



Tripping on the starting line

A local kindergarten student recently announced that she wanted to kill herself because of stress, and doctors are seeing more and more cases of children having emotional problems. What has gone wrong with our education system?

LIFE in Hong Kong has been described as a pressure cooker, and obviously even youngsters are not spared the stress.

As more parents are subscribing to the view that success depends on an early head start, they are starting boot camp-style training for their children earlier and earlier in their lives.

In an attempt to ‘fully identify their potential’, parents enrol their offspring in various pre-school programmes, interest courses and playgroups. But these activities have proven too stressful for many of our children.

The community was shocked when a five-year-old girl in K-3 told her parents she wanted to “jump out of the window” after attending a series of **stressful** primary school application interviews.

She was subsequently **diagnosed** to be suffering from depression, and her case was not the only one. Psychiatrists report that incidences of young children seeking help for emotional problems are rising.

Clearly, the **fashionable** ‘winning on the starting line’ motto is taking a toll on the well-being of our children.

Symptoms of a sick system

COMPETITION to get into the ‘best’ schools has prompted parents to start preparing their children for the education treadmill early.

In the hope of gaining an edge in primary school applications, children as young as two or three years old are made to participate in an array of training courses, competitions, performances and even **voluntary** work.

There are many **symptoms** showing that something is very wrong with our approach with respect to our children’s education.

Scramble for kindergarten places

SCENES of parents lining up to get application forms outside primary schools can now be seen outside kindergartens too.

The situation was particularly bad in the Northern District where kindergarten places are in short supply, with local parents fearing that children of non-resident parents are swarming in.

In order to ensure that their children got a place, some parents applied to over 30 schools in the district. Others were so concerned that they quit their jobs to give school applications their full attention.



Building a winning portfolio

AS competition to get into popular kindergartens and primary schools is fierce, parents are doing all they can to give their children a fighting chance. Tutorial classes, training courses for admission interviews and interest programmes have now become a necessary part of local students’ educational careers.

A new survey by The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (香港青年協會) on Primary 5 and 6 students is revealing of how far parents are prepared to go. Of the more than 500 students surveyed, 63 percent were taking after-school tutorial classes, with nine starting when they were in kindergarten.



Advert on a bus for a tutorial school.

Another study of 1,400 primary and secondary students during the summer holidays found 66 percent of them expected to take part in at least six different extracurricular activities when school starts, with 33 percent saying they would be taking part in 11.

Preparation for primary school applications represents a heavy financial burden for parents. Some families are reported as having to spend close to HK\$20,000 a month on a child during the kindergarten stage to cover fees for school, tutorial lessons and training courses.

Training PI student in stock trading

THE obsession with giving children a ‘head start’ also **manifests** itself in age-inappropriate teaching materials. A picture of a Hong Kong pre-school classroom that was uploaded to the internet recently caught international attention. It showed a whiteboard listing index movements of major stock markets around the world.

US magazine *The Atlantic* carried a related report under the tongue-in-cheek headline ‘Be terrified: Hong Kong’s banker babies are learning finance in pre-K’. But the light tone of the report **belied** the serious problem of pushing children too hard too early.

Showing the same problem was a Primary 1 worksheet from a Hong Kong school that has also gone viral. It dealt with diverse issues such as the mainland’s new law prohibiting ‘low cost’ tours, artiste Eric Tsang Chi-wai (曾志偉) quitting as chairman of Hong Kong Performing Artistes Guild (香港演藝人協會) and taxi fare rises.

It triggered a hot debate as to how six-year-olds would find these matters relevant, or be able to comprehend their significance.

Academics say that while students should be encouraged to pay attention to current affairs, it is **counterproductive** to cram them with materials that are too difficult for their age.

All parents want to give their children the best, but are their efforts and sacrifices having desirable results? Does putting children through unrelenting and grueling training really helping?

Markets		
Name	Last	% change
DOW JONES	15,081.47	-0.20
S&P	1,655.83	-0.33
NASDAQ	3,602.78	-0.09
FTSE	6,499.99	+0.26
HANG SENG	22,443.48	-0.33
ASX 200	5,114.20	+0.01
SENSEX	18,578.18	-3.71
NIKKEI	13,612.72	-0.27

Financial information as learning material for young kids in a nursery.

Soul-searching time

MANY parents try to train their children to be multi-talented, but end up making them good at nothing or even putting their health at risk. Most of the 4,600 cases of students seeking help at The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups last year were related to academic pressure and stress.

But experience in many countries shows that school can be fun and children need not be subjected to hardships to be successful in their academic careers and later in life.

Perhaps it is time our parents and educators did some soul-searching on whether we want to continue with what we are doing with our children’s education, and how we can help them to be happy and successful. ♥

Key ideas

Hong Kong parents are pushing their children too hard in the hope of ensuring their success in life. As a result, many youngsters are over-stressed and cases of emotional problems among children are increasing. We should think about whether the efforts of our parents and educators are misguided.

Did you know?

Stress can cause physical symptoms such as stomach aches and headaches. If a child complains about these symptoms frequently, especially when the complaints increase in certain situations, such as before a big examination, the child may be experiencing significant stress.

Critical questions

1. Are Hong Kong parents pushing their children too hard?
2. If you could change one thing in our education system, what would it be?

References

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Comic-1 The big market



Comic-2 Detecting depression among students

