Are We Pushing Our Children Too Hard in Academics?
By Dr Ryan Hong, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology;
CFPR Research Associate, NUS
As featured on Lianhe Zaobao, 1 January 2017

Singapore’s educational system enjoys an excellent international reputation as one that produces students who are highly knowledgeable and competent. In 2015, Singapore came in first place in science and mathematics scores of 15-year-olds in a ranking survey of 76 countries done by the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Undoubtedly, there is a pervasive climate of ensuring high standards and expectations from parents and teachers to excel academically. Singaporean students are often faced with immense academic stress and even young children attending primary schools are not exempted from this stressful environment.

The question of whether we are subjecting our children to excessive stress in school came sharply into public focus recently due to the tragic case of an 11 year-old boy who committed suicide because he did not do well in his exam and was afraid of telling his grades to his parents. This particular case of suicide occurred against the backdrop of a spike in suicide rates among children and adolescents (aged 10-19 years) in 2015. Although the underlying reasons for ending one’s life differ from case to case, a number of cases seem to point to reasons where children fail to meet academic expectations.

Parents often have high expectations of their children’s academic performance and some may demonstrate this by urging the child to achieve good grades, while others may overreact when the child makes mistakes and falls short of expectations. Such parental behavior can potentially influence a child’s self-views, in particular their beliefs about how perfect they should be when it comes to schoolwork. Setting high standards and striving to achieve those standards are definitely behaviours that we hope to see in our children. However, in this pursuit of excellence, we want to avoid a potential downside – to become overly concerned of one’s mistakes and whether one’s performance is matching up to high standards imposed by others (such as parents and teachers). This concern of making errors and falling short of expectations is known as maladaptive perfectionism.

Research has shown that individuals who are high on maladaptive perfectionism are often anxious, depressed, and suffer from burnout over the long term. They are also less creative and innovative, often sticking to the tried-and-tested way of doing things. A more important question that has yet to be adequately addressed in research is how does maladaptive perfectionism emerge in children in the first place?

In a five-year study on primary school children in Singapore, a team of us from the Department of Psychology at the National University of Singapore found that a majority of children felt that others such as parents and teachers have high expectations on them to be perfect. Furthermore, children with intrusive and controlling parents had a higher tendency to be overly critical of themselves and this tendency increased over the years. Controlling parents often deprive children the opportunities to learn (even from making mistakes) in a nonthreatening environment. When parents intrude, it signals to children that they are not good enough that parents have to intervene in various domains.
of their lives. As a consequence, these children may become overly concerned about committing even the slightest errors. Over time, children develop maladaptive perfectionistic beliefs and show elevated depression or anxiety symptoms.

A study done in the United States and Germany shows that parents’ aspirations for their children’s academic achievement can be a positive motivating force for the children, enabling them to perform well in studies. However, when parents have excessive expectations (i.e., over-aspirations) on their children’s achievement, the children’s academic performance suffers over time.

In general, research suggests that children do not do well academically and emotionally when parents place unrealistically high demands on them and intrude into their learning space excessively. When children develop maladaptive perfectionistic beliefs, they become less inclined to seek help for problems as they do not want others to know that they can be vulnerable at times. This could further exacerbate the emotional distress in children with such beliefs.

What can parents do to prevent their children from developing maladaptive perfectionistic beliefs? While parents definitely can have expectations about their children, parents need to be mindful of whether their expectations are realistic given the children’s ability and the way they communicate their expectations. Parents often think that by pushing their children hard in studying, they are doing it for the sake of the children’s future. However, parents need to ask themselves if doing so is undermining their children’s joy of learning and discovery at their own pace. The advice is: know your child’s ability and set realistic standards for him or her.

How parents communicate their expectations is also very critical. Parents could show support to their children’s learning process by helping them set realistic goals and work towards achieving those goals. Foster a supportive climate of learning from mistakes and failing, recognizing that making mistakes are part and parcel of a learning process. Do not simply set high expectations and demand high performance from your child without providing emotional and learning support. Do not compare your child to others and put him or her down. Do not communicate “all-or-nothing” thinking to your child (e.g., “Getting second place is not enough, you need to get first place”). Acknowledge and celebrate the achievements and efforts put in by your child.

In his 2016 National Day Rally speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong recounted a moment when he was asked about three wishes he had for Singapore. He said that he had just two wishes. The first was that we could be blessed with a “divine discontent” and always be driven to do better in what we do. The second wish was that we have the wisdom to count our blessings, knowing how precious our country is and we know how to protect and treasure it. In many ways, what the PM has said can be applied to how we see our children. We hope to inculcate in them a motivation to strive for the better, but at the same time, to celebrate what they have achieved and treasure them as our beloved children. Demonstrating that we are always supporting our children in their journey of learning will go a long way in helping them achieve their potential and making their journey an enjoyable one.