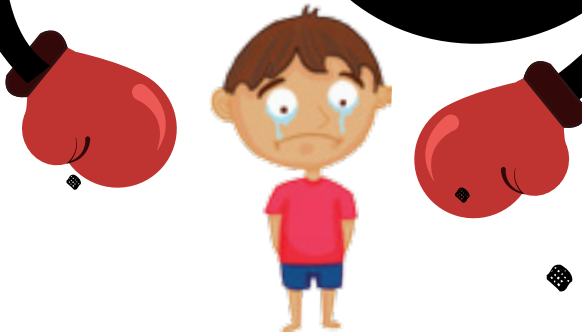




Children's Opinion Series

When parents fight, children suffer

Protecting children from conflict at home



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.





*That is my tree and if you can see
I have a lot of leaves and roots. The
reason why there are a lot of roots
is because I have a big family and
the leaves represent our family.
We do not hate each other,
we love each other.*

*- Ong Mon,
Myanmar refugee living in Malaysia (18 years old)*



THE CORE OF SOCIETY

A family is conventionally defined as a social unit consisting of two parents and their children who live together¹.

In reality, however, families are as diverse as the societies they exist in. Families can consist of two parents or single parents. Some families have children, and some do not, and some of the children may be adopted or may be stepchildren.

Some households live with the extended family (e.g. aunts, uncles, grandparents, or cousins), while others consist of nuclear families (married couples with/without children, or at least one parent with children).

No matter what shape and form they take, families are the pillars of society. They provide identity, love, care, protection and support, especially for children and dependents.

It goes without saying that there are happy families, as well as unhappy ones. Even happy families have to cope with the challenges and pressures of modern life. This can lead to conflict among family members, especially between parents. How will such conflicts affect the children?

¹ Oxford Dictionaries. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/family>



Artwork by a child that SUKA Society worked with

Parents

Captains, Providers, Nurturers



**"SHOW YOUR KIDS THAT
YOU LOVE THEM. MAKE SURE
YOUR CHILDREN TRUST YOU
BECAUSE THERE IS NOBODY
THEY CAN TRUST EXCEPT
THEIR FAMILY."**

EDEN, 17

SUKA Society conducted interviews with teenagers from Orang Asli communities, where the children spoke about the important role that parents play in their lives.

Fifteen-year-old Ika says that good parents are loving, attentive, understanding and responsible. They also teach their children the right values, and provide for the family.

Eden, 17, stressed the importance of parental guidance: "Parents should help their children in their studies, expose them to as much knowledge as possible, and protect them from social ills".

What these children are telling us is that parents are much more than people just fulfilling material needs. Their biggest responsibility is to love, nurture, and guide children. Without the emotional care and guidance from parents (or caregivers who assume the parental responsibilities), children could be vulnerable or helpless.

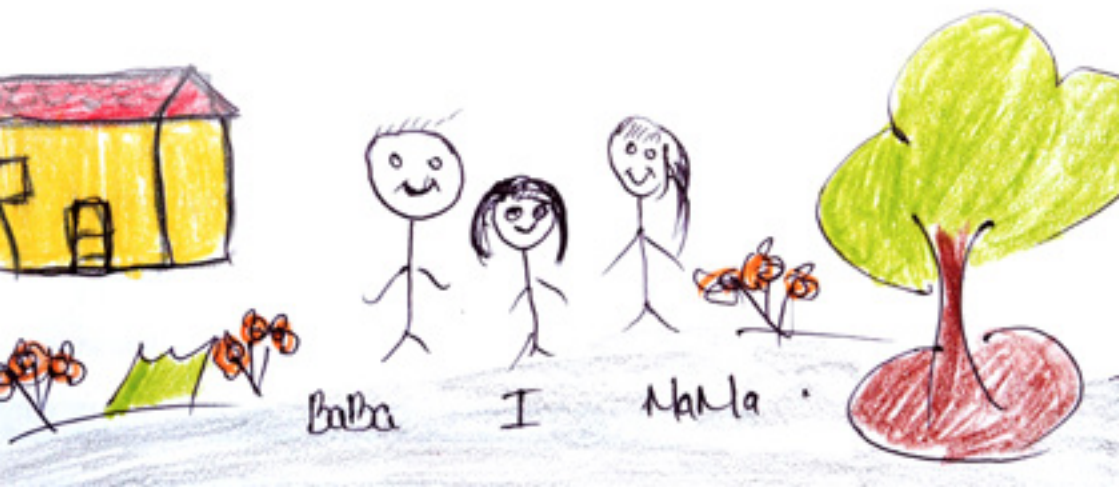
MUM AND DAD'S DIFFERENT ROLES

Alex Lui, Head of the Psychology Department at HELP University, says that both parents play separate, but equally important roles in influencing their children's development.

"When children are younger, mothers play a more important role. Mothers are more nurturing, so this makes children feel more cared for and reassures them that their needs are met."

"The father's role is more important when the children are approaching adolescence. Older children spend more time outside of the family, and as fathers are usually the more authoritative parent in the family, their role is to teach social norms and rules to children, such as how to be independent, how to take care of themselves with confidence, and how to deal with stress," he says.

Children learn values and traits like politeness or self-control through observation rather than instruction. Parents can guide their children by being their role models.



*I feel safe when mom
is with me because she
takes care of me when
I am sick and tells me
when I am wrong.*

- Melody, Myanmar refugee living in Malaysia (14)



WHY DO PARENTS ARGUE?

Parents are only human. They may be in a loving, committed relationship but raising a family comes with a lot of pressure and expectations. It is normal to have disagreements and arguments occasionally, but they should be handled wisely.

WE JUST DON'T TALK ANYMORE

Parents may argue about the family finances, job issues (e.g. long working hours or the lack of employment), or lifestyle habits (e.g. excessive drinking).

Digital technology and modern work-life pressures are adding a new dimension to parental conflict. Families spend less time interacting with each other and spend more time on-screen instead.

Although the daily arguments may be over trivial matters such as what time someone gets home, or whose turn it is to do the chores, there may be the several underlying causes for the conflict.

"Nilai murni yang saya mahu ada apabila saya sudah berkahwin adalah bertanggungjawab. Yang kedua, kasih sayang. Kasih sayang saya akan berikan kepada anak saya dan suami saya. Apabila suami saya dan saya bergaduh, kita tak akan gunakan kata-kata kesat. Contohnya perkataan yang menyakitkan hati dan perasaan antara satu sama lain dan kata-kata yang melibatkan anak. Contohnya, 'Saya melahirkan anak ini kerana gara-gara dia (pasangan)'."

"The values that I want to nurture when I am married is the sense of responsibility. The second, love. I will give my love to my children and my husband. When my husband and I fight, we will not use abusive language. For example, words that will hurt each other's feelings and words involving children. For example, 'I gave birth to this child because of you (spouse)'."

- Inis, an Orang Asli from Pahang (16)

GOOD COP, BAD COP

Parents usually have differing views on how to discipline or bring up their children.

One parent may be more permissive, and the other more authoritarian. These styles will clash, leading to a situation where one parent is the "good cop" and the other is the "bad cop". The lack of consistency in parenting styles may lead to problems with the child's behaviour and attitude, and create a situation where the child prefers one parent over the other.

"Parents must have equal roles in dealing with discipline. Don't delegate it to one parent because it will lead to the perception that one parent is stronger than the other," says Alex Lui, Head of the Psychology Department at HELP University.

He also advises parents not to criticise their spouse's parenting style in front of the children. Disagreements over parenting decisions, including with grandparents, should be discussed and resolved away from the children.

UNHAPPY WITNESSES TO CONFLICT

Children need to feel secure, safe, and loved at home. If there are frequent conflicts at home, especially between parents, the children will be the most affected.

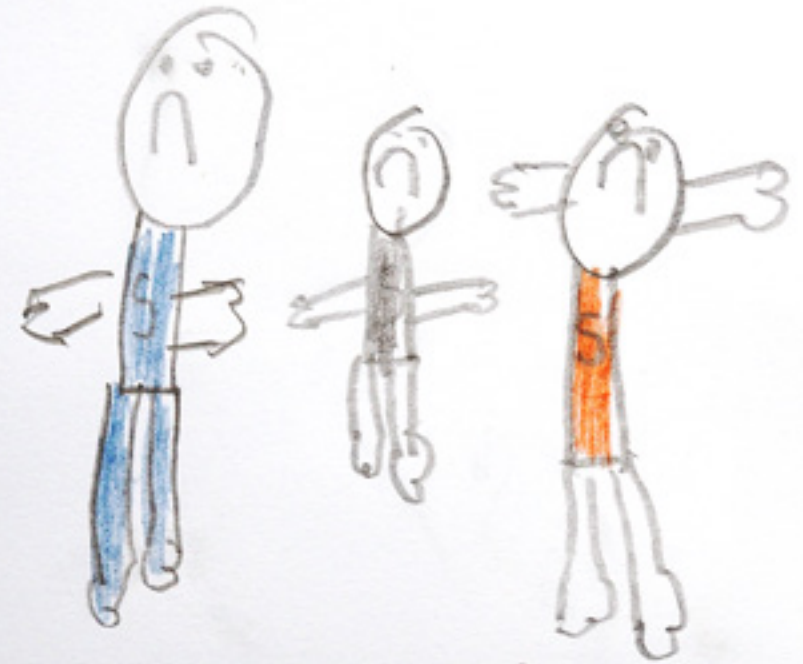
When parents argue on a daily basis, there is a danger that their children will have emotional, social and behavioural problems. The children could also have difficulty in concentrating, which, in turn, affects their educational achievements.

They also feel unsafe and insecure at home, which inhibits their relationship with their parents and with others.

“Sometimes I feel angry when they fight. Sometimes I will interfere. It is my father’s fault for scolding my mother. I will side with my mom and say, ‘It’s not good for you to blame people. Don’t be angry,’ and he will scold me back,” says 15-year-old Ika.

She adds that she wishes all parents will learn to resolve their arguments in a healthy manner, so that their children will have a peaceful home.

“Sad family”
by Santosh (10)



Sad family

LITTLE EYES ARE WATCHING

Parents often argue without realising that their children can see, hear and sense everything.

“Young children will feel afraid when their parents are arguing. Teenagers are more likely to feel angry and withdraw by hiding in their rooms,” says Tan Ah Eng, volunteer counsellor with Focus on the Family.

Children sometimes feel some sense of responsibility for the conflict – they become anxious, wondering if they are to blame, or, they try to maintain the harmony at home. This is an unfair burden for children to take on.

Arguing parents inevitably drag their children into the conflict, by complaining to the children about the other spouse, or forcing them to take sides.

Seventeen-year-old Eden, whose parents constantly argue, says:



“If they are fighting, they say,
‘I hate you, go to your father. I hate your
father. Why does your father do this to me?’
And my mother will complain to every kid that she has.”

I know when they argue because I am their daughter. Their facial reactions and the way they talk show it. They will hide it from us children but I will know because I am their daughter.

- Ivy, an Orang Asli from Sabah (17) -

I think parents should be good role models for their kids. They think the kids are so stupid and don't know anything. Actually from when I was 6 years old, I remember everything until now, even though they're not aware of that.

- Qian, Kepong (19) -



When I was younger my parents fought a lot. I could hear them, but I could never see them. Sometimes when they're shouting at each other, a lot of memories come back, and it's a bit painful.

Make sure the child is not aware of what's happening. Children should never be involved.

- Jem, Damansara (19) -

"Hello, pokok ni dia sebelah layu, sebelah subur. Yang subur ni, tiga buah. Lagi satu buah ibu saya, lagi satu buah bapa saya, lagi satu buah abang saya. Yang layu ni, kadang-kadang dia orang gaduh. Yang subur ni kadang-kadang dia orang baik. Walaupun dia orang miskin, akar ini akan tumbuh semakin mendalam sebab dia orang tidak berputus asa untuk bekerja."

"Hello, half of this tree is withered and the other half is fertile. The fertile side has three fruits. Each represents my mother, my father and my brother. The withered part shows the times when they were having a fight. The fertile part shows the times when they were on good terms. Although they are poor, the roots will grow deeper because they did not give up working."

- Keven, an Orang Asli from Johor (13)



WORDS AND PHYSICAL ACTION

Some parents hit and push each other while arguing, but verbal aggression, such as parents calling each other names, using crude insults, or threatening to abandon the family, can be just as frightening and damaging for children.

Similarly, silent tactics like avoiding, walking out of the room, sulking, or withdrawing, can affect the children's wellbeing.

In addition, one parent always passively tolerating the bullying negatively affects the children.

COPING MECHANISM

Children absorb what they observe – so they will pick up on the way their parents argue and imitate the same behaviour.

“Children will grow up learning to react similarly when they face difficult situations. They may yell or resort to physical abuse against others,” says Alex Lui, Head of the Psychology Department at HELP University.

Children also cope with conflict by displaying negative reactions. “They unload their emotions on others outside the family, such as friends, teachers, or people who will not really react to them,” says Alex Lui.

According to Child Education Psychologist, Lau Cheng Yi, if there is no avenue or platform for the children to safely express their emotions, then the children will learn to keep quiet.



“Sometimes, it is not that children do not want to talk about how they feel - they may not know what to say. Their fear is expressed in symptoms like not being able to sleep at night, having nightmares, grinding their teeth at night, crying, or having stomach aches.”

- Lau Cheng Yi, Child Education Psychologist

EXPRESSIONS OF DISTRESS



"If there is a problem or disagreement in my family, I think everyone should discuss it together and figure out how to solve it. Families may sometimes face a lot of problems, so we have to be patient and discuss it calmly. Some problems can be discussed with children."

- Julia, an Orang Asli from Raub (15)

RESOLVING CONFLICTS FAIRLY

BE ON THE SAME TEAM

"Yes, we can!"

Parents should be on the same team in the family. When the parents talk in terms of "you" and "I" (e.g. "I want...I don't like...I hate..."), they show an unwillingness to cooperate to reach a resolution that is in the best interest of everyone in the family, especially the children.

Talk about what **"we"** can do together, and what **"our"** common desires are.

BE CALM

"Let's talk about this after dinner."

Screaming insults ("You're stupid and useless! Get lost! I hate you!") at each other only makes the conflict worse.

Do not address the conflict when both spouses are angry. Set a specific time to discuss the issue so that there is time to cool down and to control the emotions.

“For me, a family should be harmonious, loving and rational. When there are problems, we should not be emotional, but should discuss the matter, listen to each other’s explanations and pray for each other.”

- Edora Embeli, an Orang Asli from Pahang (15)

BE FOCUSED

“What can we do?”

Argue about the issue at hand, and not to bring up his/her faults, mistakes and weaknesses (e.g. “Why don’t you ever listen to me? Look what happened, it’s all your fault.”).

Get to the root of the matter. It’s not about who is right or wrong – it’s about what you can both do to move forward.

BE EMPATHETIC

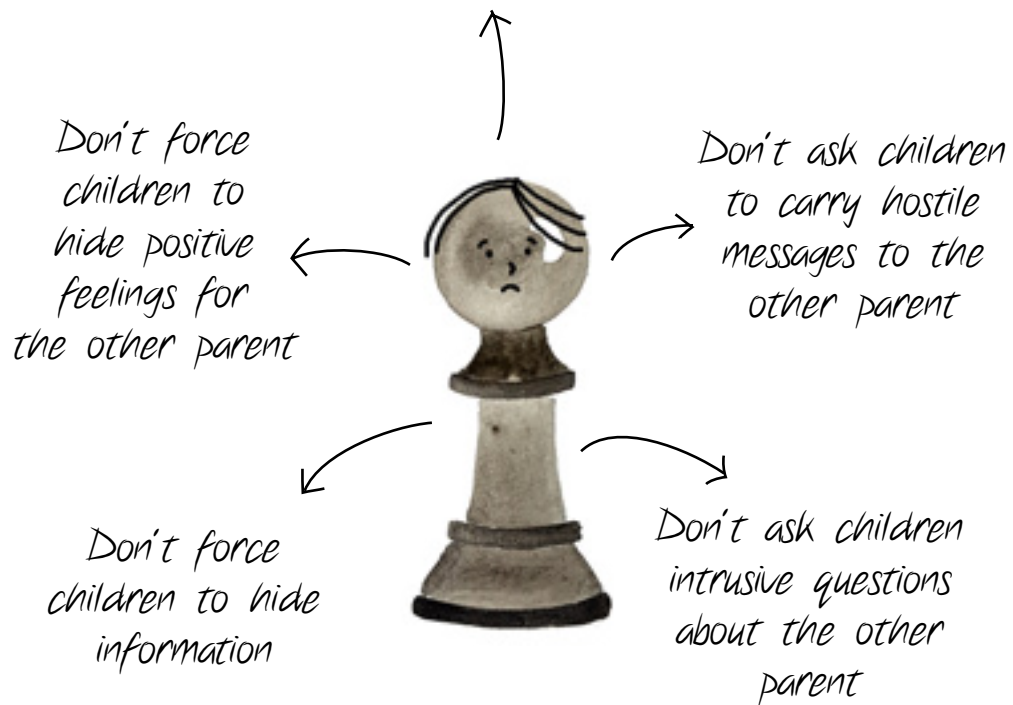
“I know things are stressful at work...”

See things from the other person’s perspective and understand why he/she behaves that way.

The discussion will be more productive as you look at the underlying problems that is causing the conflict.

YOUR CHILD IS **NOT** A PAWN IN YOUR CONFLICTS

*Don't criticise or put
down the other parent
in front of children*



Finally...

Four tips to keep in mind

TIP NUMBER ONE

Ask: When is it ok for your child to know about the conflict?

“If the problem involves the child, I think the parents should discuss with the child, rather than keep the child in the dark. If the child finds out accidentally, she will feel like the problem is worse than it actually is because the parents didn’t want to tell her.”

- Rachel, 19

Should you argue in front of your child? If you are having a screaming match, or arguing about adult matters like sex, the answer is definitely ‘No’.

Child Education Psychologist, Lau Cheng Yi also advises parents not to obviously disagree with the partner’s view in front of their children, especially when it relates to decisions involving the children.

“Inconsistency may not be something that they understand,” says Lau.

However, Alex Lui, Head of the Psychology Department at HELP University, believes that children should not be completely shielded from conflict, as they need to learn about matters that affect the family and how to resolve them.

“Children need to be reassured that disagreements are normal and that it will pass,” says Tan Ah Eng, volunteer counsellor with Focus on the Family.

“Have an open discussion about conflict that involves children, such as decisions about education or decisions that have a financial impact on the family. For example, if a child wants to study overseas, this may have financial implications that spark arguments between the parents,” says Tan.

Lau agrees: “The children can hear their parents reasoning, and see their coming to an agreement.”

TIP NUMBER TWO

Do not drag your child into the conflict

"I think parents should not involve the children... my parents used to fight in front of us, which actually affected our emotions and studies, especially my sister during her Form 6 - her results were bad - she's the oldest and she needed to take care of the family and needed to take care of her studies. My father is quite aggressive, and he would slap everyone and involve everyone, which really traumatised us."

- Teoh, 19

Resolving the conflict is not your child's responsibility. It is unfair to put the burden on your child to settle the conflict, or to take sides in an argument.

"Some parents drag their children into the conflict, by using 'political methods', such as spoiling the child. This can lead to the child picking a 'favourite' parent, and being forced to support that parent in an argument," says Lui.



Artwork by Aswina, an Orang Asli from Johor (15) "Behind a smile, in truth, this heart is filled with pain"



TIP NUMBER THREE

Explain the conflict to your child

“[When I become a parent] maybe if we fight and the children hear it, I will go to them and I will talk to them. I will ask them not to feel worried about dad harbouring anything or of mom raising her voice. I will apologize to the children and ask them not to be stressed over it and to forget about the incident.”

- Britny, 16

No matter how mature your children may seem, they are not adults. They still need a lot of reassurance and a sense of security. When talking to them about a conflict, be sure that they don't end up feeling guilty or helpless.

“You can tell them, ‘Mommy and Daddy needs to talk about this and we need some time and we will get back to you.’ Then they can learn empathy, that even parents have problems and there are no straightforward answers. You are bringing them along as you solve problems, but at their level of understanding,” says Lau.

Meanwhile, Lui says the keywords to keep in mind are **“explain”** and **“two-way communication”**. Parents must have a controlled discussion with children, in which they explain the conflict and reassure them that matters can be resolved.

Maintaining two-way communication means ensuring that children are able to voice out their own opinions and concerns about the conflict, so that parents can help them work through it.

“Bad Memories” by Britny, an Orang Asli from Raub (16)

TIP NUMBER FOUR

Use the right language

"A husband and wife should not use crude language, such as language that hurts each other's feelings."

- Inis, 16

Lau says parents need to use "emotion" words in their conversation (but not get emotional), so that their children can also learn how to express themselves. "For example, parents should say 'I am cross that you did not tidy up', instead of 'Ahh! Why did you make such a mess?'"

The latter only communicates negativity without providing the option of a solution.

"By using words like 'I'm upset' or 'I'm so pleased', you are telling children what it is about their behaviour that you are unhappy/happy about. You are also communicating your feelings and how it is connected to their behaviour," says Lau.

In any conflict or disagreement at home, find the opportunity to have a constructive outcome so that children can learn about solving problems and managing emotions in a healthy way.

"Memories that make me angry"
by Inis (16)





"The cloud and rain represent my bad memories. My sadness and anger is over my parents' divorce and my mother's death. It made me so sad and I cannot deny it anymore.

The durian thorns are like my step-siblings when they complain all kinds of things about me to my stepmother, so she scolds me without knowing whether it's true or false. I feel hurt, like I have been stabbed by thorns, so much that I feel as if the pain will never go away.

The fire is my anger. When I get angry, my face turns very red and I will throw and punch things to release my frustration.

I also have sweet memories of my family as we are now. Now that my stepmother understands me, I feel her love for me. I think she understands me because I have lost my birth mother, so she feels sorry for me and tries to be the best mother to me.

This is the sign of a united family – when we have problems, we share and discuss it together."

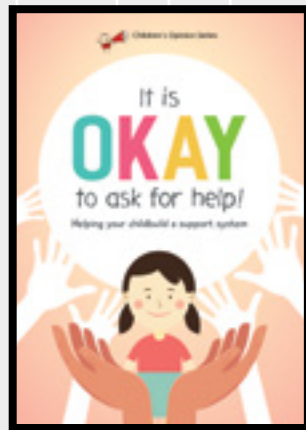
- Edora, 16

Collect all 3 booklets from the series!



Booklet 1

Speaking your child's
love language



Booklet 2

It is OKAY to
ask for help!

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.

Digital booklets are available at our website:
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Write to us at:

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