

## **Executive summary**

### **Background**

In recent years, there is increasing concern about psycho-social problems in young people such as substance abuse, delinquency, suicide, and teenage pregnancy. Many of these adolescent problems can be traced back to the early childhood years. Children who exhibit behaviour problems at an early age are at a higher risk of adolescent behaviour problems. Child behaviour problems are associated with a number of parenting and family support variables. It is clear that if these parenting and child behaviour problems are not addressed, and early onset behaviour problems are not treated or prevented, aggressive children are likely to go on to develop various delinquent problems. One of the effective interventions is parenting programmes to equip parents with positive, non-violent discipline methods and supportive parenting approaches that promote child psychosocial development. Recognizing the importance of early intervention, the Family Health Service, Department of Health, Hong Kong, launched its parenting programme for parents of children from birth to five in 2002 through its Maternal and Child Health Centres (MCHCs).

The present study is a survey of the profile of child behaviour problems, parenting and family support, in terms of parental perception of child behaviour problems, parenting stress and parenting sense of competence, marital relationship, and social support, conducted prior to the introduction of the aforesaid parenting programme. The survey may be repeated regularly to track changes in the above parameters, to examine co-occurrence of the various child behaviour, parenting and family support variables, and to provide data for comparisons between subpopulations of families. The information can also shed light on the effectiveness of the territory-wide parenting programme and the needs of parents and children for services.

### **Survey design and findings**

The participants were Chinese parents with children aged 4 years (+/- 6 months) who had registered with MCHCs and were living in Hong Kong during the study period. A multi-stage cluster sampling method was used. A total of 942 useable questionnaires were returned, with a response rate of 83.29%. The participants were requested to complete a set of questionnaires on child behaviour problems, parenting and family support variables, and access to parenting education.

The results indicated that approximately 10% of children may have clinically significant behaviour problems, which warrants further evaluation. Parenting and family support variables were associated with socioeconomic factors such as parents' educational level, parents' occupational status and family income, together with type of childcare assistance. Families with parents of lower educational level, lower occupational status, and lower family income were reporting higher problem levels. The results also indicated that parenting and

family support variables and child behaviour problems were associated with one another. In particular, one of the more important factors was the availability of social support, in the sense of having someone to share in times of stress. Families with social support were more likely to report lower child behaviour problems, lower parenting stress, less frequent use of dysfunctional discipline styles, higher parenting efficacy and higher marital satisfaction. Parents with children with more behaviour problems were more likely to report higher parenting stress, lower parenting efficacy and lower marital satisfaction.

As far as parenting education is concerned, the study results showed that fathers and younger parents were less likely to participate in parenting education. Parents were most likely to access parenting education through direct services to children such as schools and MCHCs.

### **Implications for services**

In terms of service provision, the results indicate that more attention should be paid to several categories of parents.

- Approximately 10% of children may have clinically significant behaviour problems, which warrants further evaluation. Services should be provided to these children and their families to help them deal with the problem.
- It is apparent that parents of low socioeconomic status (low educational level, low occupational status and low income level) are experiencing considerable difficulties in parenting. Services should be targeted towards this group of parents to give them support to deal with their parenting difficulties.
- As fathers and younger parents are less likely to access parenting education, strategies should be devised to encourage more fathers and younger parents to participate in parenting education.

The results suggest that schools and MCHCs are popular access points for parenting education as they are very accessible and there is no stigma associated with attending these premises.

It is evident that social support for parents is related to child behaviour problems and parenting difficulties. Services to enhance social support among parents, such as parent support groups, parent self-help groups etc will help to build up social support network among parents.