

Transcript – MCRI Speaker Series
Preliminary Findings of Survey on Children’s Homes:
Family disintegration and institutional care of children in Malaysia

On September 10th, 2013, MCRI organized a MCRI Speaker Series seminar entitled ‘Preliminary Findings of Survey on Children’s Homes: Family disintegration and institutional care of children in Malaysia’ at the HELP Residences with Assistant Professor Marc Archer from the University of Nottingham, Malaysia Campus. The seminar shared Marc’s preliminary findings on the scope of child abandonment/family disintegration and the nature of alternative care provided in Malaysia.

In this seminar, Marc shared findings including (1) reasons for abandonment/admission of children to institutions, (2) aspects of provision of care within the institution, and (3) long-term planning and expected provision of children upon leaving the institution.

The 54 participants who attended the seminar were sorted into several smaller groups to facilitate discussion on the questions posed regarding the preliminary research findings.

Questions 1 to 3 were presented on a slide with the following table, which shows the 3 reasons for entering homes most strongly endorsed by survey respondents:

REASON	Average	Lowest	Highest	(Standard deviation)
Single mothers	54	0	100	31.5
Parents can’t cope	41	0	100	39.2
Abandoned	19	0	100	32.3

1. What do we make of this?

Participants generally found it surprising that the main reason children go into homes were because of ‘single mothers’ (some participants assumed them to be teen mothers). However, it is unclear if the participants’ reactions were on the basis that the results revealed was consistent or contradictory with their own understanding of this issue. Financial instability partly explains why single mothers place their children in homes – for food and shelter. This parent-child separation could be traumatic to a child but most single women just do not have the support to keep their children even though the Social Welfare Department (JKM) reportedly offers monthly RM 250 to single mothers. Participants believe that parents should have more support so their children do not have to go into homes.

Further comments made by participants are summarized below:

- Children of single mothers who do not have a birth certificate, or know who their biological father is may face challenges in accessing education.
- There is a lack of training in terms of care-providing, lack of family planning support, lack of professionals, and lack of health education.
- Participants suggest that communities should involve extended families to care for children in the family so parents would not need to place them in a home. However, they also have families of their own.
- There is also a strong need to inform and educate parents especially of low SES (socio-economic status) on how to raise their children.
- To help single mothers, participants explained that the government should enforce a husband's responsibility in such situations.

2. Are there interventions in place?

- Ministry of Health now looks at nutrition and the mother, but the mental health aspect is lacking. The MOH has maternal and health clinics – why not develop them to become family support centres that also provide care from the mental health aspect?
- A participant shared that there is a residential treatment centre in Singapore for troubled children that helps them develop a sense of self and also develop the parent-child connection. They would stay for one-year and then return to their families. Replicating this model could be considered.
- There are homes that cater for the care of young pregnant girls. They have more parents on their waiting list who want to adopt their babies than there are pregnant girls who are there. However, some of these homes are under investigation for possible baby trafficking.
- The Social Welfare Department (JKM) reportedly gives RM 250 to single mothers on a monthly basis.
- The WAO-Women's Aid Organisation receives abused mothers and their children for 3 months in a home. After that children are placed in a temporary home for 2 years whilst the mother finds work until they are in a position to take the children back. But WAO is a small organization; they only house a maximum of 20 women at any one time. This is run by funding from individuals and companies. Not sure if there are other organizations doing similar things.
- There is an organization that follows through with a small group of children, simulating real family. It is a private organization that recruits children for their homes and is focused towards protection for the child. This organization requires that parents keep in touch with the children while they're helping the kids. It has a lot to do with education of basic cleanliness.

3. What more could be done?

- Spreading awareness of available services
 - a. Providing and targeting the existing services in the Ministry of Women, have affordable daycare centers. Directing available resources, so mothers can still continue with their responsibilities
- Education
 - a. Provide sexual education in schools in order to prevent teenage pregnancies
 - b. Lift the stigma on fostering
 - c. Children's homes or other organization can have seminars to teach parents about parental responsibility, parenting skills and help them understand their children
 - d. Develop caregiving subject in universities
- Skills development
 - a. Ethical guidelines for social workers needed, child protection policies – many social workers do not have a degree.
 - b. There is a need for more trained people in social services (social workers, therapists or psychologists on the ground) for children with special needs. Organizations and universities and colleges need to connect with each other – the industry and university connection. In the UK, people in the industry talk to the people in the education field to fill all these gaps.
- In the community
 - a. For children who have grown out of the homes, they can be employed by the homes again to care for the younger children, earn a small salary so they can learn to support themselves.
 - b. Police and communities work together to create safer environments; for parents who can't cope with education problems in children, schools can come in. Community centre programs for families which do not involve placing a child in the home to help families stay together. Fostering is not common in the local Asian culture but there has been short term fostering like during the holidays, Deepavali or Hari Raya, depending on race. But for special needs children it is quite difficult to have fostering as they are deemed unwanted.
 - c. Fostering options are available but people are not aware of it. RM 250 is given to those who foster. This provides an opportunity for children to grow in a family context rather than in orphanage.
 - d. Community centers, homes or therapy centers to support parent-child connection

- e. Provide more encouragement and support – stigma from society: towards adoption and fostering children in group homes (eg. Not their own flesh and blood) and also towards adopting children with special needs
- Others
 - a. Provide citizenship or birth certificate to stateless children (born out of wedlock to foreign/migrant parents) because without birth certificate they are abandoned.

Questions 4 to 6 were presented on a slide (see Appendix) with the following question and data from the survey: *Do you have difficulty **recruiting** caregiving staff?* YES: 85%

4. What are the challenges in recruiting caregiving staff?

Based on participants' discussions, there is a strong need for training for caregivers and social workers. Below are the challenges in recruitment:

- Lack of communication between Management and Caregiving staff
 - a. Miscommunication between two parties sometimes ends with caregiving staff being scolded by management. Sometimes the staff simply do not have the skills or knowledge to do their work. It is frustrating for them as well. They need their management team's support and empowerment.
- Lack of knowledge and training
 - a. Lack the proper skills to care for children
 - b. Some staff do not know how to balance between work and rest time and end up sacrificing their own needs
- Turn over
 - a. Low pay, demanding work hours, poor work prospects
 - b. Do not know how to deal with the children (a caregiver's course is just 4-5 days)
- Lack of qualified staff

With the above challenges, there seems to be a need for/to:

- Focused training
- Break down work shifts so staff have time to rest
- Take care of the needs of the caregivers as well as the needs of the children

5. What approaches have homes used with success?

- A participant suggested looking to church-based homes to see what helps them retain their staff as they seem to have enough.
- Providing counselling for the staff allows them to learn about themselves and become more passionate and enthusiastic.
- Some homes use a shift system. For example, the general working hours of caregivers may range from 8 to 12 hours. It is a long time to be with a child and majority of homes do not have systems like this.
- Screening out 'opportunists' – people who are not committed to the job and will leave as soon as something else comes along. Participants suggested that having them spend some time with the kids during the interview process is a good way to tell if they possess the vocational quality.
- Having managerial staffs who are sensitive to the needs and wellbeing of staff is important to retain staff.
- Some homes use more structured and formal channels in recruiting staff compared to others who advertise in the 7-11 or via friends' network.
- There is a website for volunteers ('do good') but none for professional caregivers.

6. What other lessons, advice, can be shared? By whom?

Participants were generally in agreement that they would like to have more training of caregivers. Among the participants from one of the discussion groups believed that the development of caregivers is important for the wellbeing of children and also for their personal growth in terms of having a career plan and a defined salary increment.

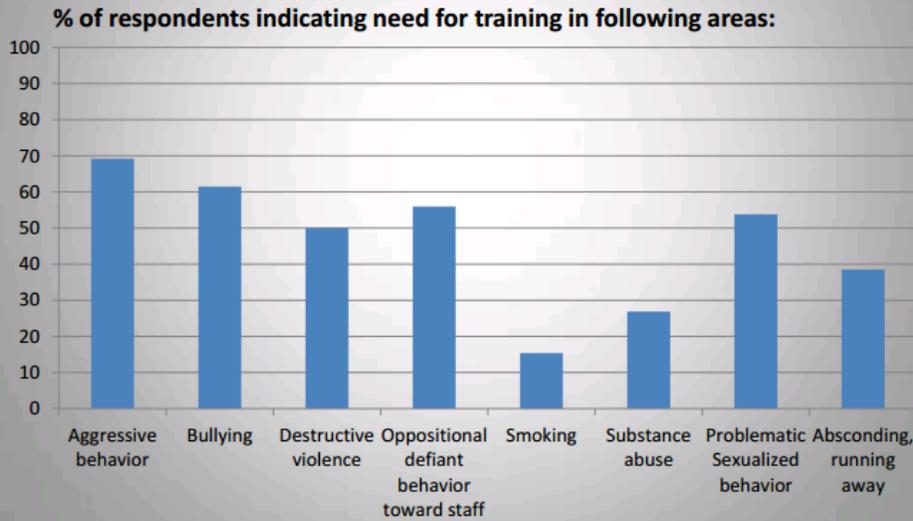
Questions 7 and 8 were presented on a slide which included graphs summarizing the percentage of survey respondents who felt training was required in various areas.

Four more questions posed during the session, but due to insufficient time they were not addressed. Below are the questions:

1. Which training is most urgently required?
2. Who can offer it? (there were no specific suggestions given but participants suggested that the more organized NGOs could provide the training or even share resources to help fellow NGOs develop themselves.
3. Why is the goal for so many children to remain in the group home?
4. Can foster care be more widely utilized in Malaysia?

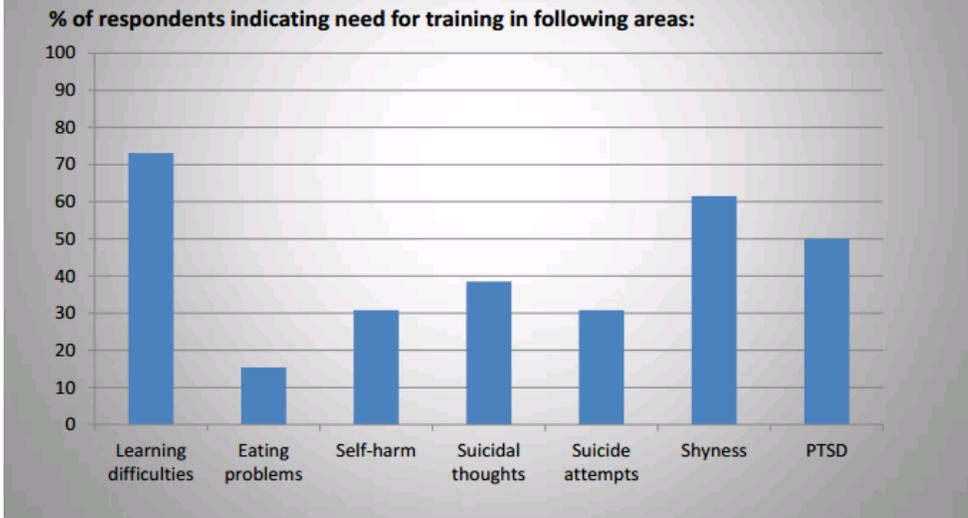
Results RQ5:

What are the needs of the caregivers?



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