



# When My Child Does Not Do Well in School

By Ms Carolyn Kee

Tuesday mornings at the Child Guidance Clinic (CGC) are dedicated to professional development and training. Colleagues of different professions gather to exchange knowledge, review the latest literature, share expertise and offer suggestions on case management and treatment. On one such morning, an impromptu discussion took place among the team of psychologists, touching on the subject of how to manage cases involving children who do not do well in school.

In Singapore, generations of students have been instilled with the value of education and the importance of performing well in their examinations. Academic qualifications have long been seen among Singaporeans as the means to a better life, a higher paying job, status and social recognition. The history of Singapore has been one of strife and anxiety – a small nation, lacking natural resources and banking largely on the hard work and talents of its people to forge a niche within the larger global economy. Government-designed productivity campaigns in the 80s urged the people to be “good, better, best, never let it rest, till your good is better and your better is best”. This jingle played incessantly on TV, driving home the message to the working population and also students at the time, that one cannot be anything but the best.

Fast forward to the present, and parents who have grown up in the 70s and 80s continue to hold fast to long ingrained values of having to be at the top of the game. There is an anxiety about not being on par with or

at a greater advantage than the other person. And naturally, having more or less “arrived” in their own right, this anxiety is now extended to their children. *Kiasuism*, a fear of losing out to others, is good-humouredly considered a typical Singaporean trait. Websites, such as [kiasuparents.com](http://kiasuparents.com), rank primary schools based on academic performance and popularity, and forums are filled with posts about the best playschools, enrichment classes and tuition centres available. By wanting the best for their children and wanting their children to be their best, parents invest time, energy and money to ensure that their children do well in school.

What happens then when children fail their exams or fall below the average grade? At the CGC, a large proportion of children referred for psychiatric and psychological assessment are brought in because teachers, parents or family doctors are worried about the child’s underachievement in school and have concerns that the child may be suffering from a learning disorder such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), an emotional condition such as anxiety which may be impeding academic progress, or behavioural issues such as oppositional behaviour or poor motivation. The psychologists perform psychometric tests to tease out the possible issues of intellectual disability, specific learning disorders and attentional problems, and also participate in the treatment of the condition using behavioural, cognitive and/or motivational methods.

While progress can be made with the help

of these methods, it is often challenging for patients and their parents to cope with their underachievement, particularly when it is due to factors largely out of their direct control, for example, when the child has a learning disability or poor attention. While medication may help to remedy poor attention to some degree and learning strategies can be taught to compensate for these issues, the child often continues to struggle with his academic demands and performs below expectations. This is the issue that our team of psychologists, specialising mainly in the clinical and educational fields, strive to address. During our impromptu discussion, colleagues shared the reactions of parents who are confronted with the results of psychological assessments that suggest that their child faces a long and indeterminate struggle with academic demands, without the clear assurance of a positive academic outcome.

One psychologist related how a mother, in her distress upon finding out the below average intellectual ability of her child, expressed her grief by shouting at the clinic staff. Anger is a common reaction when one is facing anxiety and uncertainty, as it helps one cope by garnering strength through the energy that anger brings. While our staff did not feel comfortable being shouted at, we tried to understand the pain that the mother was experiencing then and find ways to support her and help her to cope. Some parents find it hard to accept the child’s diagnosis and try to alleviate the situation by asking whether

increasing the child's tuition or intensifying the teaching would help improve the child's ability. We psychologists have to clearly but gently inform the parent that such well-meaning but overly strenuous efforts will not reap the desired results but may do more harm than good. A senior psychologist, who has done innumerable intellectual assessments in her several years of service, observed that Malay families seem to accept a diagnosis of learning difficulty more readily than other cultures. We wonder what factors help a family cope better and what can be learnt from those families that take such setbacks in their stride? How does an individual's religious beliefs, value system, perspective on success or family and community support play a part?

Throughout our discussion, we examined a number of issues that struck us as important in helping families through the struggle of coming to terms with an underperforming child.

### The anxiety and grief of parents is very real

My friend once remarked, while watching her child play, "Until now, I have never realised I could feel so much joy and so much anxiety all at the same time." A parent, faced with a child who is not coping well with school, struggles daily with feelings of uncertainty, fear, anxiety, frustration, anger, blame, guilt, disappointment, loss, and even grief. Why is my child not doing well? What did I do wrong? Perhaps if I had been stricter with him, he would have done better. It's my husband's fault; it's his bad genes. If only I had taken better care of myself when I was pregnant. How am I going to show my face to others? I thought he was such a smart boy. I had such hopes for him. What will happen when I grow old? Can he take care of himself? Who will take care of me?

One psychologist, whose child had a learning difficulty, reflected that while she struggled with her anxieties about her child's future, she was comforted that her family had the means to support the child financially and to give him the opportunities he needs. While having this financial safeguard reassured her, it allowed her insight into how a parent might feel without this buffer to fall back on. Many concerns faced by these parents are very real issues that have to be addressed and as psychologists, we acknowledge that there are no easy solutions. We need to validate these concerns and the feelings that come with

them. Sometimes, the parents express anger or resentment towards the child, and while we may not agree with the harsh words used, we have to recognise the pain, grief and fear that underlie the words. A colleague reminded us that it is important to speak to parents without the child present, so that they can freely express their feelings without hurting the child.

### It is not easy to let go

As a young psychologist, I remember thinking, "If only parents could accept their children, things would be so much easier." Ten years and two children later, I realise how difficult it is to be a parent. A parent feels a tremendous sense of anxiety and responsibility to ensure that her child has the means to live a comfortable life and enjoys status and respect within the community. Many parents find it hard to accept their children's poor performance in school and ply them with extra practice and remedial lessons, hoping that these would help to pull up their grades. This often results in stress and unhappiness in both parent and child, and leads to conflict and strain within the parent-child relationship. In spite of the pain and frustration that results, parents find it hard to let go and find themselves trapped

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in a cycle in which their anxiety drives them to push the child to work harder, resulting in stress, frustration, despair and ever increasing distress.

As we shared, it became clear that a focal issue when working with such parents and children, is helping them through their anxiety and the grief that comes with letting go of their hopes and dreams. When a child is assessed to have a learning difficulty, coming to terms with it is a never-ending process. One mother commented, "I lower my expectations until I reach a point where I think I cannot possibly lower it anymore, and then I find myself lowering my expectations even more." The process is almost like drowning – an individual struggles to stay afloat until a point where he finally lets go and allows himself to sink. Only then can he regain a new equilibrium which allows him to see the situation in a new light or find new ways to cope. This new equilibrium is threatened when new losses arise and the struggle begins anew. The very crux of what makes the process so difficult and terrifying

is the need to let go in a context much like drowning or freefalling, where the usual safety nets are not there, and one's instinct is to cling on tighter to what seems to be the only lifeline.

### Consider what we don't want

Fear and anxiety can be paralyzing. Parents fretting over their child's poor academic performance can sometimes become mired in a mindset where studies become the one and only concern. In the push for academic progress, other aspects of the child's well-being may sometimes be neglected and sacrificed. Several of the children seen at our clinic had difficulties with academic issues, which escalated into emotional and behavioural problems as they grew older, and started to react against the increasing pressure that they faced from parents and teachers, their own increasing sense of helplessness and failure, and the lack of acceptance and support they experienced from family and peers. Family relationships break down as dissatisfaction increases over the child's academic performance. Some children become disillusioned with school and family and find solace in social subcultures, such as gang membership, delinquent behaviour or

substance abuse. In other cases, the children become depressed, withdraw from the people around them, drop out of school, lose interest in living and even attempt suicide in an effort to renounce a life that to them is beset with unrelenting frustration, emptiness and failure. The push for academic performance is clearly counter-productive if the child drops out of school or does not even want to live anymore.

In therapy, a technique that involves examining some unanticipated negative consequences is sometimes used to escalate the anxiety of the client and to alter his or her perspective on the current problem. Having seen a number of the cases described above, the psychologists at CGC share their experiences with parents in the hope that the academic issue may be recalibrated as a preferred problem as compared to far worse scenarios such as delinquency or suicide. As one psychologist put it, "I've seen these cases and it scares me. So I remind myself not to push my kids too hard. I don't want them to end up like that." Psychologists also

share research information with parents and students about how a moderate level of stress is related to optimal performance whereas stress at overly high levels can result in less satisfactory performance due to exhaustion or poorer mental functioning.

### Give hope

One psychologist heading a community



outreach team shared that when parents came to him, they often focused on their frustrations, disappointments and dissatisfaction with their child. While he made it a point to validate their concerns and empathise with their frustrations, he would gently but firmly steer them towards looking at the improvements in their child by asking questions like, "What good things have happened since the last time we met?" and "In what ways has your child become better?" In time, he has found that the parents he worked with have become more attuned to seeing the positive changes in their child and in their families, however small these changes may be.

It is hard to see the beauty in a stalagmite cave when you are lost and alone in the dark, wondering if you would ever find your way out. It helps when you have a guide with a torch and a map, who can confidently light your path and show you the splendour along the way. Parents with underperforming children are often consumed with anxiety about their child's academic future and find it hard to see a way out. We work with parents to help them consider alternative perspectives and avenues to success. A mother, racked with frustration over her son's poor grades, was gently

reminded of his kind and gentle nature, his natural wit and humour and his strong moral values. She was able to acknowledge that she had brought him up to be a good person and appreciate her success as a parent in this respect.

Different individuals find hope in different things. For some, it is holding on to those stories of individuals who struggled in school but went on to successfully develop themselves further in a profession, vocation or business. Others remind themselves of the strengths and positives in their children and hope in the eventual fulfillment of these promises. Yet others draw strength from knowing that they themselves have struggled in the past

among communities in her home country that still struggle to establish a viable system of nutrition and healthcare for their children, it would have been considered a luxury to be able to worry about a child's poor academic performance.

One parent with a child diagnosed with ADHD once remarked during a parents' workshop that "ADHD kids are really angels in disguise." As the other parents looked at him in wonder, he went on to explain, "Before I had a child with ADHD, I was like all other Singaporeans, focused on getting the 5Cs. After my child came along, I learnt to look past what is valued by the mainstream and see all the small things that are truly important." Parents who are able to reflect deeply about what they really want for their child and revise their perceptions of success find joy and meaning, as they come to terms with their child's underperformance.

As psychologists at the CGC, we are privileged to have parents share with us their personal journeys. We join in their experiences of frustration and helplessness, feel for their

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but have nevertheless managed to survive and make a life for themselves.

### Appreciation

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It is difficult in the midst of anxiety and uncertainty to remember that there are things to appreciate. Yet it is in this appreciation that a person finds hope and light in the wake of disappointment. Our expatriate psychologist, who comes from a country that has seen poverty and strife, remarked that

distress and are touched and inspired by their perseverance and love. In both our professional and personal lives, we journey with them and endeavour to learn from their courage, fortitude and wisdom.

*To the dedicated team of psychologists at the CGC for generously sharing their thoughts and experiences, without which this article could not have been written. SMA*



Carolyn Kee is a psychologist working with children and adolescents who feel anxious, depressed or troubled. She has been with the CGC for the past 15 years. Her work includes psychological assessment, individual and group therapy, school consultation, emergency behaviour management, as well as conducting talks and workshops on mental health issues. She has written books and contributed articles on depression, stress and other mental health conditions. Her illustrated children's books on attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and eating disorder are currently being sold at the CGC and other helping agencies. As a mother of two young children, she is no stranger to the trials and triumphs of parenting and has an acquired sensibility to the issues faced by children in our local setting.