



Focus on skills that contribute towards a child's holistic development, the writer urges. What fits the bill are pro-social skills, such as a desire to keep learning and contributing to the community. ST FILE PHOTO

# Parents and kids can be better off if we widen concept of merit

To end society's obsession with relative performance, we should count contributions to community as part of merit.

## Tan Poh Lin

Parents do a lot for their children in Singapore.

Many go to great lengths to secure places for their kids in coveted primary schools and send them for private tutoring. Such competitiveness means that families spend more and more time and money, just to outdo each other.

More recently, the north-east region has witnessed the proliferation of "dedicated enrichment zones". These have now expanded their offerings to cater to pre-school children, opening up a new frontier in the educational arms race.

As a mother of two young children myself, I've been in countless conversations with other parents about schools and extracurricular activities. In my experience, while most parents would personally agree with Prime Minister Lawrence Wong's assessment that the definition of success should go beyond academic and material achievements, many may nevertheless choose to stick to the old formula when it comes to their own children.

Yet amidst all the competition, many are unhappy with having to be more kiasu, literally "fearful of losing", than one would otherwise like to be.

### A CULTURE OF HYPER-COMPETITIVENESS

So what exactly are parents fearful of?

Perhaps the most obvious answer is that parents fear seeing their children at the bottom of the heap in a system that concentrates rewards at the top. To get up there, one must outperform peers in assessments from classroom to workplace.

In the past, parents would receive school report cards that clearly indicated a student's exact ranking in class as determined by exams that started as early as Primary 1. This information, which indicated how far a student was from the top, likely compelled some families to get more heavily involved.

Today, primary and secondary school students no longer have to sit mid-year examinations, and the youngest would also be spared from testing until Primary 3. Moreover, starting this year, academic streaming has been removed in secondary schools in favour of subject-based banding. By diversifying from the use of single metrics, these moves have reined in the stressful practice of student ranking.

Although these institutional shifts can take some of the edge off the pressure on parents, some families have got around them by sending their children for mock examinations at private centres.

Similarly, when primary school registration rules were amended in 2021 to double the number of places reserved for the most competitive phase, parents' chat groups and forums immediately discussed strategies to get ahead of the competition.

These responses suggest changes to the educational system and rules can do only so much. As long as parents feel that some schools and pathways are more prestigious than others, they will continue to feel the pressures of a hyper-competitive culture.

### PARENTAL OBLIGATION AND UNCERTAINTY

One reason that parents are so competitive is that they feel their children are vulnerable and depend upon them to provide help and guidance. Driven by a sense of duty, they find it difficult to defy crowd wisdom because, in future, they might be accused of being irresponsible parents. This also accords them with the moral authority to override any childish protestations as the adult "voice of reason". The forces at play are especially intense if the stakes are determined at younger ages.

Another problem is that parents have to take decisions today without full information on their children's future preferences. Uncertain where their children's passions will lie and what their

material aspirations will look like, parents are more likely to avoid risky choices in favour of safer options, which is doing what everyone else is doing.

These dynamics restrict the choice sets of parents, often at the cost of the well-being of the students themselves. Stress levels among Singaporean children have increased and academics play a big part. This is likely linked to

**If a decisive shift in parenting culture is to happen, a social consensus is needed. What can help accelerate this process is to increase recognition of the trend towards a softer approach to child development, in which families increasingly care about character and socio-emotional development, and where building environments of support, trust and openness is prioritised.**

why children have been reporting more mental health issues, with one study estimating that children lose 24 days of school per year on average due to depression or anxiety symptoms.

While experts warn that busy parents may not detect issues or be equipped to provide support for their children's mental health, a separate set of risks also arises from the opposite direction, where overly intensive parenting leads to anxiety and weakens the ability to face failure among children.

Some parents may feel that these costs are worth it if it means that their children will have a brighter future. But it doesn't make sense to pursue something at all costs, and yet take a naive and uncritical view of the expected gains, which can be very far from what is imagined as to how far they actually go towards fulfilment and well-being. A culture centred on academic performance and failing to properly value children's holistic development leads us to short-change ourselves and our loved ones.

### MAKING MERIT LESS ABOUT RELATIVE PERFORMANCE

Apart from academic ability, we need to focus on skills and competencies that contribute towards a child's holistic development while tamping down

excessive competitiveness in a merit-based society.

These must meet two criteria. First, they need to be highly desired by future employers, colleagues and society at large. Second, they need to be observable, measurable and yet, relative to academic performance, less given to competitive pressures that can spill over to parents.

Such competencies should also be independent of socioeconomic background. This can help bolster the institution of meritocracy as an underlying governing principle. This has come under increased scrutiny as some feel the odds of accumulating merit are stacked against the disadvantaged, who are further made to feel undeserving.

What fits the bill are pro-social skills that include diligence, resilience, honesty, humility, kindness, and desire to keep learning and contributing to the community. These attributes are not only highly sought after in professional settings, but necessarily involve individual autonomy and value identification. They also place the onus of learning, as it should be, on the students rather than on their parents.

Moral striving and contributing to the common good are also non-competitive and less dependent on family background, bringing us closer to a fair society, where everyone can make good, regardless of socioeconomic status.

This is in contrast with technical competencies, which are also important, but where not everyone can be a top achiever. By logical implication, the flip side of acknowledging that every child has unique gifts, is that there will be some advantages and talents that not every child possesses.

A broader concept of merit that is more within everyone's reach can lower stress, improve mental health and embolden individuals to pursue personal interests and strengths. It also promotes proper societal functioning through greater belonging, cohesion, and increased propensity to take calculated risks.

### ARRIVING AT A SOCIAL CONSENSUS

If a decisive shift in parenting culture is to happen, a social consensus is needed. What can help accelerate this process is to increase recognition of the trend towards a softer approach to child development, in which families increasingly care about character and socio-emotional development, and where building environments of support, trust and openness is prioritised.

If such a consensus is reached, parents will not feel compelled to enter the educational race at the expense of their children's well-being, just because they mistakenly think that's what everyone else is also doing.

By shifting the bar for merit in the classroom from achievement for personal gain to include contributions to the community, we make it something which everyone, not just the few, can reach.

• Tan Poh Lin is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore.