

While instituting more parental leave for parents to attend children's school activities benefits all parents, it will greatly help low-income parents who work in jobs with inflexible hours and poorer leave benefits.
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video game consoles for their children expressly to occupy them at home, away from the streets.

This was a logical and strategic choice given the bad neighbourhoods many of these families live in, but probably comes across as bad parenting to people who cannot conceive of the kinds of survival protection needed by some disadvantaged families.

Existing initiatives to cultivate students from low-income and other vulnerable families can help close the privilege gap, for example, through volunteer mentors and parenting programmes.

So can current adjustments such as holding parenting programmes at night or on weekends to improve participation from parents whose job hours are inflexible and who cannot get time off, and providing child-minding services for parents who do not have alternative care arrangements.

These adjustments address low take-up rates from low-income beneficiaries, which is due to the same time constraints that prevent concerted cultivation.

INSTITUTIONAL BUY-IN

Beyond individual-focused initiatives, however, institutional changes are more important to address the root cause.

For example, how can we rethink the content of parenting programmes to more fully appreciate the logic of low-income parents' parenting?

Given the class stratification effect – and in the light of China's clampdown on its tuition industry – might there be new grounds for more institutional discouragement of the shadow tuition industry?

Or how about instituting more parental leave for parents to attend children's school activities to improve participation in meet-the-parents sessions and other parenting engagements in school?

While the increased leave benefits all parents, it will more greatly help many low-income parents who work in jobs with inflexible hours and poorer leave benefits. It is a worthwhile use of public money as it invests in the human capital of the future generation, conferring great social benefits.

Overall, we need to discard middle-class judgment of low-income parents' parenting. Instead, we should exercise greater empathy for, and appreciation of, their survival strategies, while also seeking to alleviate structural conditions that disadvantage them.

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Drop middle-class judgment of low-income parenting

The economic realities poorer parents face call for empathy, better support and institutional change

Irene YH Ng, Nicole Ng and Joshua Khoo

For *The Straits Times*

Tuition. Swimming lessons. Music class.

Parent volunteer work to improve their children's chances of gaining admission to a preferred school. Getting coaches to improve the children's sports calibre. These are common parenting strategies for those with middle or high socio-economic status (SES).

However, such activities, which are valued by our society, are often alien and inaccessible to lower socio-economic status parents. It is a class privilege to be able to afford all the nice-to-haves in parenting and have the resources, including time, to focus on them.

And yet, as long as society is stratified, high SES parents will intensify their efforts to improve future opportunities for their children – and they will be rewarded for it. This leads to a situation of the greater the stratification, the greater the parenting divide.

Low SES parents do the best they can, but their differing priorities can involve a unique logic to what society would consider "normal". Society often regards their parenting behaviour as inferior, or as the cause of children's poor outcomes.

A look at the parenting divide, and the reasons why lower economic status parents make the choices they do, shows the systemic disadvantages they are up against and what can be done to improve the situation.

WHAT ARE THE CLASS-BASED DIFFERENCES?

In *Unequal Childhoods*, author Annette Lareau found clear differences in the parenting strategies of parents from high and low SES. She named the high SES parenting strategy "concerted cultivation", which describes the intentional ways parents procure their children's academic success and progression.

In contrast, the parenting of low SES parents was characterised by "the accomplishment of natural growth", where children are afforded autonomy early on.

Our study on young parents in Singapore found similar

distinctions between class groups. The class-based differences were not only apparent in how our interviewees articulated their parenting ideals, but also in their experiences of their parents' parenting growing up.

While explaining why they wanted to parent a certain way, interviewees would often make reference to their current circumstances and how their parents had raised them, revealing an intergenerational angle.

Take this contrast between high SES Harold, a youth worker, and low SES Luqman, a retail assistant (both pseudonyms).

Harold spoke of his parents as being highly involved in his education, while not being emotionally present in his growing-up years. Now, as a parent, he sends his children to enrichment classes. But he also mentioned choosing to be as involved and emotionally engaged in his children's lives, something he felt was missing in his upbringing.

Luqman, in contrast, normalised his absence in his children's lives because he needed to work long hours to earn enough for the family.

When he and his wife decided that he would take on extra work so that she could work part-time to take care of the children after school, he spoke of the loneliness and exhaustion of coming home daily to an already sleeping family.

Yet he also said: "I think the majority of people in Singapore is, like, they've grown up not seeing their father. Because their father has to find money for the family... I think as long as I'm working, able to support them, that's okay; like when I grew up... also never see my father; my father work."

So for Luqman, since his own father was uninvolved in his life, he more readily accepted his absence in his children's life.

For Harold, his father's lack of involvement compels him to be more involved and he had greater means to do so.

The contrast demonstrates one channel through which parenting logic is shaped by SES. Many low-income parents have neither the money nor the time to be concerted cultivators, unlike their higher-income peers.

So, even when low-income parents articulate a preference for a hands-off approach to raising children, they might do so because of the lack of resources.

The lack of resources is also an explanation offered by Professor Jean Yeung and Professor Lim Sun Sun for why children from rental housing spend more time on digital devices than children who live in private and landed property ("Mind the gap – income divide in children's use of digital devices", *ST*, Sept 17). Low-income parents have fewer resources to engage their children in alternative activities.

We have also seen a related but more active use of digital devices as a parenting strategy by low-SES parents.

In her research on the household debt of low-income families, the first author met a respondent who already had her home Internet connection terminated by two different providers due to non-payment. Yet the respondent emphasised that she needed to have a home broadband connection and was trying to subscribe to a third provider.

Why? So that she could keep her children at home where she could see what they were doing, and not be outside mixing with bad company.

Viewed through a middle-class lens, one may find her logic completely wrongheaded, triggering a slew of red flags.

What about the ills of being on the Internet? Is expensive broadband necessary when one is already mired in debt?

Well, for this hapless mum, keeping her children at home, away from trouble outside, is a more desperate need than paying her bills.

This "keep them off the streets" strategy was similarly found by sociologist Lynn Verduzco-Baker among "welfare mums" in the United States, rebutting the stereotype of them as unmotivated individuals who sponge off the state.

The mothers bought Nintendo