

Save the Children Hong Kong Response to the Policy Address 2020

The Chief Executive has delivered the policy address and rolled out measures to alleviate the impacts of months of social unrest and the COVID-19 outbreak. In response to the Policy Address, Save the Children have the following suggestions to further ensure the laws, policies and practices of government are fully compatible with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC):

Educational Support

Ongoing social tensions and the outbreak of the COVID-19 have caused continuous school suspension, which affects students' learning progress and well-being. The school suspension can also have significant impact on younger children, who have been out of schools the longest and for whom this education gap cannot be compensated with online learning.

Interpersonal interaction with adults and peers during the early years is critical to children's acquisition of key knowledge and skills, as well as their social-emotional development and well-being, and the absence of such interactions has immediate as well as long-term impacts on their development. In addition to the new grants that are allocated to support the blended approach to teaching and learning, the government should provide adequate supports to schools to ensure that the physical, mental health and psychosocial support are fully integrated into educational responses.

Parental Education and Support

In addition to students, parents in Hong Kong are also overwhelmed with their responsibilities to educate their children at home among other existing commitments, while financial distress increases with the declining economy. Increased stress has contributed to increases of domestic violence. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), nearly 3 in 4 children or 300 million children aged 2–4 years old regularly suffer physical punishment and/or psychological violence at the hands of parents and caregivers.¹

In a global study conducted by Save the Children that looked at “The Hidden Impact of COVID-19 on Child Protection and Wellbeing” also revealed that 22% of parents/caregivers reported an increase in their use of negative or violent parenting methods.²

This complicated situation highlighted the importance of parent education and support. The government should consider implementing large-scale parent education programmes and support services including counselling, domestic violence services and parenting advice, to improve access to support services and enhance child-parent relationships.

Online Protection

School closures and social distancing measures have resulted in online platforms and communities becoming essential tools to support children's learning, socialisation and play.

Apart from opportunities for sustaining and promoting children's learning and socialising, these same tools may also increase children's exposure to online risks. Worldwide, an estimated 750,000 individuals are trying to connect with children online for sexual purposes at any one time.³ In Hong Kong, it was recently reported that an increasing number of juveniles have fallen victim to child pornography or sex crimes as they make online friends while getting stuck at home amid the pandemic. The situation is alarming.

To better address the risks, the government should consider raising public awareness of online risks for children, providing further information for children, parents and teachers on how best to protect children from these risks, and creating the legal infrastructure to provide necessary protection to children when using Internet.

Mental Health

During the consultation period, we have proposed policies to address the mental health needs of children and young people. We appreciate the government's effort to provide additional \$300 million to better support the needy in the community and raise public awareness of mental health. To expedite the impact for children, the government should consider allocating funds to schools and relevant non-governmental organisations to implement tailor-made programmes that match the needs of their users.

To better address the mental health issues in Hong Kong, we suggest the government adopt multi-pronged approaches to resolve issues concerning children's mental health in Hong Kong. Save the Children Hong Kong examines the mental health needs of children in Hong Kong and offers recommendations to address the needs in the following report: <https://savethechildren.click/mental-health-report>

References:

1. World Health Organization. (2020, June 8). Child maltreatment.. <https://www.who.int/news-room/factsheets/detail/child-maltreatment>
2. Ritz, D., O'Hare, G. and Burgess, M. (2020), *The Hidden Impact of COVID-19 on Child Protection and Wellbeing*. London, Save the Children International.
3. WePROTECT Global Alliance (2019), *Global Threat Assessment 2019: Working together to end the sexual exploitation of children online, End Violence Against Children*, New York, 2019 .

