

~~Wrong priorities  
harming children~~

■ **By Suganthi Supermaniam, Lavinia Dhanangunan and Ili Liyana Mokhtar**  
news@nst.com.my

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Four children go missing every day. One in three children has mental health problems.

One in 11 children scored straight As in their Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah this year.

These figures and the growing legion of obese children, with rising cases of Type 2 diabetes, high-blood pressure and high cholesterol level, have got experts wondering whether Malaysians have got their priorities right — focusing on educational excellence to the detriment of the children's safety and health.

They are questioning if the misplaced focus could be the cause of the woes facing children.

The medical profession has blamed parents' indulgence for the growing number of obese children and health problems such as diabetes, high-blood pressure and high cholesterol level.

Sri Murugan Centre director and founder Datuk Dr M. Thambirajah said everything began with the family unit.

He said in the past, teachers took it upon themselves to play the dual role of educator and parent.

"But today, because of the workload and pressure to perform, they can no longer play the dual role. It is unfair to expect that from them."

Thambirajah said children from middle-class families faced competition every day in examinations, piano lessons, art classes and others. He said these children faced stress.

Human Dynamic child counsellor Wong Yee Men agreed that children were stressed out these days, but disagreed that this problem was confined to middle-class families.

"Today, both parents have their own careers. Children want their parents to spend time with them, period."

Wong said she had seen an increase in referral cases from parents, teachers and counsellors for children with behavioural problems, learning difficulties or even emotional blockages.

"I feel the root problem lies with the parents."

Wong said parents often brought back their "baggage"

from work and this would have an adverse impact on the child's life.

"For example, because of a bad day at work, the parent could have snapped at the child over a simple matter like watching television. This will stress out the child."

Children's safety has also become a crucial issue.

With more than 8,000 children reported missing over the last five years and more than 500 in the first six months of this year, experts are wringing their hands on what can be done.

Even the missing children alert system remains just a proposal.

Health-wise, our children are not doing too good, either.

Children as young as 7 are developing Type 2 diabetes as a result of their couch-potato lifestyle and high-calorie food.

Hospital Putrajaya, the referral hospital for diabetes cases in the country, has been recording an "alarming" increase in the number of cases.

Hospital Putrajaya paediatrics department head Dr Fuziah Md Zain said children with a propensity for Type 2 diabetes were usually the youngest in the family.

"We believe that because the youngest child is usually the pet in the family, parents give in to their demands for high-calorie food."

The latest National Health and Morbidity Study showed that 20 per cent of children and teenagers in Malaysia have mental ailments.

The figure was 13 per cent in 1996.

Gleneagles Medical Centre Penang consultant psychiatrist Dr Zsmani Shafiee, during a Family Day gathering last month, said some 130,000 Malaysian children and adolescents suffered mental illnesses.

Selayang Hospital saw a 300 per cent increase in the number of children seeking psychiatric help in the past four years.

HELP University College's developmental and counselling psychologist Dr Brendan J. Gomez said depression, stress, violence and suicide were on the rise among young people.

"It is a really worrying trend, and we want to try and address that problem right now."

Universiti Teknologi Mara's Faculty of Medicine consultant psychiatrist Associate Profes-

## FACT FILE

### Diabetes

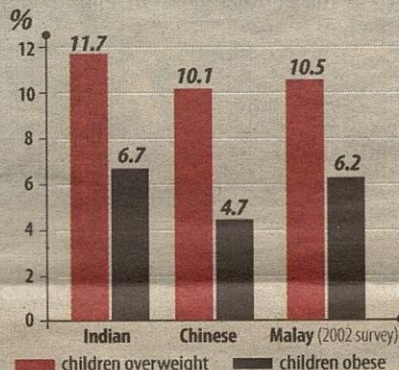
- Children as young as 7 are developing Type 2 diabetes

### Children's mental health

- **130,000** children suffer from mental illnesses
- **53** children under 11 and **1,837** above 12 attempted suicide in 2000

### Obesity

- Highest obesity rate seen among pre-school and primary schoolchildren (2006 study)
- **11 per cent** of Peninsular Malaysia children between 6 and 12 were overweight and 6 per cent were obese (2000 UKM study).



### Safety and security

- **8,000** children missing in the last 5 years
- **Three of four** missing children are girls
- **Four of 10** children go missing after running away with peers or lovers
- More than **500** children were reported missing between January and May this year

sor Dr Osman Chik Bakar disagreed that parents should be blamed for the malaise.

"Genetically, children are not the same, so parents need to approach their children by how they respond. Sometimes, a child can respond just by communicating with the parents.

"Other times, a more forceful approach is needed."

He said other factors could also contribute to stress experienced by children such as influence from peers, media and Internet.

"We can't protect our children from everything.

"After all, we live in very challenging times where everything is made available to them."

National Union of the Teaching Profession secretary-general Lok Yim Pheng said parents could control and monitor younger children but it was not that easy with older

ones.

"Parents should control their children but just how much can they control them?"

"Cyber cafes, for example, are like a magnet for children.

"If the attraction is too great, how much can the parents control their children?"

Lok said the authorities should not allow cyber cafes to operate near schools and should stop schoolchildren from entering them.

"If it is difficult for the child to enter the cyber cafe, I think he or she will have no choice but to go home."

Women's Aid Organisation executive director Ivy Josiah said it was insensitive to place the blame on parents alone, as keeping a child safe was the responsibility of the whole community.

She said the focus should not be on parents but on creating a safer environment for children.