

Family Integrity & Social Integration Save Costs on Medical, Remedial & Corrective Services

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The first five years of life has been well recognized to be crucial to the development of a child. Stable care-giving relationship and environment facilitate the positive development of a child.

With a stable, available and responsive care-giver, a child learns to conduct his life through reciprocal adjustment to the care-giver. A child learns to predict what the care-giver will do, and to regulate own emotion and behavior in adjusting to the care-giver. Likewise, the care-giver learns to predict what the child will do, and to adjust to the child. With this mutual attunement and co-regulation, the child forms an emotional attachment with the care-giver, feels secure to explore the world, and internalizes the care-giver's way of behaving as the working model (1). Investigations have shown that secure mother-child attachment is linked to positive behavior later in the child's life, such as self-esteem, social competence, satisfying peer relations, and persistence in problem solving (2).

If the parent is not the child's primary care-giver in the early years, upon reunion both the child and the parent would need to readjust to each others' discrepant ways of behaving. Clinical experiences evidenced difficulties and frustration in parent-child relationships especially if the parent only expects the child to behave and perform, without attuning to the child's feelings and needs. Non-compliance in the child is commonly witnessed.

That the parent is not the child's primary care-giver in the early years also implies that the child's relationship with the early care-giver is discontinued or disrupted. The child inevitably experiences a sense of loss, anxious and depressed moods. Negative affect could hamper his ability to adapt to the new demands in the new environment (3).

If the child is a new arrival, he has to adapt to the new social environment, and the new social identity as a migrant. If the child is at school age, he has to adapt to additional changes brought about by the transition to school life,

different teaching media, and educational styles. The younger the age, the less established are one's guiding principles, living habits, communication pattern, social identity and social ties. Hence, fewer changes are involved at one time.

Significant life changes require social readjustment and induce stress. The more changes happened at any one time, the greater stress is experienced. Change of care-giver, living environment, and social identity, entering school, or changing school are significant life changes for a child. Entering a marital life, migrating, being discriminated, leaving maiden family and social ties, giving up own occupation, and starting anew, giving birth and enacting the parenting role are significant life changes for a woman. Transition to parenthood, additional social and financial responsibilities, uncertainty and instability in family conditions are stressors to a man.

Stress beyond one's coping triggers negative moods such as anxiety, irritability, helplessness and depression, as well as diminishes attention span and impulse control. Prolonged failure to cope can lead to social maladjustment, low productivity and efficiency, social deviance, or mental disorder, as well as weakening a person's immune system leading to psycho-physiological disorders. Medical research has indicated that almost 80% of physical illnesses are associated with emotions and stress (4).

There is considerable evidence that maternal depression is associated with physical and psychological unavailability to the child, impaired care-giving quality, and negative mother-child interactions and attachment (5). However, secure attachment of the child to the parent in the early years can be a protective factor to decreased parenting quality in case of parental distress. Insecure attachment, on the other hand, is a risk factor to decreased parenting quality (6).

Prevention is better than cure. Family integrity and social integration can help prevent negative developmental trajectories, physical illnesses, mindless accidents, mental disorder, and social deviance to a great extent. In other words, costs on medical, remedial and corrective services can be minimized.

To enhance social harmony, stability and prosperity, the following recommendations are made.

1. Local residents marrying Mainlanders can enjoy de facto marital life once

- they get married without being separated by Government policy.
2. Mainlanders married to local residents can adjust to the changes brought about by marriage and migration before they become a parent.
 3. Children of local residents can enjoy the right of birth and abode in Hong Kong to minimize unnecessary stress and sufferings in later readjustment.

Reference

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