

Save the Children Hong Kong Recommendations on the 2022 Policy Address

Save the Children's vision is a world in which every child attains the right to survival, protection, development and participation. We draw from over 100 years of experience to transform the lives of children in Hong Kong and around the world. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), an international agreement setting out the rights of every child, is at the heart of what we do. In Hong Kong, we regularly review policies related to children and their rights and provide recommendations to support the development of comprehensive, child-centred government policies and practices that align with the UNCRC.

In advance of this year's Policy Address, we want to draw the government's attention to the following recommendations.

Protect children from harm

In recent years, numerous heartbreaking child abuse and neglect cases involved parents and child-serving organisations. According to the Social Welfare Department's Child protection registry report, there were 1,367 reported newly registered cases of abuse or neglect in 2021, a 45% increase from the previous year. 43.4% of these were physical harm and abuse, and in the majority of the cases (59.9%), the perpetrators were parents of the children. In addition, our Young Voices research in 2021 reveals that nearly 1 in 5 young respondents often or always worried about experiencing violence from an adult, 1 in 5 youth does not know where to seek help when facing violence, and 46% of them indicate they worry about being punished by their parents.

Corporal punishment or violence against children causes a range of longer-term negative impacts, including physical harm, poor mental and emotional health, atypical brain function, lower cognitive development, and perpetration of violence and anti-social behaviour in adulthood. Protecting children from harm is the responsibility of all adults. The government's measures are essential to better protect children from abuse and neglect through law reform, allocating resources to professional training, investigation, and raising public awareness. We urge the government to:

- Prohibit corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading punishment of children in all settings and speed up the legislative process of the mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse cases and "failure to protect" law.
- Launch public education campaigns to build a culture of zero tolerance for violence against children across society.
- Scale-up parenting education programmes to promote the use of non-violent communication methods. Families and caregivers with a high risk of or history of abuse or neglect should be especially targeted for parent education and counselling services.
- Ensure the existing human resources, training, investigation mechanism, foster care, and social services support can cope with the proposed legislative changes in mandatory reporting requirement for designated professionals to report suspected child abuse cases.
- Strengthen training for front-line professionals such as teachers and social workers to learn how best to communicate with children and youth about violence and abuse, and increase vigilance to suspected child abuse cases.
- Incorporate child protection education into the regular curriculum to encourage help-seeking behavior, build children's resilience and ensure they know where to seek help when needed.
- Introduce incentive schemes to subsidise all child-serving organisations to establish child safeguarding mechanisms and enhance their capacity to keep children safe.

Protect Children's mental health

The social and emotional well-being of children is as important as physical health. Good mental health allows children to cope with life challenges and realise their full potential.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), globally, 1 in 7 children and youth aged 10-19 experience mental health conditions. While there is no official data in Hong Kong to monitor the situation in the mental health of different age groups, the rising demand for child and youth psychiatric services may highlight the severity of the situation. For example, the caseload of children and youth aged below handled by the Hospital Authority's psychiatric teams rose from 26,500 in 2014 to 42,700 in 2021, representing an increase of nearly 61% in 7 years.

Due to the lack of knowledge, misunderstanding or stigma, in relation to mental health issues, some children may remain undiagnosed and untreated, their poor mental health could continue to affect them into adulthood. In addition to receiving treatment, early interventions or self-care practices are equally important to reduce risk factors and prevent a mental illness from impacting children and youth's long-term development. Mental wellbeing of the next generation in an area that the government should commit to prioritise and invest in. Therefore, we urge the government to:

- Accelerate schools' adoption of the Whole School Approach to promote mental health amongst students. Make Social and Emotional Learning one of the core goals of education at all levels, and integrate the knowledge into the school curriculum to ensure children can better understand and manage emotion, show empathy for others, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.
- Provide additional training to teachers and school social workers to enhance children's social and emotional skills and support them to drive early identification and support students with mental health needs.
- Support community organisations in raising public awareness on mental health to reduce the stigma associated with help-seeking behaviours, and strengthening community and family support for at-risk children.

- Increase resources for public child psychiatric specialist outpatient services to reduce the waiting time for those who suffer from ADHD, autism, depression, anxiety disorder or other psychological illnesses.
- Ensure the supply of psychiatrists, community psychiatric nurses, and case managers can meet long-term human resources needs according to the guidelines of the World Health Organization and increase the supply of educational psychologists to provide better support to students who suffer from poor mental health.
- Review the education curriculum and public examination system to reduce study pressure and foster balanced development for students.

Empower children and youth with hope and opportunity

Young people are the future pillars and members of our society. So this society must be open and fair so that all children in the next generation can see hope and opportunity to participate for future success. However, a survey conducted by the Chinese University of Hong Kong showed that 52% of the respondents said there are insufficient opportunities for upward mobility, and 63.3% think the current opportunities for upward mobility have declined compared to 10 years ago.

In 2021, 23.6% of Hong Kong children live in poverty, and the youth unemployment rate rose from 8.6% in 2017 to 12.9% in 2021. Income inequality and a lower socioeconomic status affect educational attainment, income level, and well-being. The government has a role in empowering children and youth with skills, knowledge, and opportunities to participate for future success. We urge the government to:

- Increase the number of youth engagement programmes to encourage children and youth's participation in civic affairs.
- Increase the proportion of young advisors in the Commission on Children and Youth Development Commission, to ensure their voices are heard and their ideas, demands and lived experiences are reflected, shared, and visible in the policy-making process.
- Expand the coverage of financial schemes and increase the amount of student financial assistance and to support underprivileged families to address inter-generational poverty issues.
- Increase resources to provide upward mobility opportunities especially for underprivileged youth, enhancing their knowledge in key skills for the future and exposure to different career opportunities.