations where they may lie. Other independent raters, such as parents, may provide observations across different settings.

We also encountered the issue of incomplete or missing data from teachers, as they may have forgotten to, or were too busy to complete the forms after the programme ended. It is therefore important to engage the teachers and schools in understanding the importance of the evaluation data, and to share evaluation findings with them.

I forgot to clean it up.
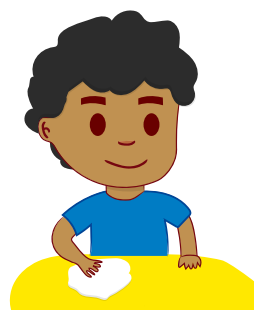
## Measure: Temptation resistance paradigm (Behavioural task)

We piloted this task to examine if children could extend what they have learnt in CCT to change their behaviours. This complements the scenario-based questions which elicited children's verbal responses.

Children were instructed by the interviewer not to lift the cup to peek at its contents.

Don't peek inside the cup, I'll be leaving the room!

Did you look inside the cup when I left?

When the interviewer returned, the child was asked if they looked inside the cup.

### Takeaways

While past research studies using this task reported that majority of children peeked, over 90% of children in our sample did not peek during the pre-test. Therefore, we determined that this task was not suitable for evaluating CCT – even if children had learnt the value of honesty, it would be highly unlikely that we detect further decreases in their peeking behavior.

Even though best practices suggest adopting existing measures from past research studies, not all tasks may be suitable for use locally. Pilot testing tasks is an important step in selecting suitable measures for programme evaluation.

## Overall Takeaways

1. When designing evaluation measures for children, it is important to consider their developmental levels and cognitive capabilities.
2. In selecting independent observers, it is important to consider the amount of exposure and type of interactions they have with the participants of the programme. Helping observers understand the goals of the evaluation could encourage buy-in and ensure a smoother data collection process.
3. Measures from past research studies may not necessarily be suitable for our local context. Pilot testing and adaptation may be required to refine the measures.

CCT's lesson plans will soon be available as an online resource on the Singapore Children's Society's website.    2

A complete list of journal articles that are reviewed in this feature can be found at www.tinyurl.com/ResearchBitesJul2020Ref    3

# What is the Role of Fathers in Developing Children's Social Skills?

Feature by Research Officer Chew Kuo Min, Kate

During the 13th Singapore Children's Society Lecture last October, Dr John M. Elliott shared research findings on the role of mothers in children's development and some members of the audience were interested to find out more about the role of fathers.

In this issue, we focused on how fathers can help to develop their children's social skills so that they can interact well with others, form and maintain close relationships, and respond to social situations appropriately.

According to existing research, secure father-child attachment is one of the important factors that contributes to the development of children's social skills. Children who are securely attached to their fathers have better social skills than children who are less securely attached.

**What is secure parent-child attachment?**
• Children depend on their parent as a reliable figure to explore their environment.

Secure parent-child attachment develops when:
• Children are able to seek comfort from their parent when they experience negative feelings.
• Parents are sensitive to their children's needs and respond appropriately.

**Why is secure parent-child attachment important?**
• Secure parent-child attachment promotes children's social skills in early and middle childhood (3 to 12 years old).
• Children with better social skills are likely to experience less stress, better psychological well-being, and better academic achievement.

## How does father-child attachment contribute to children's social skills?
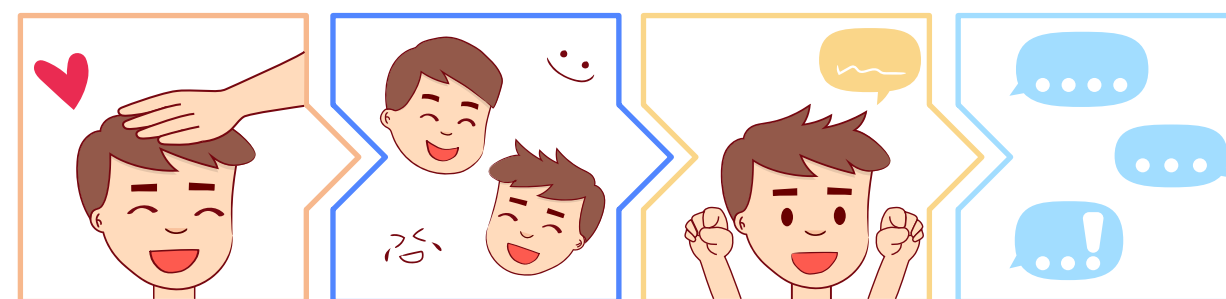
Securely attached children receive warm and timely responses to their needs from their fathers.

Positive experiences with their fathers influence children's expectations of other social interactions.

Children become more motivated to actively seek interactions with others.

With more social interactions, children have more practice and improve their social skills.

## How can fathers build secure attachment with their child?
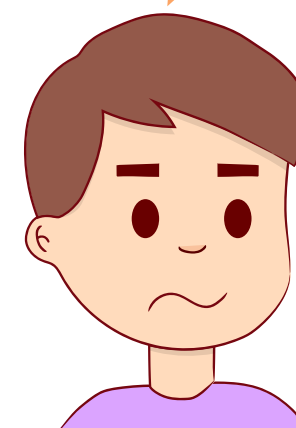
**1 Understand your child's behaviours and needs**
• Your child may communicate their needs and distress through a mix of verbal and non-verbal cues, e.g. words, tone of voice, facial expressions.

For example:
• They might throw a temper tantrum to get their parents' attention.
• They might cry when they feel unwell.

• Try to empathise with your child by putting yourself in their shoes.

**2 Respond to your child's needs in a sensitive manner**
• Acknowledge your child's feelings.
• Respond appropriately in a calm manner. If possible, clarify or find out what your child needs.

I see that you are feeling very angry.

Can you tell me what is making you angry?

What else can you do to make yourself less angry?

Is there a better way to let me know what you need?

In conclusion, father-child attachment influences how children interact, create, and form relationships with others. In order to build secure attachments, fathers could try to understand their child's behaviours and needs, and respond to them in a sensitive manner.

# How can Parents Protect Children from Online Sexual Images?

Feature by
Senior Research Officer Jerrine Khong,
Research Officer Lui Zhi Jing, and
Former Senior Research Officer Jacky Tan

## About

In 2015, a study with 60 preschoolers in Singapore found that **2 in 3 children aged 3 years or below had access to electronic devices**. More recently, the use of electronic devices was made necessary with Singapore's shift to home-based learning for all school children amid the COVID-19 pandemic.
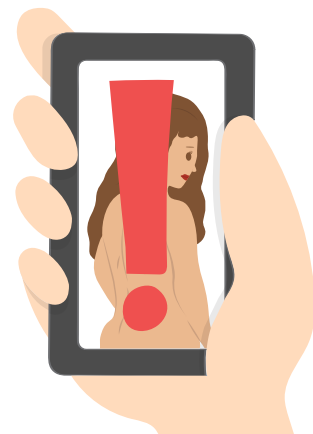
While there are many benefits of using the Internet, children may unintentionally come across sexual images online. This could happen when they open spam emails or access apps and websites with pop-up advertisements. They may also be the target of online sexual predators, who have been reported to hijack video conferencing platforms to flash inappropriate images at children.

In this article, we explore the effectiveness of different strategies parents take to protect children from sexually explicit materials online.

## Restricting access using software and rules:
### A common parenting strategy to ensure child's safety on the Internet

**Internet filters** are technologies designed to prevent access to harmful online content. However, these filters often make two kinds of errors:
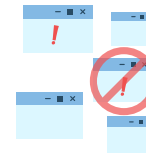
**Underblocking**
Failing to block new problematic sites, content, and apps

**Overblocking**
Unnecessarily blocking access to educational health and sexuality information

**Rule-setting** refers to restrictions that parents set for their children on what they cannot do online. Some examples of rules are:

Not downloading music or films from the Internet

Only using electronic devices for a limited duration determined by parents

**!**

However, simply setting restrictions without communicating clear expectations and providing support to your child is not enough.

**1** While your child may experience lower risks from their Internet use, they may also have fewer learning opportunities as a result of such restrictive strategies.

**2** Your child could perceive this as a form of control. This may unexpectedly result in them being more interested in the activities they were forbidden to do.

**3** Your teenage child may feel like you no longer trust them, and are therefore controlling their independence and freedom to use the Internet. This could lead to conflict between you and your child.

**Research suggests that communicating openly with your child is equally important to help your child develop a healthy relationship with their bodies. This conversation about your child's body and sexual health can begin from a very young age:**

### 1 From Infancy

Use the proper terms when referring to your child's private body parts. This helps your child develop a healthy relationship with their body.
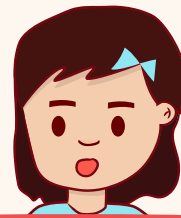
Use proper terms:
- "penis"
- "breast"

No nicknames, please!
- "kukubird"
- "nehneh"
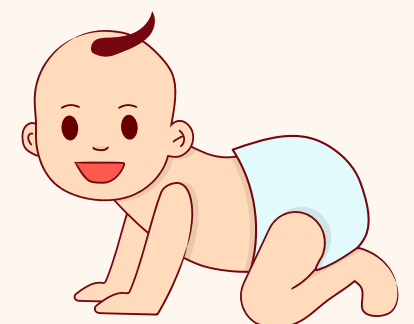
## 2 During Middle Childhood (8 to 12 years old)

Keep an ongoing conversation and let your child know that they can always talk to you about things they may see online.

✓
1. Check in with your child regularly; let them know that no question is off-limits:
   - "Have you ever seen any naked people on screen?"
2. Provide emotional support and help your child prepare some coping strategies if they are upset after seeing some unwanted sexual images:
   - "It's normal to feel this way, I would too."
   - "What do you think you should do if you see these pictures?"

✗
1. Do not use shame-based messaging
   - "Shame on you for looking this up!"
2. Do not punish your child if they report accidentally seeing sexual images online:
   - "What?! No more Internet for you!"

## 3 During Adolescence (13 years old and above)

Have an open and honest conversation about their values and attitudes towards sexuality and relationships. If your teenage child has searched for sexual images or pornography online:
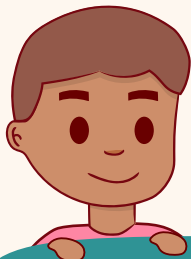
✓
Encourage them to consider the effect of these content on relationships:
- "Do you ever want to do the things you see online?"
- "How do you think watching sexual content can affect people's relationships?"

✗
Do not make them feel guilty for what they have seen:
- "Why do you watch such disgusting videos?"

**!** Exposure to online sexual images can hurt children and youth's self-esteem, beliefs about gender and sexuality, and their body image. As parents, we can engage our children in age-appropriate conversations about their bodies and sexual health from a young age to reduce the harmful effects of such exposures.

In Issue 8, we collected your feedback on how we could improve subsequent issues of Research Bites. Please view a summary of our findings here.