



HELP FAMILIES

We need to help the families when children are still very young, before they attend primary school. Otherwise, we will see a vicious circle of disadvantage that significantly limits the social mobility of children from families with low SES.



PROFESSOR JEAN YEUNG, from the National University of Singapore Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, who co-authored the study. Prof Yeung said her research provides empirical evidence to support the Government's plan to encourage more lower-income families to send their children to pre-school by the age of three.

PRE-SCHOOL ADVANTAGE

Going to pre-school is now the norm. If children from low-SES families don't go to pre-school, their disadvantage will get more entrenched over time.



MR VITAL TAN, the assistant director of children and youth services at Care Corner Singapore, emphasising the need for kids from low-income families to attend pre-school.

Professor Jean Yeung, from the National University of Singapore Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, a co-author of the study, said parents with a higher socio-economic status tend to have fewer financial woes. They also set more boundaries for their kids, such as rules about homework or what they do after school.
ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

Kids' test scores differ widely based on parents' income, education

New study finds pre-schoolers with better educated or higher income parents do better

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Pre-school children with parents who are better educated or have a higher income tend to do significantly better when it comes to language and numeracy skills.

And children of parents with higher educational qualifications are more likely to do better at practising self-control and delayed gratification, where they forgo a smaller reward offered immediately in return for a bigger one if they wait.

Those who are better able to put off instant gratification also tend to score higher in language and numeracy skills.

These are the key findings of a new study of almost 3,000 children aged between three and six years old in Singapore.

The study found large disparities in their test scores based on their parents' socio-economic status (SES), which is measured by the parents' annual income and educational qualifications.

Professor Jean Yeung and Dr Chen Xuejiao, who are both from the National University of Singapore Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, authored the study. It was published in the 2023 fourth-quarter edition of the *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, an international academic journal.

Singapore that is based on a nationally representative sample of families with young children.

The children tested are all part of the Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG-Leads), which is funded by the Ministry of Education and aims to look into factors that affect early childhood development.

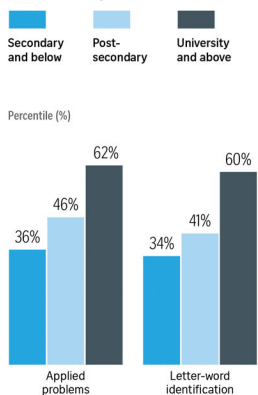
The study found that:

- Children whose parents are more educated or have a higher income tend to do significantly better in an international standardised test, called the Woodcock-Johnson Achievement Test, that has been adapted to the Singapore context. The letter-word identification section assesses the child's language and verbal skills, while its applied problems test measures mathematics and numeracy skills.
- For example, children in the top 25th percentile of annual family income of \$150,000 or more, on average, had test scores in the 68th percentile for the applied problems test. Meanwhile, children in the bottom 25th percentile of family income, which is \$48,000 or lower, scored in the 43rd percentile.
- Children with parents who have university and higher education scored, on average, in the 60th percentile in the letter-word identification test, whereas those whose parents have secondary or lower education scored in the 34th percentile.

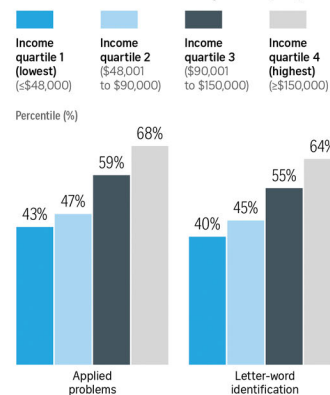
Prof Yeung said parents with higher SES tend to have fewer financial woes, higher educational expectations of their child, and provide a well-maintained home environment. They also set more boundaries for them, such as rules

Children's test scores

Based on their parents' educational levels



Based on their total annual family income (2018)



Note: In this study, the percentile refers to the percentage of the children that a child scores higher than.

Source: PROFESSOR JEAN YEUNG AND DR CHEN XUEJIAO SUNDAY TIMES GRAPHICS

about homework or what the child does after school, among other things.

She said: "Expectations affect behaviour." This is because parents who have a higher expectation of their child's educational attainment spend, on average, more time and more money on their child, such as reading a book together, going to the library and paying for learning-related activities and materials for the child, she added.

They are also more likely to stimulate their child's curiosity and help their child learn and think critically, which leads to higher test scores.

The study also found that the more often a child forgoes instant gratification, the higher his or her test scores are. This finding is consistent with past research that shows that a child's capacity to delay instant gratification during his early years predicts his academic achievement, Prof Yeung said.

This is because the process of choosing to delay instant gratification is crucial in helping young children concentrate and remember, among other things, and this helps their performance in academic tasks, she explained.

Better-educated parents are also more likely to teach their children

about the importance of making decisions that would benefit them in the longer run, such as studying hard and not spending too much time watching television, she said. Hence, their children tend to have a greater ability to delay being immediately gratified.

The study comes in the wake of the Government's move to reduce income inequality and boost social mobility under the Forward Singapore report, which was launched on Oct 27. One of the Government's plans is to encourage more lower-income families to send their children to pre-school by the age of three to reduce the risk of their development lagging behind that of their peers when they enter Primary 1.

The enrolment and attendance of children from such families at the ages of three to four tend to be lower than the national average, the report said.

Prof Yeung said her research provides empirical evidence to support what the Government is proposing to do. She said: "We need to help the families when children are still very young, before they attend primary school. Otherwise, we will see a vicious circle of disadvantage that significantly limits the social

mobility of children from families with low SES."

Low-income parents must also be better equipped to learn positive parenting behaviour and to help their children with learning needs, among other things, she said.

Ms Cheryl Ann, manager of children and youth services at Care Corner Singapore, pointed out that the study's recommendations to help parents have stable jobs and decent wages to be able to support their children are important.

If parents' basic needs are not met, they would not have the time, energy or bandwidth to even think about helping their child with his learning needs, she said.

The first three years of a child's life is crucial for learning, she said, and so it is especially vital to get children from low-income families enrolled in pre-school as early as possible.

Her colleague, Mr Vital Tan, Care Corner's assistant director of children and youth services, said: "Going to pre-school is now the norm. If children from low-SES families don't go to pre-school, their disadvantage will get more entrenched over time."

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