

Submission to the Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

Re: Discussions on mechanism for handling abuse cases relating to children from high risk families and follow-up to the Child Fatality Review Report

(Meeting of the Panel on Welfare Services on 28 May 2016)

While the focus of discussion of the Panel meeting is on the mechanism for handling abuse cases relating to children from high risk families, we would like to stress the overwhelming importance of prevention of abuse and promotion of well-being for these children.

Children from vulnerable families (e.g. parents who use illicit drugs or with severe mental illnesses) are exposed to strong, frequent and prolonged adversities such as physical and emotional neglect and/or abuse, family violence and poverty. Recent research in neurosciences reveals that these toxic stresses cause prolonged activation of the child's stress response system, resulting in disruption of the developing brain architecture and other organ systems. This will have a cumulative deleterious effect on the physical, cognitive and emotional development of the child with consequences that last a life time. It has been shown that the degree of childhood adversity is related to the likelihood of child developmental and adult health problems, including diabetes, heart disease, depression and substance abuse. Research also indicates that supportive and responsive relationships with caring adults as early in life as possible can prevent or even reverse the situation¹.

In addressing the varied circumstances and needs of vulnerable families, a comprehensive range of evidence-based programmes should be available. The following are strategies (in bold-types) that have been shown by rigorous evaluative studies to be effective:

1. Provision of universal primary health care for pregnant women and children to promote healthy development as well as early identification of problems and timely management

The Maternal and Child Health Centres currently provide a range of health promotion and disease prevention services for children aged 0 to 5 years and their families. The Comprehensive Child Development Service (CCDS), implemented since 2005, appears to have been able to fulfill its function of early identification of vulnerable families. However, the lack of effective interventions has limited its impact.

2. For vulnerable first-time parents, intensive support through home visits by trained nurses starting from the antenatal period can produce significant and long term benefits for both the child and parents

A programme model developed in the United States since decades ago, the Nurse Family Partnership, with a structured curriculum provided by trained nurses beginning in the antenatal period and extending to 2 years of age, has been shown to be highly effective in a number of randomized controlled trials. However, it is notable that the effectiveness of low-intensity home visitation programmes delivered by poorly trained non-professionals is questionable. In Hong Kong, there is a lack of provision of such effective high-intensity programme delivered by professionals.

3. For young children experiencing significant adversity, programmes that provide high-quality, center-based education-cum-care for the child alongside direct support for parents can have positive impacts

Decades of overseas research has identified the core characteristics of effective programmes, namely: (1) high adult-to-child ratio; (2) a well-trained, competent staff; (3) responsive and warm staff-children interactions; (4) developmentally appropriate and stimulating activities; (5) a safe physical setting; (6) a rich language environment; (7) active child participation, and (8) quality support programmes for parents.

An optimal social-emotional environment with responsive caregiving by adults lays the foundation for the developing brain architecture and builds cognitive and emotional competence. However, it is remarkable that the current childcare provision for children 0 to 2 in Hong Kong focuses largely on physical care, with little or no attention to building social-emotional competence of children and support for parents. Further, the available places for children in need are grossly inadequate.

4. For young children experiencing neglect or recurrent child abuse as a result of adverse family situations such as severe parental depression, substance abuse or family violence, targeted and intensive interventions can prevent the disruption of brain architecture and promote better developmental outcomes

Individualized parent coaching on the use of positive and non-coercive parenting methods to manage child behaviour has been found to be effective in reducing dysfunctional parenting practices, parenting stress, and child behaviour problems. In Hong Kong, the Parent-Child Interaction Therapy has been evaluated and found to be effective with Hong Kong Chinese families, but is only available through one NGO.

In Hong Kong, as in other developed areas, conventional services with limited programme approaches and modes of delivery may no longer be able to address the diverse and complex needs of vulnerable families today. Moreover, while there is currently a myriad of services provided by various agencies, the effectiveness of most is unknown. Recent neuroscience research has informed us of the crucial determinants of human development and the effective intervention strategies. The key is to select strategies that have documented effectiveness, adapt these for local use and establish their effectiveness through rigorous evaluative studies, fund and scale up only those with substantial evidence of effectiveness, and assure their quality through training of providers and continuous improvement of service performance.

It is remarkable that similar issues such as the promotion of child mental health and prevention of mental health problems have been the subject of deliberation in different forums (e.g. the Expert Group on Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, under the Committee on Mental Health chaired by the Secretary for Food and Health). In the best interest of these children from high-risk families and the society, we suggest that a consensus on the strategies and concerted efforts from relevant stakeholders under the leadership of a joint-up Government are paramount.

The future of our society depends on the health and competence of our next generation. Heckmanⁱⁱ has demonstrated that investment in the early years yields long-term societal benefits relative to programme costs. We urge the Government to move forward as a matter of urgency.

Dr Shirley Leung, Specialist in Developmental-Behavioural Paediatrics; Formerly Assistant Director, Department of Health

Prof Cynthia Leung, Educational Psychologist; Professor, Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Dr Hung Se Fong, Specialist in Psychiatry; Formerly Consultant Psychiatrist in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Kwai Chung Hospital

ⁱ Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/>

ⁱⁱ Heckman, J.J. (2000). *Invest in the very young*. Ounce of Prevention Fund and the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy Studies.