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Can money buy happiness? Not always for kids

A growing body of research suggests that despite financial and educational advantage, adolescents from upper middle-class families face the same or higher risk of mental health problems than those from poorer families

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For the Straits Times

A recent survey by the Institute of Policy Studies found that Singaporeans with higher incomes had the lowest proportion of people who said they felt "very happy" most of the time. While the inverse relationship between income and happiness among adults has received some attention, what is rarely discussed is the impact of affluence on children and adolescents.

Traditionally, research has shown that youth raised in wealthy families have fewer behavioural problems than those from less affluent households.

However, an emerging body of research conducted in the United States and Norway suggests that despite significant financial and educational advantage, adolescents from upper middle-class families are at comparable or higher risk of depression, anxiety, delinquency and substance use than those from less privileged families.

Affluent Asian youth appear to be at similar risk. In 2018, I conducted a research study of 153 Hong Kong Chinese families and found that over half of the female adolescents and a third of the males reported borderline clinical levels of anxiety and depression.

Close to 95 per cent of the families in my sample earned at least twice the Hong Kong median monthly household income and more than 60 per cent earned a monthly household income of at least HK$100,000 (S$17,300). This placed most families among the top 6 per cent of income-earning households.

MORE IS NOT ALWAYS BETTER

Experts argue that this problem of "affluenza" is due to multiple pressures embedded within the context of affluence. Youth from affluent families must navigate an ultra-competitive, achievement-oriented environment where conceptions of success are narrowly defined in terms of material achievement, such as gaining admission to a highly selective university or landing a high-paying job.

Because the competition to meet these thresholds for success is keen, youth from affluent families need to excel in multiple scholastic and extracurricular domains to distinguish themselves from their peers. The stress associated with this pressure to perform is what is thought to increase risk of mental health problems.

However, in my conversations with these youth, it was rarely the pressure from the school, teachers and peers that they struggled with. Rather, they pointed to pressures in the home, which they internalised.

Research supports these stories. Early work on upper middle-class, suburban families in the US by Dr Suniya Luthar and her colleagues from Columbia University suggests that affluent parents held high – and perhaps sometimes unrealistic – expectations for their children's academic, and subsequently occupational, achievements. They also found that these high achievement expectations consistently predicted youth mental health problems.

Other more recent studies suggest that these parents tend to be overly involved in their children's lives, such as selecting their children's classes and extracurricular activities, completing their homework for them, and intervening directly when their children have disputes with friends or teachers.

In their attempts to shield their children from failure, parents may inadvertently interfere with a key developmental task of adolescence, which is to independently problem-solve and make decisions. This can have an impact on their children's psychological resilience to crisis situations.

However, while affluent parents are heavily invested in securing their children's material success, they may not be physically or emotionally engaged with them. Consequently, many young people from these affluent families report feeling isolated and alone.

THE PROBLEM OF THE MYTH OF INVULNERABILITY

The myth of invulnerability of the affluent youth is problematic in three ways.

First, if parents and teachers assume that children who "have everything" cannot be depressed, anxious or delinquent, they may be less vigilant about identifying and addressing these issues. Indeed, preliminary research by researchers at Stony Brook University suggests that youth from wealthy families are no more likely to receive mental health treatment than their less affluent peers.

Second, existing prevention or intervention programmes may not adequately target the specific issues of youth from high-achieving, affluent families. Like youth from low-income families with complex family situations, effective programming should reflect the lived experiences of these young people.

For instance, poor grades or school drop-out are typically used as a proxy for identifying at-risk youth. In contrast, my research on wealthy Hong Kong adolescents found no relation between academic performance and depression and anxiety symptoms. This suggests that current programmes may not appropriately capture at-risk youth from affluent backgrounds.

Third, and critically, wealthy parents are often blamed for being "pushy parents" who wilfully drive their children to distress. In reality, they are simply trying their best – as all parents do – to help their children thrive in a world where there are few established avenues for success and a stark divide between the rich and the poor.

In framing these issues as "rich people's problems" and vilifying these parents, little effort is made to systematically help affluent youth.

IMPROVING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH THROUGH SYSTEMIC CHANGE

While mental health literacy programmes and increased community support are helpful, more systemic changes are necessary to improve the mental health of our youth.

Often, the problems of the meritocratic system are framed as being harmful only to less privileged youth. Hence, systemic initiatives focused on diversifying notions of success and social mixing of youth tend to receive pushback from the "upper classes", because they are perceived to help level the playing field by reducing what these affluent families consider their limited advantage.

Yet, clearly, a system that emphasises competition and material rewards has the potential to negatively impact the well-being of all youth.

As Singapore moves to prioritise youth mental health, raising awareness of the benefits of such systemic initiatives across the wealth spectrum and committing to the development of an inclusive society that embraces diverse efforts and talents may be key to seeing real change.

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