



Children's Opinion Series

It is
OKAY

to ask for help!

Helping your child build a support system



Advocating for children's **OPINIONS**



THE MAKING OF THE CHILDREN'S OPINION SERIES

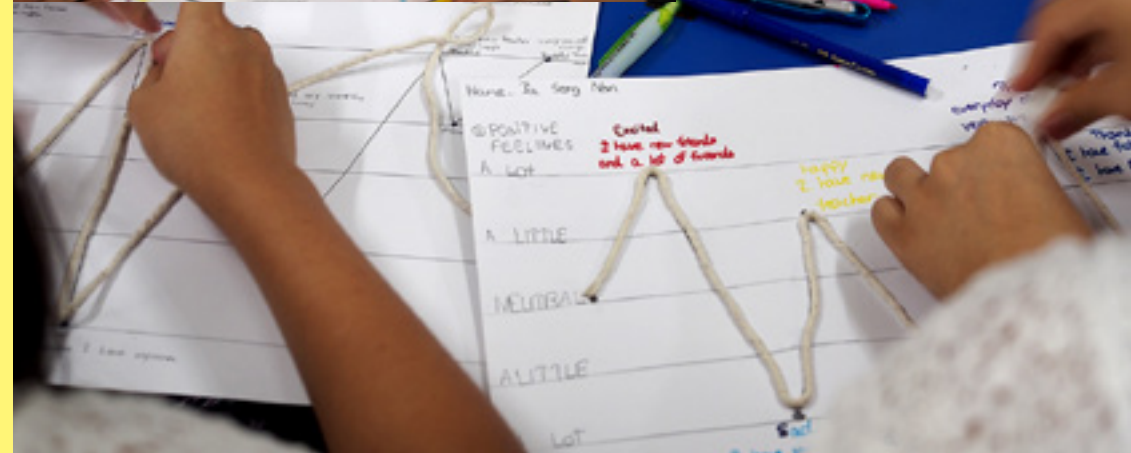
SUKA SOCIETY'S WORKSHOPS

SUKA Society conducted nine workshops in 2016 with youths from refugee, Orang Asli, and urban poor communities. The youths freely shared their thoughts and opinions about their family and support system, their emotions, and their goals. The workshops were conducted to provide the youths with tools to develop resilience, and for them to learn how to resolve obstacles that they may face in pursuing their goals.

WHY THESE BOOKLETS?

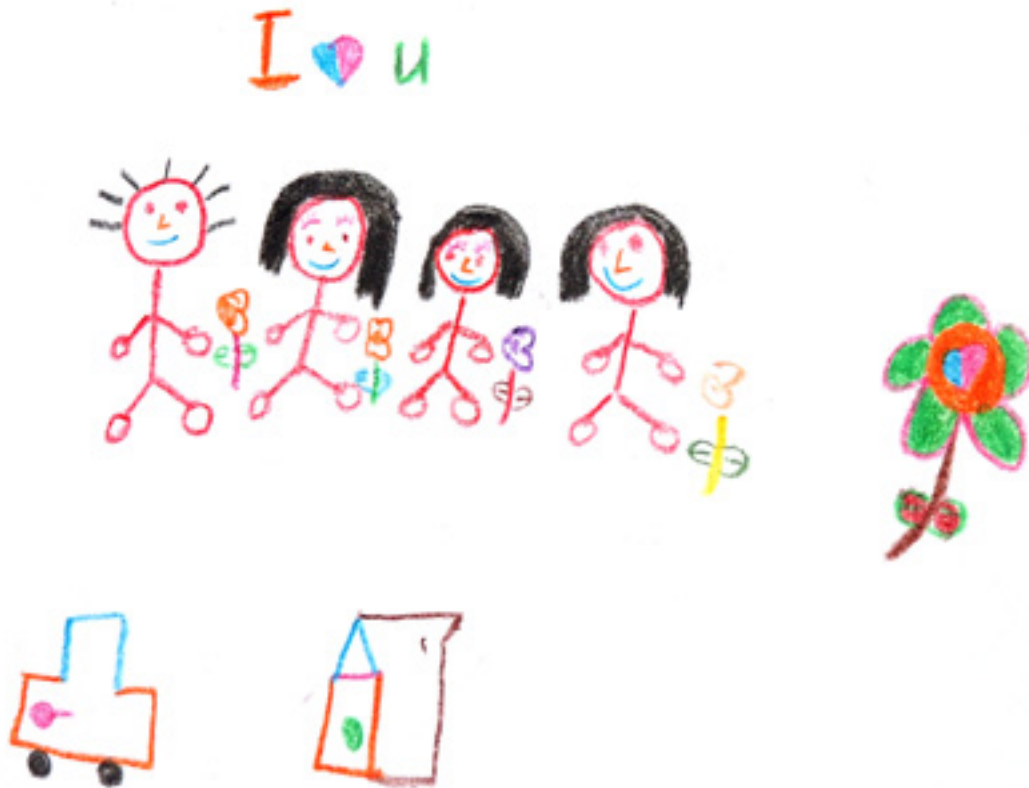
SUKA Society published a series of three booklets:

Speaking your child's love language, **It is OKAY to ask for help!** and **When parents fight, children suffer** as a follow-up to the workshops, aimed at promoting the opinions of youths and children on issues important to them. We hope that key people in children's lives, such as parents, teachers, decision-makers, and people who work closely with children, will find these booklets helpful in developing ways to connect with children, understand them, and to help improve their lives.



I'll be there for you...

Children have to navigate the difficult experience of growing up and need a strong support system who they can reach out to and who can guide and help them in this journey. The support system is made up of parents, family members, friends and other important people in their lives.



"I love my family" Artwork by Jazlyn (6)



"This is my parents together (*branches in the middle*). This is my brother and this is my sister (*branches on the right*). And this is my brother and I (*branches on the left*)."

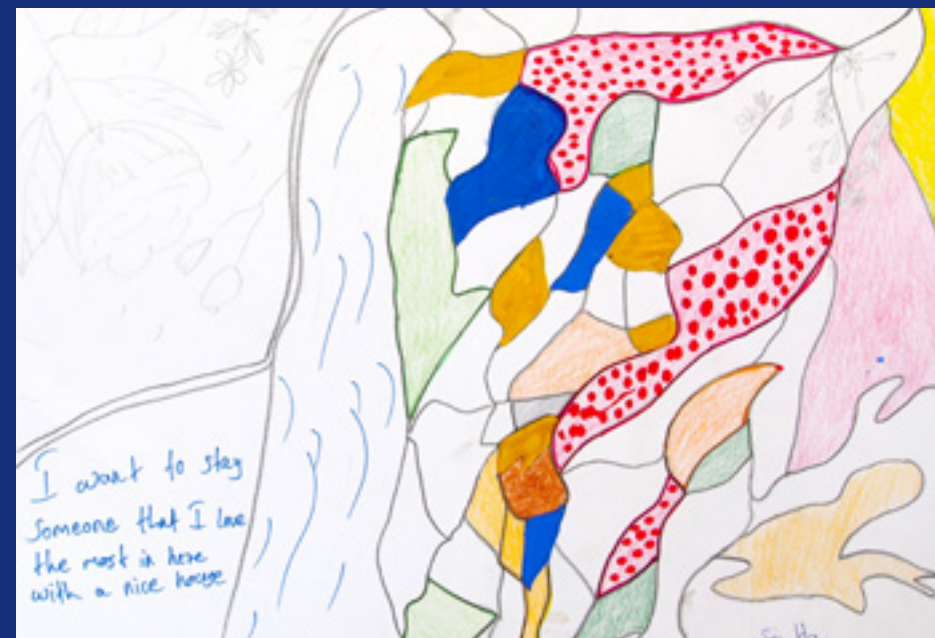
- Ong Chan (13)



A Child's Worries Stresses and Challenges



"My emotions" Artwork by children who SUKA Society worked with.



"I don't know how to keep away from stress. I don't think about who I can talk to when I feel sad. I don't know how to tell. Now I deal with the stress and learn how to forget. I still don't talk to people about it. I don't like asking for people's help because I feel sorry for inconveniencing them. I still feel this way but I've learned to seek help from people." - Soi Ha (15)

SELF-IDENTITY ISSUES

Senior consultant paediatrician Datuk Dr Amar-Singh HSS, who is also head of the Paediatric Department, Hospital Raja Permaisuri Bainun, Ipoh, believes that many children feel that they are alone and are unable to fit in with those around them.

"Society now focuses so much on performance, the type of job you have, and external attributes like beauty. Very few people are accepted for their innate self, i.e. who they are," he says.

This is further heightened when parents and other close people constantly compare their children's achievements with their siblings, cousins or friends.

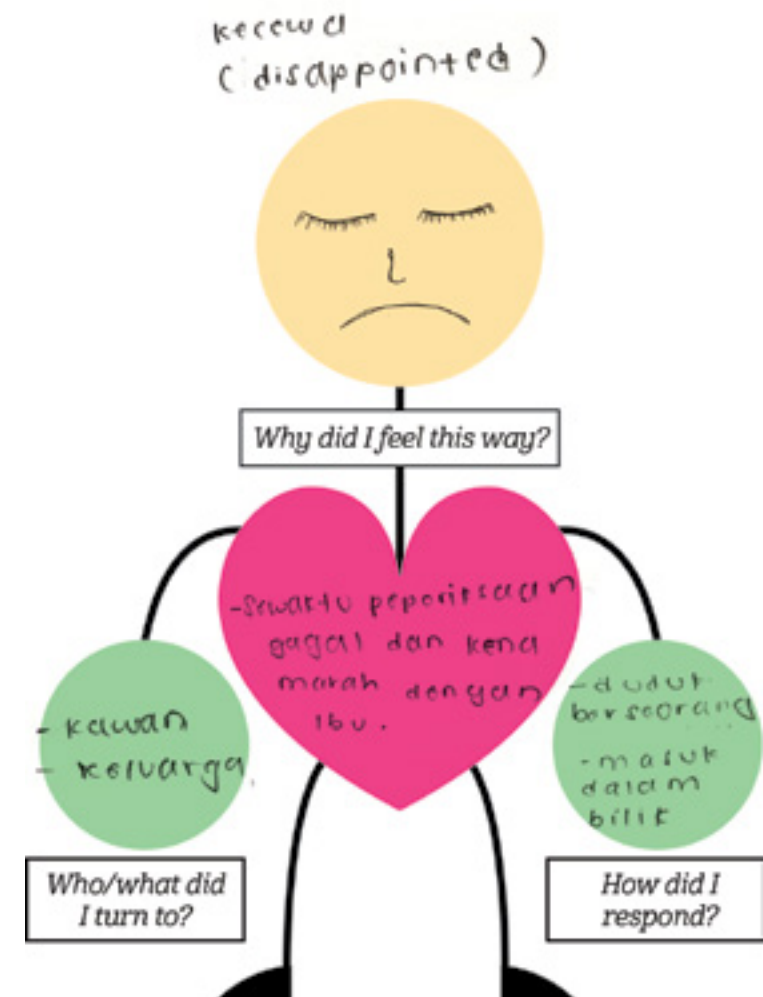
ACADEMIC PRESSURE

The education system in Malaysia tends to focus on homework and achieving multiple A's. Children have to juggle numerous tuition classes and extra-curricular activities. Many parents also have high expectations for their children.

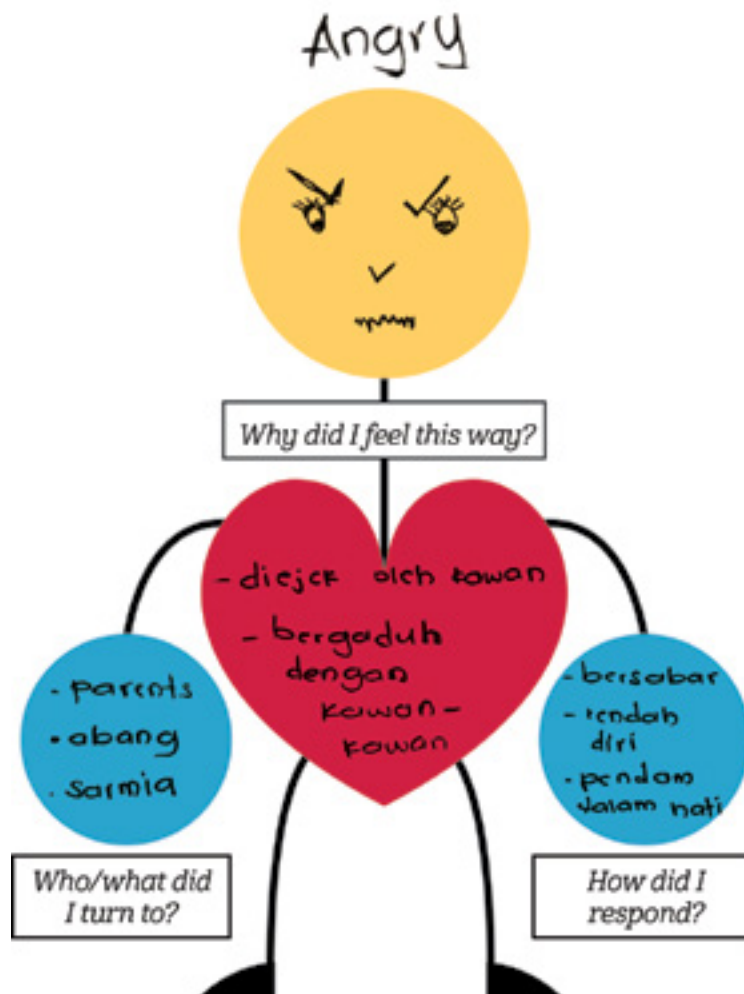
"Parents should not focus on achievements, but, rather, on relationships. They need to change their mindsets. Children may score badly because they are tired of studying. They want to have fun," says Dr Amar-Singh.

Fatimah Haron, Senior Lecturer with the Department of Psychology in HELP University, says that parents are often too focused on the end result and do not credit the children's efforts. "Your child's attempt deserves recognition. Look then at where your child can improve, instead of making him feel that he is not good enough," she says.

She also cautions parents against making comparisons among siblings and setting unrealistic goals for children based on their siblings' performance.



YATI - 16 YEARS OLD



SARA - 13 YEARS OLD

PEER PRESSURE

We all experience peer pressure, even as adults, but peer pressure is most obviously felt in children, who feel the need to do what other people of their age or social group are doing so as to fit in.

Alex Lui, Head of the Psychology Department at HELP University, says children will take on some of their peer's attitudes and behavior, especially those that they spend time with.

Peer pressure can have positive consequences, such as influencing the children to join a sport, to work harder in their studies, or to aim to enter university because their friends did that.

However, if children do not have the right values or are not guided to choose the right friends, peer pressure could lead them to acquiring bad habits.

It is important for parents to recognise when their children are feeling stressed due to peer pressure. "There should be open communication so that children can come back and share about their friends," says Lui.

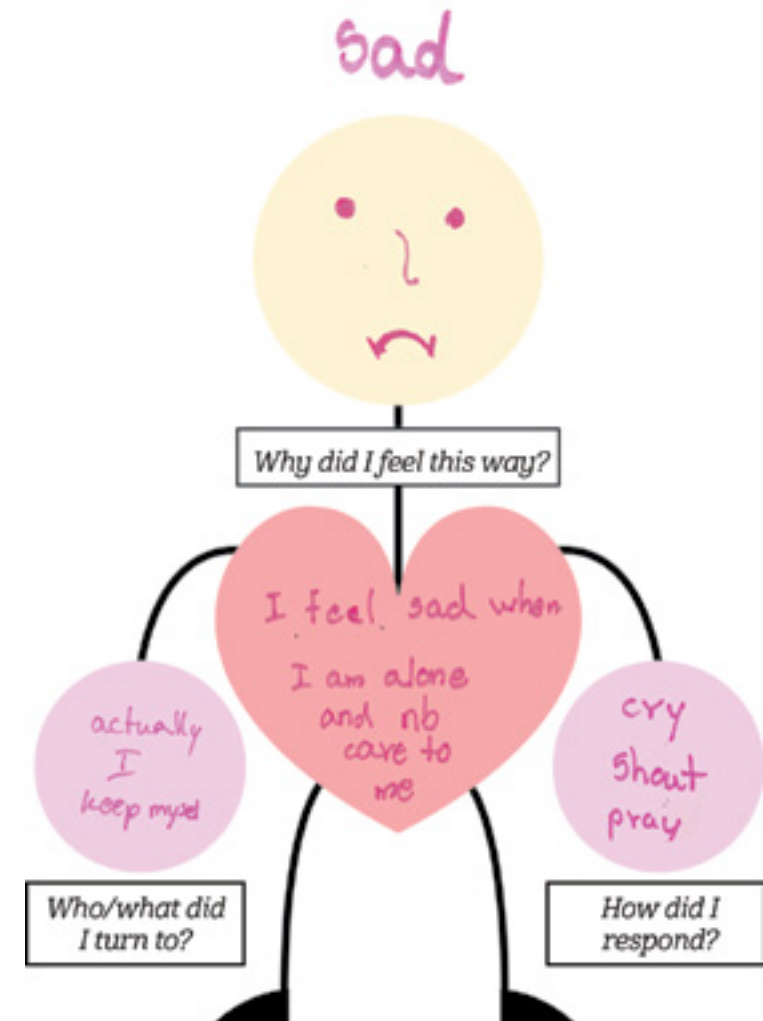
FAMILY SITUATION

Children are highly attuned to what is happening in their family. Minor and major upheavals can be a cause of great stress for them.

Divorce, conflict, or illness in a parent can make them feel very fearful and insecure. Being separated from the family, such as having to go away to boarding school, can also cause a lot of unhappiness.

Among the refugee children that SUKA Society has worked with, many have expressed sadness, frustration and anger that they do not get to see their parents or relatives.

The family's financial difficulties can also weigh heavily on a child's mind. Children may inadvertently or directly hear about these problems from their parents, but do not have the maturity to understand or cope with such matters.



KAI - 17 YEARS OLD

BULLYING

Fatimah Haron says that bullying is a common cause for mental problems such as depression and anxiety among children.

“We do not take bullying seriously enough. Usually, we only take action when there are physical consequences. But, emotional teasing can sometimes be worse, leading to stress and depression,” she says, adding that teachers can also engage in bullying.

Cyber-bullying is becoming increasingly common and is much more insidious because it happens out of sight and is often perpetrated by bullies who can remain anonymous.

Parents should also look out for signs that indicate their child might be bullying others.



“Sad child” Artwork by an Orang Asli pre-school child from Slim River



“My family protects me from darkness” Artwork by Christiana, a 12 year old Orang Asli from Raub.

What happens when children have no one to turn to?

"I feel alone, because my parents are not nearby. They stay in Jitra and I only see them two to three times a year. I cannot share my feelings with anybody. I am sad because my mother went back to Myanmar. I felt angry when I couldn't see my uncle when he died. And I feel hate because someone made me sad. Most of the time, I miss my family."

- Lionel (17)

Sad. Unhappy. Angry. Hate.

These were the negative emotions that 17-year-old Lionel Chan described for his life.

It is not unusual to hear children and teenagers express similar negative emotions, whether they live in rural or urban settings, or are from low-income or middle-class families.

It is important for children to have people in whom they can confide. Otherwise, all the frustration, loneliness, resentment and hurt will fester inside them. By the time it spills out, it could have caused long-term harm to them.



"The portrait of me" Artwork by Lionel, a 17 year old refugee from Myanmar

SELF-HATE

Anger, fear and sadness are normal emotions for everyone. But young children and teenagers may have problems understanding these feelings.

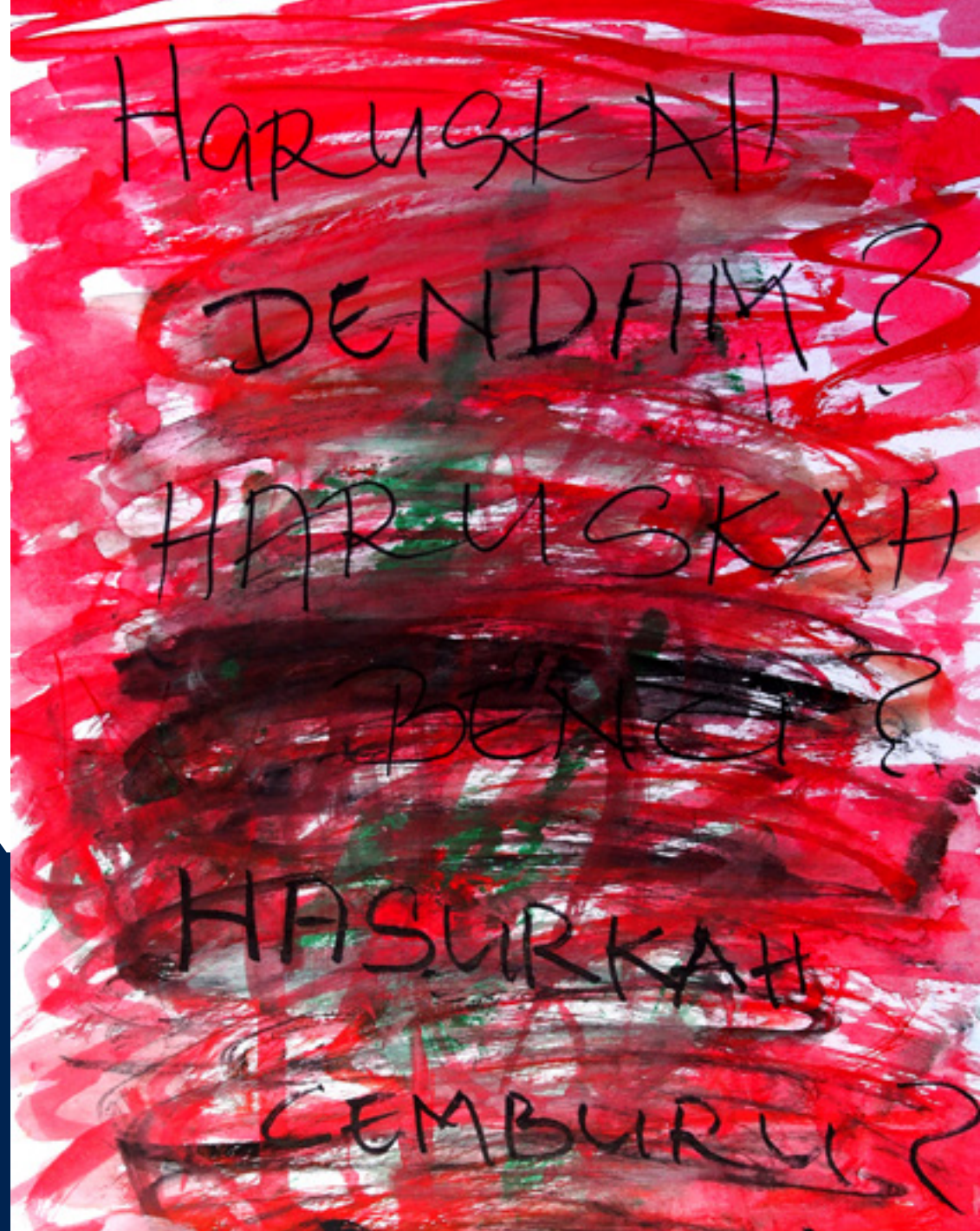
Tan Ah Eng, volunteer counsellor with Focus on the Family, says that the issue of self-hate is common in children.

“Self-hate is when children do not love themselves. It can arise because of being bullied in school, having identity issues, or having problems like divorce in the family, or favouritism at home or in school,” Tan explains.

“All children struggle, especially during their teenage years. Finding your own identity and voice is part of growing up, but it can be a struggle,” she says.

SIGNS OF SELF-HATE TO LOOK OUT FOR:

- Extreme anger
- Self-harm (e.g. cutting or hitting themselves)
- Depression
- Extra critical of themselves
- Finds difficulty accepting compliments



*“Must there be grudges? Must there be hate? Must there be jealousy?”
Artwork by Ika, a 15 year old Orang Asli from Raub*

SOMETIMES IT'S NOT JUST A STOMACH ACHES

When a child has fears and stresses that she is not able to express, she may display physical symptoms due to the stress building up inside her. For instance, she may suddenly complain of a stomach ache or may vomit every day before going to school, even though she has no health problems.

“These are called psychosomatic symptoms, which are due to psychological issues that affect their body,” says Lau Cheng Yi, child education psychologist.

The physical symptoms may arise from some trauma that occurred at school, such as being shamed or shouted at by their teachers, or being bullied by friends. The child may feel anxious at the thought of going back to school and may experience “butterflies in her stomach”, but may express it as “a stomach ache”.

Some children may have nightmares, grind their teeth at night or display extreme reactions like vomiting because that is how their body reacts to stress. Then, the child will start to associate going to school with that very unpleasant bodily reaction, and it becomes a vicious cycle.

Parents have to be alert to sudden changes in children's behaviour or to notice physical indications, such as bruises, says Fatimah Haron.

A CRY FOR HELP

- Bedwetting (in younger toilet-trained children)
- Nightmares, teeth-grinding
- Sudden refusal to go to school
- Stomach aches, vomiting for no reason
- Unexplained mood swings, rebelliousness, or becoming withdrawn
- Complaints like “my head hurts” or “I hate everyone” that occur frequently



“Uncertainties” Artwork by Ivy, a 16 year old Orang Asli from Sabah

YOUR CHILD'S SUPPORT SYSTEM

Family support

The first level of a child's support system usually consists of parents and immediate family members. These are the people who have the most contact with the child, and can offer the most support when the child needs it.



"He is not able to walk, meaning to say he can't stand by his own and he always needs someone to support him then he can stand up and walk. He wasn't happy all the time because he was unable to do what he wanted, but maybe someone will help him to be a happier person." - Chan Mon (18)

"I'm close to my mum and I can share my feelings with her. In the evening or at night, I will tell her stuff like how was school. My mum will listen and give me advice."

- Norita (15)

PARENTS

Parents' support and guidance is an important part of a child's life, no matter how old the child. Parents should ensure they are tuned in to the child's life, so that they will be sensitive to any sudden changes in behaviour.

Parents should try to be available for the children to talk to them. Spending quality time with the children enables the children to know that they can depend on the parents and are not bothering them.

Teenagers may be reluctant to talk to their parents, especially if they have problems with their studies, relationships or something that they know their parents will disapprove of. Teenagers automatically shut down if they are nagged, criticised or belittled.

Parents should try to be a coach and mentor to the teenager, rather than an authoritarian parent. They should try to be open, understanding and non-judgmental to strengthen the relationship with the child and to nurture trust.

"This painting has a meaning. When we were born, we were received by hands. And when we were a child, we were always shown love by the touch of our parents and siblings. We can help our parents with our own hands when we become adults."

- Eden (17)



"This stem represents the beginning of my family. This (*broken branch on the left*) is the part I grow with my parents. It end up here. Now I came to Malaysia, I live with my brother. So he give me the other way how I grow up. Actually this (*black vine*) is me.. I will keep to this way. This pot means water (*love in the family*). Everybody can take the water. Everyone is welcome."

- Lawi (16)

SIBLINGS

Older siblings play an important role in helping children figure out how to cope with a problem. An older brother or sister would have probably gone through similar experiences, having attended the same school and dealt with family issues earlier.

If you have two or more children, encourage them to rely on each other for support and advice. Be a role model for your older children, so that they will also set the right examples for their younger siblings.

Finding “significant others” in life

Parents and immediate family members are not the only people that children can depend on. A strong support system also consists of “significant others” – people who have an important presence in a child’s life and whom the children respect and look up to and are therefore in a position to offer help and guidance.

“The people in my life now are my friends. I don’t see my parents. I only have my uncle here. My uncle was taken away by the police here before. I was very worried when that happened. It is hard not having my mom and dad with me. I get support from my friends. It is important to have people around you that you trust because they can help you.”

Ong Chan, 13 year old refugee who fled his village in Myanmar and is now living in Malaysia.



“My uncle helped me to get used to Malaysia as my parents are not around.”

– Soi Ha (15)

For 14-year-old Enrique from the Orang Asli community, apart from his family members, the important people in his life include his pastor, school principal, and *ketua kampung* (village head).

Sankha, 16, who is from Myanmar, feels that the people he can turn to for support include his family, UNHCR, MRO (*Mon Refugee Organization*), MRCEC (*Mon Refugee Children Education Centre*) and Harvest Training Centre.

Extended family members

Uncles, aunts, grandparents, cousins, and other relatives can provide very useful support to children. They can give advice and comfort, lend a helping hand, and provide an objective viewpoint if there is conflict between the child and the family.

“Helping Hands” Artwork by Edora (16)



School

The school is one of the best places for children to seek support outside the family. Children should feel comfortable going to their teachers, school counsellors, hostel wardens, or the principal, whether their problems are related to school, friends or family.

However, many children are afraid that their teachers will punish them or report them to the principal. Teachers need to make an effort to build up trust with their students, so that they can be in the position to offer advice when their students need it.

Teachers, including tuition teachers, music/dance tutors, or sports coaches, play a tremendous role in helping the child build self-confidence.

Facing page: "My Support Circles" by children who attended SUKA Society's Resilience Workshops

Community

There are many people in the community who can be good sources of support for children. Religious leaders may be helpful to the child who has been brought up in that faith as they share the same values.

In rural areas, children may look up to their *ketua kampung* or village head and see them as figures of authority whom they can turn to for help. In a close-knit community, even neighbours and other adults can be part of the children's support system.

But, Dr Amar-Singh says that we can no longer take for granted that "it takes a village to raise a child", whether it is in an urban or rural setting.

"People don't even know their neighbours' names now," he says.

"Today, there are more dangers, especially in urban areas," says Mrs Vijayakumari Pillai, a child protection consultant.

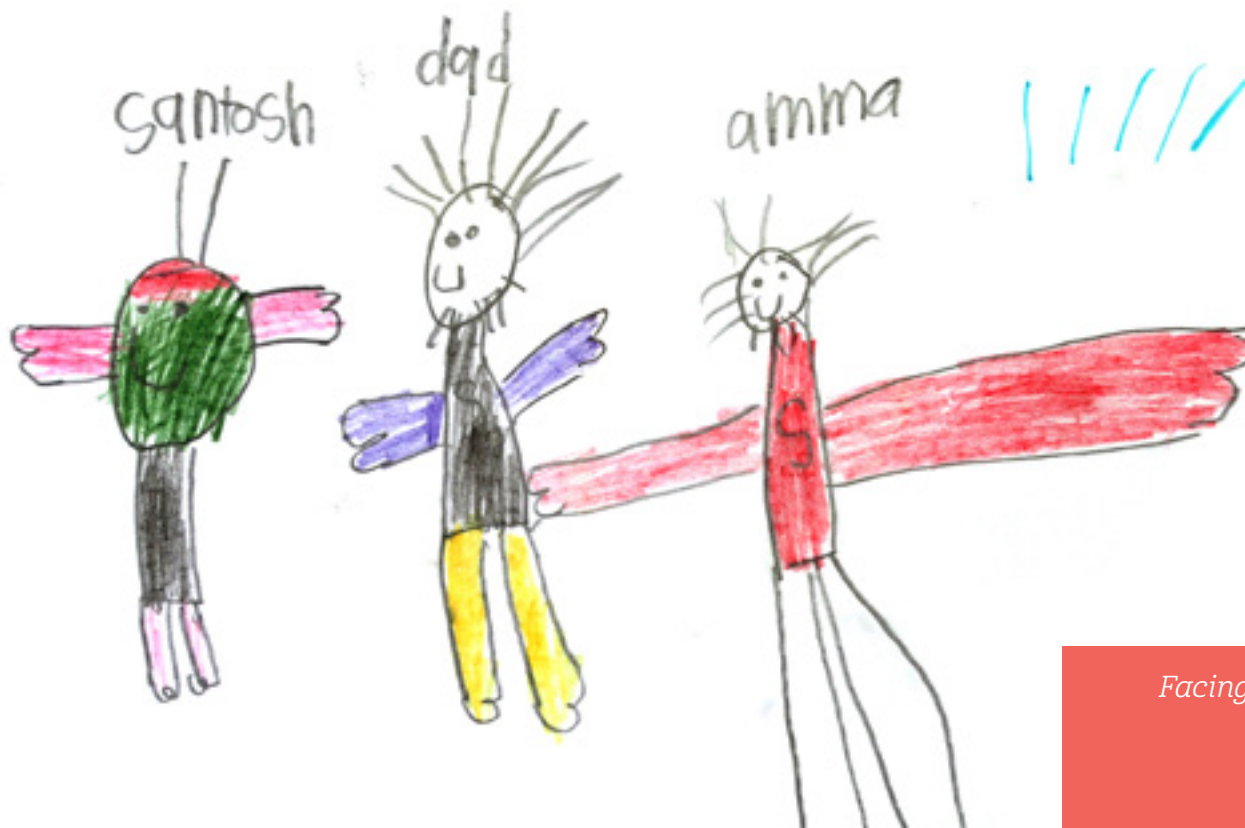
We all play a role in being part of the children's support system. If we see a child or teenager in a public place or in our neighbourhood who appears to be in need of help, we should not turn a blind eye.
Every child is a child of our community.



"My dream home" Artwork by refugee children from the Rvwang community

HELPING YOUR CHILD BUILD A SUPPORT SYSTEM

After you have identified the people who form part of your child's support system, you also need to help your child build this network, so that these "significant others" will be a part of his/her life.



1.

Teach children how to ask for help

Children may feel uncomfortable saying that they need help, because they think that they will be ridiculed.

Show your child that it is okay to ask for help and the best way to do this is to model asking for help. Ask them to help you, e.g. doing chores, taking care of younger siblings, or teaching you to use the computer, and show your appreciation.

2.

Don't do everything for them

When a child has a problem, a parent's instinct is to immediately jump in and solve it for him/her. However, your child has to learn to tackle his/her own problems.

This is where you can start helping your child to find the "significant others" in his/her life.

For example, if your child has a problem in school, ask him/her if there are any teachers whom he/she likes and respects, and could help him/her. If your child is feeling upset that he/she cannot play football well, suggest that he/she hang out with an older cousin or an uncle who likes playing football.

Facing page: "Happy Family" by Santosh (10)



Artwork by a child who SUKA Society worked with.

3.

Get children involved in activities

Help your child widen his/her circles so that he/she will be able to meet more people who could be part of his/her support system. Encourage him/her to join activities at school, with friends, or in the community. It could be dance school, the football club, swimming competitions, religious youth groups, or volunteer work.

Do not force your child to participate in activities – rather, have a chat with him/her about what he/she likes and help him/her find something he/she will genuinely enjoy. At these activities, he/she will likely meet friends (same age and older) and adults who share his/her interests and provide support.



"God made everyone special. That's why I drew many colourful thumbprints"

- Mary (14)



Trust and communication

- keys to building a strong support system

Many children find it difficult to confide in their parents. Parents have to foster healthy communication and trust with their children – this creates an environment that encourages honesty and sharing so that the children are able to express their feelings and problems and find support in their parents or significant others.



Artwork by Mimi (12)

Why children lie and hide their feelings

"I don't really share my problems with my parents. I don't like to *kena tegur* (be admonished). I prefer my friends who are my age."

- Ozni (15)

Children fear being scolded or criticised by their parents if they were to talk about their problems.

Edora, 16 years old, says she is reluctant to talk about her deepest feelings and secrets with her father and stepmother because she is afraid that they will be disappointed and ashamed of her.

"I have always behaved well in front of them, so they would not be expecting some of the things that I keep secret."

- Edora (16)



Artwork by Mimi (12)

Are you listening?

“Parents often do not listen, hence kids do not want to share,” says Datuk Dr Amar-Singh HSS.

Many children end up living a very “instructed life”, adds Dr Amar-Singh, where their only communication with their parents is “Have you bathed?” or “Have you finished your homework?”.

The lack of meaningful communication creates a situation where children and parents do not trust each other.

Nurturing trust

According to Fatimah Haron, trust begins with establishing a relationship with your children where the lines of communication are kept open.

“You want your child to confide in you, but it cannot happen if you haven’t developed a relationship where your child feels that he can open up and share with you what’s happening in his life,” she says.

Dr Amar-Singh believes that parents need to spend quality time listening to their children, without any judgement or preconceived answers in their minds.

“To build trust, parents and children should compromise sometimes and agree on certain things,” says Tan.

But, trust can be broken when parents are not honest with their children. “Even ‘white lies’ can break the trust,” says Alex Lui.

“Trust can also be broken when you do not do what you said you would do. For instance, you may promise ‘if you finish your meal, you will get dessert’, but, then, you don’t let them have the dessert,” says Lui.

It is difficult to rebuild trust once it has been broken. Honest and open communication is the only way to regain trust, as well as to prevent this fragile bond from being damaged in the first place.

Tips for fostering communication and trust

1. Be honest

Do not be afraid to admit that you do not have all the answers, or that you sometimes struggle with work and personal problems too. Children need sincerity. They can sense when something is wrong, and lying to them or covering up your feelings does not help.

"Learning by observation is very important. If parents can show honesty, for instance, apologising when they make a mistake, then children will learn how to do it too," says Lui

2. Say 'sorry' and mean it

In Asian society, most parents feel that it is taboo to apologise to their children, believing that the children will lose respect and not recognise their authority.

On the contrary, your child will respect you for having the courage to admit you made a mistake. In turn, your child will show you the same openness. This creates opportunities for you to help your child realise that mistakes are important lessons to learn from.

Artwork by a child who SUKA Society worked with.



3. Show understanding and empathy

Try not to judge your children, otherwise you build walls between you and your children.

"If parents are constantly judging, the children may start to filter their feelings and hide things because they feel that their parents cannot accept everything they want to say," says Lui.

Another mistake that parents often make is to belittle their children's fears and anxieties by giving responses such as, "Don't be silly", or "You're too young to understand".

Show your child that you understand his/her feelings are real, and that you are there to listen, if not to offer advice.

4. Keep your promises

Parents should try not to promise things that they cannot be sure to commit to, such as spending the weekend with the children, or attending their sports day. Children will surely be disappointed if parents fail to keep their promises and if this happens repeatedly, they will eventually not believe any promises made.

But, sometimes promises are broken because of unavoidable circumstances. Parents should be honest and explain the reasons to the children.



"Waiting" Artwork by Ah Pong (14)

Collect all 3 booklets from the series!



Booklet 1

Speaking your child's
love language



Booklet 3

When parents fight,
children suffer

DID YOU FIND THIS
BOOKLET HELPFUL?

We would love to hear your
opinion about this booklet.

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

If you find this booklet helpful, you may like to pass
it on to your family, friends and colleagues. Feel free
to contact SUKA Society for additional copies.

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