Academic Stress Among Primary Schoolers in Singapore: *Investigating the mental health impact of a childhood defined by PSLE*

Summary

This study addresses the gap in research in Singapore around the impact of academic stress on the mental health of primary school students, particularly given the unique pressures of the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). It highlights the critical importance of this period of childhood and preadolescence for long-term mental health, given that half of all mental health issues begin before age 14.

Through interviews with 15 mental health experts who work with this age group, the study confirms that academic pressure, especially surrounding the PSLE, is a major source of distress for local students, leading to symptoms like apathy, school refusal, self-injury, anxiety, and low self-esteem, with potential long-term negative impacts on self-perception. Experts also identified parental expectations, school culture, and internally-generated stress as significant contributing factors to this academic pressure. They expressed concern about chronic stress and the PSLE dominating childhood, limiting play, rest and opportunities for personal development.

This study suggests that the current education system's emphasis on high-stakes exams at an early age may harm children's mental well-being, ultimately weakening human capital. Its findings support calls for updates to the primary education system that would delay stack-ranking and high-stakes exams in order to better support children's holistic development and mental health.

1. Introduction

1a. Literature Review

Academic stress has been linked to adverse mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, across diverse populations of children and youth in both Asian and Western contexts (Steare et al., 2023). In Singapore, academic stress is positively correlated with depressive symptoms (Ang and Huan, 2006a) and non-suicidal self-injury among youth (Tan et al., 2014), and has been found to be one predictor of suicidal behavior (Ho et al., 1999), with depression playing a mediating role (Ang and Huan, 2006b). Yet, academic stress in Singapore remains an under-studied phenomenon. A 2020 systematic review of research on adolescent depression in Singapore noted that academic stress was "conspicuously absent" from the literature, despite being a risk factor for depression (Goh et al., 2023). Given the poor state of mental health in Singapore today – with the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) reporting that 1 in 3 youth (aged 15-35) display "severe or extremely severe" symptoms of depression, anxiety, and/or stress (IMH, 2024) – it is time for a deeper examination of academic stress and its relationship to mental health.

Half of all mental health problems first occur before age 14 (Goh et al., 2023), making childhood and preadolescence critical formative periods in individuals' long-term mental health. One study found that 16.9% of Singaporean primary schoolers show "clinically elevated symptoms of depression" and 9.3% display similarly elevated symptoms of anxiety (Magiati et al., 2015). However, the potential link between adverse mental health outcomes and academic stress during primary school has not been adequately explored. Valuable research has documented the intense anxiety, burnout, and other negative emotions that parents (disproportionately, mothers) experience in the lead-up to the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), which Singaporean children take the year they turn 12 (Teo, Y., 2022; Singapore Children's Society, 2021), but little has been written about the mental health of children themselves during this period. This is a significant omission, especially given that Singapore is unique among developed nations in the amount of high-stakes academic pressure it imposes on its primary schoolers (EveryChild.SG, 2022). More recently, the authors of the 2021 Global Burden of Disease study for Asean noted that academic pressure may be linked to increased mental health issues among young people, though this idea is not explored in-depth in the report (Teo, J., 2025).

One likely reason for this gap in the literature is, simply, the myriad ethical and logistical challenges inherent in performing research on young children, especially those belonging to vulnerable populations (e.g., mental health clients). Another contributing reason may be the enduring popular notion that 'children are resilient' – that is, that 'minor' stressful experiences in childhood (e.g., consistently failing to meet expectations at school) are not likely to have a significant impact on a child's long-term mental health. Research from countries similar to Singapore, however, demonstrates that this is not the case. Primary school-aged children are no more immune to the mental health impacts of academic pressure than are their teenage brothers and sisters. A high correlation between academic stress and adverse mental health outcomes has been found among primary schoolers in China (Hesketh et al., 2010) and in Hong Kong (Leung et al., 2010). A separate, longitudinal study in China found that poor academic achievement at age 8 was associated with depression at age 10, with researchers positing that the negative "social feedback" received by underperforming 8-year-olds may be one driver of their later depression (Chen et al., 1995).

Two resources hint at the centrality of academic achievement to Singaporean primary schoolers' mental health and overall worldview. First, research published in 2016 by Singapore Children's Society found that even young primary schoolers strongly associated so-called 'elite' secondary schools (i.e., schools attended by top scorers on the PSLE) with high social status and material affluence; they associated 'non-elite' schools with the inverse (Ong and Cheung, 2016). In other words, the perception of a social hierarchy based on academic merit already constitutes a key feature of Singaporean children's worldview from a young age, and may naturally contribute to their experience of academics as both high-stakes and high-stress.

Second, the Singaporean children's mental health hotline, Tinkle Friend, reports that "school-related issues", which include "academic stress, struggles with managing co-curricular activities, challenges with teachers and transitional stress when facing assessments and examinations", are the top topics of conversation among its primary school-aged users (Shafeeq, 2024). It appears that Singapore's primary schoolers do, indeed, experience some degree of academic stress, though to what extent, and with what potential long-term effects, we do not yet know.

1b. Study Background

This study aims to bridge the gap in our understanding of how academic stress affects the mental well-being of primary school-aged children in Singapore. Specifically, it explores the relationship between academic stress and poor mental health among children aged 7-12, identifying both risk and protective factors that influence their experiences. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- How does academic stress relate to poor mental health among primary school students in Singapore?

- To what extent does the PSLE – which has been linked to increased parental stress (Teo, Y., 2022; Singapore Children's Society, 2021) – also contribute to stress-related mental health issues among primary school students?

- What are the broader spillover effects of primary school academic stress on families and communities?

By addressing these questions, this study aims to provide deeper insights into the pressures faced by primary school-aged children, and to inform strategies for reducing academic stress and supporting mental well-being.

1c. Methods

This study was conducted using a series of semi-structured interviews with mental health experts who work with primary school-aged children and their families in Singapore. Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling. Clinical psychologists working with children in Singapore were identified through publicly available information and contacted via cold emails. Additionally, some psychologists and psychiatrists were referred through professional networks. This approach ensured that participants had relevant expertise while allowing for additional recruitment through professional referrals. Interviews were recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The transcriptions were then qualitatively coded using an inductive approach to identify recurring themes and patterns.

We conducted interviews with 15 mental health experts, including 10 clinical psychologists[1], 2 psychiatrists, 1 educational psychologist, 1 psychotherapist, and 1 child and family specialist. On average, the experts had 16.6 years of practice. While most currently work in private practice, they collectively have 67 years of experience in public-serving mental health institutions in Singapore, such as the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) and the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), and Social Service Agencies (SSAs). The group comprised 11 women and 4 men. Two experts were expatriates living in Singapore, while the remaining 87% were Singaporean citizens or permanent residents.

1d. Limitations

Most of the experts we interviewed are currently in private practice, and therefore primarily serve children from middle- to upper-income families, with most reporting a rough 50/50 split between local and expat clients. As such, our findings may have limited generalizability to children from lower- and lower-middle-income families. Further research is needed to understand whether academic stress contributes to poor mental health among these children.

Our findings align with those of the Singapore Youth Epidemiology and Resilience (YEAR) study, a national longitudinal study exploring the mental health of Singaporean students aged 10-18. By evaluating children's mental health directly (rather than looking at rates of formal mental health diagnoses), the YEAR study found that children living in 4-room, 5-room, or executive HDB flats, as well as those living in condominiums or other apartments, were significantly more likely to experience anxiety symptoms in the clinically-diagnosable range than those living in smaller HDB flats (Wong et al., 2024). (In 2022 dollars, these are households with an average monthly income of $9,200-$19,936 - in the top half of Singaporeans by income).

The study's authors noted that:

> "Although higher socioeconomic status has historically been associated with positive mental health outcomes, past literature suggests that **parents of a higher socioeconomic status tend to have higher educational expectations of their children**, which as explicated previously, **likely translates to higher academic stress and higher anxiety**. Furthermore, relatively affluent children who experience **overbearing demands to achieve** and parental neglect are thought to be at higher risk of developing anxiety, depression or substance abuse issues." *(emphasis added)*

Our research provides further insights into the experiences of children in this segment.

Finally, our study intentionally explores the experiences of children that have sought the assistance of a mental health professional, to better understand the extent to which academic stress may contribute to poor mental health among primary school-aged children. We freely admit that the majority of children in Singapore do not display clinically-significant mental health

[1] We limited our research population to those who had either a Master's or Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology.

symptoms (thank goodness!) However, given the well-documented mental distress that primary school academic pressure causes for Singaporean parents (Teo, Y., 2022; Singapore Children's Society, 2021) and the fact that the true prevalence of mental health disorders is likely much higher among Singaporean children than the rate of formal diagnosis suggests (e.g., YEAR study, which put 27.7% of children aged 10-18 in the clinical range for a mental health disorder) (Wong et al., 2024), we believe it is fair to suggest that the phenomena we've observed may have applicability beyond the narrow subset of Singaporean children with observable mental health symptoms that are currently receiving professional mental health support.

1e. Findings

The mental health practitioners we interviewed reported that a majority of their primary school-aged local clients reference academic pressure as a significant source of distress during mental health visits; by contrast, fewer than half of their primary school-aged expat clients do so. Practitioners characterized academic stress as a common contributing factor in their primary school-aged local clients' mental health issues. Commonly-cited signs and symptoms of academic stress among primary schoolers included apathy, withdrawal, school refusal, bullying, self-injury, anxiety, risk-avoidance, and low self-esteem.

Practitioners had nuanced views about the PSLE and whether or not it is developmentally appropriate. However, they were near-unanimous in their concern about PSLE's tendency to dominate Singaporean childhoods. Many worried that the years spent preparing for the high-stakes exam may foster a state of "chronic stress" in children, which may contribute to adverse mental health outcomes over the long run. In particular, they agreed that excessive time spent on tuition, homework, and other academic pursuits during the lead-up to PSLE can be damaging, as children are not given adequate opportunities to rest, recharge, engage in developmentally-necessary unstructured play, or exercise agency in pursuing their own interests. This may implicitly communicate to children that their own individual interests, mental health, and developmentally-appropriate needs for play and rest, are less important than their ability to meet adult expectations vis-à-vis academic achievement.

Finally, practitioners discussed protective factors that can help mitigate the effects of academic stress on primary school-aged children – while recognizing that it is not possible to completely shield children from environmental factors. To quote one psychologist: *"There are some things that are beyond the child's ability to control. We can do all the coping skills and resourcing that we want to with them, CBT [cognitive behavioral therapy], [etc.], but it doesn't change the environment that they're in, right?"*

2. Academic Stress among Primary Schoolers: Prevalence and Link to Mental Health

2a. Setting the scene

In Singapore, children take the PSLE near the end of Primary 6 (P6), the final year of primary school. Most children are 12 years old when they sit the exam, though a minority (whose birthdays fall at the end of the calendar year) are still 11. This makes Singapore unique, as it is the only developed country in which the first high-stakes exam is held before age 15 (EveryChild.SG, 2022). Depending on their scores in the four core subjects (English language; Mother Tongue [typically Chinese, Malay, or Tamil]; Mathematics; and Science), students are stack-ranked into levels/bands and then allocated to their choice of secondary school, starting from the highest ranked students. Top performers are thus able to access "elite" secondary schools that are strongly associated with future economic success, while lower performers attend schools that are widely believed to offer fewer educational opportunities and more exposure to undesirable peer behaviours. In a country that prides itself on meritocracy, and where education is the key pathway to social mobility, the PSLE is seen as a significant indicator of just how far a child will be able to rise within the formal education system.

Understandably, then, Singaporean public imagination places a tremendous amount of importance on the PSLE. Mothers who can afford to do so may take no-pay leave or even resign from their jobs during PSLE year in order to supervise their child's preparation for the exam. And preparations for the exam surely constitute a sizeable (if undisclosed) amount of Singapore's $1.8B tuition industry (Tushara, 2025), in which 8 out of 10 primary school-aged children, and 4 out of 10 preschoolers (Davie, 2016), hone their academic skills until as late as 9pm on weeknights, sometimes every weeknight.

2b. Investigating the prevalence of academic stress

This system is not neutral in its mental health effects. One crude (but telling) gauge of this is the frequency with which child mental health clients reference academic pressure as a source of distress during mental health visits. Per the mental health practitioners we interviewed, an estimated 50%-70% of local[2] clients (defined here as children and youth enrolled in local public school) reference academic pressure as a significant source of stress.

> *"More than half of my local clients [who are enrolled in local school] have academic stress as a trigger."*
>
> *"I would estimate that 60%-70% of my local clients have mental health issues related to academic pressure."*

[2] Unless noted otherwise, "local" references children enrolled in the local school system, while "expat" references children enrolled in international school. These are imperfect categories, as up to 5% of students in local primary school may be expats (MOE, 2021), and a small number of Singaporean children attend international school, but it allows us to broadly compare the two systems.

> *"At least 50%-60% of my local clients bring up academic stress."*

Most of the practitioners we interviewed serve a mix of local and expat clients. When asked to estimate what percentage of their young expat clients (defined here as children and youth enrolled in international school) reference academic stress as a source of mental distress, many of them gave a number in the 25%-30% range. That is, the estimated prevalence of what we might informally term 'problematic' academic stress among expat children receiving mental health services is roughly half that of their Singaporean counterparts.

> *"So, like, I can almost predict this with the school difference, that when [local clients] come to me, even the [local] parents, when they come to me, they will be emphasizing on the academic angle more, whereas on [the international school] side, the kind of focus or what they're looking at might be the social situation [at school] which is bothering them. I'm not saying one is more dangerous than the other; both can be equally destabilizing, and sometimes the social situation can be actually more dangerous. But yeah, that's the difference that I see more often than not."*

Practitioners shared that some families are initially motivated to seek out mental health diagnosis and support in order to obtain needed access accommodations for their child. This may be one factor influencing local school clients' greater propensity to bring up academic concerns during mental health visits; for instance, only those enrolled in local schools would be seeking a Mother Tongue exemption. However, this cannot fully account for the sizable discrepancy between local and expat clients on this issue, as many international school students also qualify for and seek out access accommodations. Nor can it account for the fact that academic stress appears to be a recurring topic of conversation for many local clients, indicating that they are not "merely" seeking access accommodations.

Practitioners also highlighted that local children are exposed to academic pressure at a younger age than most expat children. Local children face an intensely stressful period in P5-P6 (roughly, ages 11-12), during the lead-up to the PSLE; by contrast, in the absence of any similarly high-stakes exam at the primary level, international school students' most academically stressful years tend to come at the upper secondary level (roughly, ages 16-18).

> *"I would say for the international kids, it's more about the later years. For Singaporean ones, it seems to be that [the] primary school age is quite stressful. Whereas the [international] ones, it's more like 16 to 18 [when the academic stress intensifies], which feels appropriate to, you know, preparing for university and exploring what their life purpose is going to be."*

We do not wish to support the perception that, as one interviewee jokingly put it, *"everything's wonderful in international school and everything's horrible in local school."*[3] We would also emphasize that the percentages referenced above are merely estimates, presented here to help 'set the stage,' but certainly not 'citable' as hard data. Still, we find the overall point that practitioners are trying to make, about a discrepancy in the mental health effects of the two educational systems, to be intriguing. If true, it seems to indicate that the amount of academic stress experienced by local children is not inevitable – not merely a universal, unavoidable feature of childhood in the 21st century – but rather a unique, localized phenomenon, produced by an as-yet-undefined mix of policies, attitudes, and incentives, and therefore – just possibly – changeable.

The quotes below touch on two themes that will recur throughout this report: 1) the chronic time-crunch that has come to define Singaporean childhood, especially during the years leading up to PSLE; and 2) the (related) struggle of some local students to find a healthy sense of 'self' outside of academic achievement.

> *"[Conversations] are rarely about academics with the international school students [that I see as clients]. From the local school [clients], there will be comments about, in particular, the additional things outside of school. So whether or not it was like tuition classes, having a packed schedule, having no time to play, wanting to, you know, do their own things, but they don't really have much time to."*

> *"In the international schools, there is more focus on the whole person. [Children] are seen and valued in the areas they enjoy. For local students [that I see as clients], academic stress will always be the very first thing that they talk about. Then there will be the social matters, but academic stress is always at the foreground. For international students, they [may] have difficulties in a variety of areas, but academic stress is just one area. They can find joy in other areas."*

The rest of this report focuses specifically on children enrolled in the local school system. Our hope is that all children on this island can "find joy in other areas," both during and outside the school day.

3. Manifestations and sources of academic stress among primary school-aged children

3a. "About to explode": Signs and symptoms[4] of academic stress

Some children are genetically predisposed to develop mental health disorders, such as anxiety or depression; but if, when, and how these disorders manifest – their timing and severity – are

[3] Interviewees also raised issues with international schools, including varying receptivity and/or resourcing across schools for supporting neurodivergent children, and problems with bullying.

[4] Throughout this report, we use "signs and symptoms" to refer to both observable behaviors and internal experiences that may indicate distress in children. This includes non-clinical language commonly used by educators and social service practitioners, such as "school refusal," "acting out," or "withdrawal."

influenced by a child's exposure to various risk factors (e.g., exposure to violence; harsh parenting; socioeconomic problems; neurodivergence) and protective factors (e.g., protective and supportive families, schools, and communities; healthy exercise and sleep) (WHO, 2022).

The practitioners we interviewed for this report thus avoided any simplistic, causal statements about the source(s) of their clients' poor mental health. They characterized academic stress as one significant environmental factor that often contributes to their young clients' mental health problems, even if academic stress was not the reason that the client initially sought out mental health support.

> *"If I look back at most of my local school clients who come to me, even if they've come to me for any other reason, maybe it's peer pressure or bullying or relationship or a parental issue, there is always this huge emphasis on academic pressure. So it's always present. It's never not present."*

> *"[Clients] do not come to me saying that, listen, I'm very stressed because of academic pressure. That's not what's happening. But what's happening is that maybe they have stopped going to school, or maybe they are suddenly dropping down in their grade, or maybe they are reacting in very aggressive ways, or they are withdrawing. So there might be other symptoms that we are noticing, but when we go down to when they started, we feel this very strange timeline of age 12. When we start talking about [it], you kind of see that the pressure builds up during their PSLE exams, and then they did not do what they thought they can do or what they are capable of. And that's when a slide starts happening."*

> *"[Academic stress] certainly doesn't appear in 100% of cases and may not always show up as a top-line factor. But as an under the surface, kind of, contributing factor [to clients' mental health issues], it's usually there and it's pretty heavy."*

> *[Does academic stress cause mental health problems?] "I would say it contributed. It may or may not 'cause' because there are multiple factors at play, but it's definitely a contributing factor."*

Withdrawal, apathy, and school refusal are common passive or avoidant coping responses to academic stress cited by mental health practitioners:

> *"There are a few different ways [in which academic stress manifests], so some will be, I mean, just lack of interest in doing anything. And most parents will always say, like, 'She's not just not motivated, she doesn't want to do any work.' [...] And then school refusal, that's the other thing that's coming up quite a lot. Just not wanting to go to school. So those are the general signs at the younger age."*

> *"As a clinical psychologist, actually, every year, near exam time, I will often get SOS calls [about students] who are having school refusal because of anxiety over academic performance. Of course, the other main reason for school refusal will be bullying, right? It's because of the social aspects of it. But academic stress is very much apparent in many of these cases."*

> *"We see a lot of cases of kids who drop out of school, start avoiding school, start to feel overwhelmed by school, and it's very hard to get them back. And these students often take years to get back."*

Practitioners also report cases in which children respond to academic pressure by adopting externalizing coping mechanisms, including self-injurious behaviors and bullying:

> *"I had a rash of kids that would come in – all young, like Primary 2. Primary 2, they were all – sounds gross – but the presenting issue was they were all doing intense biting of the finger and toenail. They were doing this for hours every night, to the point where, like, there was like infection and like bleeding from the fingers and toes because they were so stressed out about school and the teacher, [and they] can't get the homework completed on time. There's, like, piles and piles of homework, and they're afraid of what the teachers will say, and how the teacher will punish them."*

> *"I see a lot of bullying. There are students who are not performing well, who tend to take out that frustration on other students, and to bully. But there are also, I am seeing a lot of academically well-performing students, who then take out their anger and frustrations on other kids in school, and they tend to bully as well. And then when we sit down and speak with them, a lot of the time, it's that misplaced anger and frustration at their parents for making them go through this [stressful academic experience], and they acted out elsewhere because they can't act out against their parents. And that is a mental health issue about to explode, right?"*

3b. "Not good enough": Internal symptoms of academic stress

Even in the absence of overtly dysregulated behavior, the mental health practitioners interviewed for this report expressed concern that academic stress in primary school may contribute to internalizing patterns – such as negative self-image, anxiety, hypersensitivity to criticism, and risk-avoidance – that can shape self-perception and threat sensitivity well into adulthood.

> *"It may happen that they will grow up feeling that they're not good enough, they're never good enough, right? Because they're always falling behind. They're not meeting the expectations of their parents. They're not meeting the expectations of their teachers. They try, but they fall behind…. That may not be a mental health issue per se, but it is a*

> *self-esteem issue, right? That carries on into adulthood, that 'I'm not good enough,' right? And that is also a problem."*
>
> *"We know that some children are late bloomers. Think of the damage to their self-esteem of always being told that, 'You're a failure,' 'You're not good enough.' I think that has a lot more impact than we know."*
>
> *"In their mind, [some clients] just thought that they are failures and that they didn't get to where they thought they should, or to where their peers went [for secondary school], and that kind of becomes the starting point for a lot of anxiety, low self esteem, or, you know, fear of failure, or just avoiding any situation that makes them feel small."*

One psychologist spoke of adult patients who still feel that their PSLE score "sticks to them"; even as adults, they continue to judge themselves by it, and use it to assess their 'place' in the social hierarchy relative to others. He says: *"This [mode of thinking] has huge psychological impacts; it prevents people from developing a growth-based mindset, which is what therapy advocates for."*

A different psychologist concurs, reporting:

> *"I know [adult] clients of mine who said that they feel like their PSLE numbers are hanging around their necks. Yeah, no, they are defined by what they did at PSLE. They'll never forget."*

3c. Sources of academic stress

Practitioners identified three main sources of academic stress in primary school: 1) parental expectations; 2) school culture, as set and reinforced by teachers and administrators; and 3) internally-generated stress related to the child's own aspirations. Of these, parental expectations were mentioned most frequently, though practitioners believed that all three sources of stress were significant. Our analysis of practitioners' statements suggests that, at their worst, both parents and schools may have a tendency to overemphasize the importance of academic achievement and to dismiss or deprioritize children's non-academic concerns, thereby implicitly conveying to children that social, physical, and mental well-being are secondary to academic success.

Parents as a source of academic stress

Public discourse on academic stress in Singapore has often tended to identify parents as the key 'culprits' and drivers of stress. Both public officials and media sources have highlighted a perceived tendency towards parental over-involvement, or "helicopter parenting" (Teng, 2019; Teng, 2024), that may heighten anxiety and decrease resilience among children. So-called

'kiasu'[5] parents, who enroll their children in multiple tuition classes to give them a competitive edge on the PSLE, are frequently blamed for creating an 'education arms race' in which 'normal' parents are forced to compete, perhaps against their better judgment (Swee et al. 2024; Koh-Chua 2023; Tan, 2017).

The reality is likely to be more nuanced. The mental health practitioners we spoke to emphasized that parents who exert academic pressure on their children have a diverse range of motivations that are not easily reducible to 'kiasu' traits like greed or ambition. Practitioners that work with both children and their parents noted that parents' actions are often informed by their own childhood experiences with the school system. Some parents have unresolved school-related trauma of their own, particularly if they perceive themselves to have done poorly; this may lead them to push their child too hard, in hopes that they will avoid their parent's 'mistakes.' Meanwhile, parents who did well in school may genuinely struggle to imagine a less-traditional route to success for their child. One psychologist said of them: *"[Parents] who went to good schools themselves and subsequently did well in life, then want to propagate this to their children, because it worked for them. [...] I don't think they do it to hurt the kids, but it's hard for them to envision a different mode of operation."* Further, many parents of all backgrounds feel trapped by the stack-ranking system, fearing that if they fail to push their child sufficiently in the lead-up to PSLE, they are in effect curtailing their child's future educational and career opportunities.

Nevertheless, parental expectations, whether directly or indirectly communicated, can be a significant source of academic stress among primary school-aged children. Researchers in Singapore have also found that overall parenting style/characteristics can serve to heighten children's sensitivity to academic stress; in particular, there is a positive relationship between the level of parental invalidation and the level of academic stress for Singapore adolescents (Tan et al., 2014). ('Parental invalidation' refers to parents dismissing, ignoring, or belittling a child's emotional experiences.)

The representative quotes below show how such 'invalidation' can serve as a form of covert (and likely unintentional) pressure for children. By what they prioritize and deprioritize, both during mental health visits, and in everyday life, these parents may be implicitly 'teaching' children that their mental health matters less than their academic achievement.

> *"At first, there's a reluctance [among parents of children with special needs] to acknowledge that there's a problem. Then, after the acknowledgement that there's a problem, there's a huge resistance to intervention, okay? Because the belief is like, Okay, well, you say my child has a learning disability, then he needs to work harder and we need to get more tuition, right?"*

[5] A Singaporean term that can be variously translated as "afraid to lose," "fear of missing out," or even "grasping or selfish" (Oxford Languages 2025)

> *"[Sometimes], the child is expressing distress, either through cutting [or some other means]. But the parents [who talk to me] aren't necessarily concerned about that, but they are concerned that they're not doing their homework, they're not abiding by, you know, household rules, that kind of thing. It can be sometimes a bit shocking to me. You know, your child has just said all this, you've got all this going on, and then the parents are saying, what we're really concerned about is that they're not doing their homework?"*

Schools as a source of academic stress

Practitioners agreed that the perception of PSLE as a high-stakes, 'do or die' exam is often reinforced by primary school teachers and administrators. For instance:

> *"By P5-P6, PSLE becomes the culture of the school. 'This is the PSLE year.' I have clients [in P6] whose teachers have said to them, 'This year your family shouldn't be taking any vacation.'"*

> *"The pressure really ramps up in P5, because that's where the build-up to PSLE happens. Not much teaching of the curriculum actually takes place from March onwards of the P6 year. So they front-load all the curriculum, the learning, the testing in P5, okay, and for somebody who's – some are 10, some are 11 – yeah, that's a lot to deal with."*

Practitioners generally assume that individual teachers and school administrators – like parents – are acting with good intentions, hoping to ensure that each child in their care performs to his or her full potential on the PSLE. Yet, the cumulative impact of their actions can sometimes be to create an environment in which academic achievement takes precedence over children's other developmental needs. Some children may internalize the message that academics are paramount, and that their own mental/ social/ health needs are dispensable. One practitioner gave a concrete example of how this can happen: *"Holidays should be holidays, but schools will often hold extra classes over holidays, or announce that there will be an exam as soon as school recommences. This is not good. It sends a bad message from young that you can compromise on rest."*

Internally-generated academic stress

In the context of a widening class divide (Yong, 2017), children may also imbibe parents' and society's view of PSLE as their best opportunity to claim (or maintain) a toehold on society's 'elite' rung. In 2016, researchers found that even young primary schoolers "perceived individuals from 'very good' ['elite'] schools to be of significantly higher social status than those from 'normal' schools'" (Ong and Cheung, 2016). Put a different way, young Singaporeans already possess a strong intuitive understanding of their society's reward structure, of the types of activities and achievements that are most likely to enhance their social status – even if they are unable to put it into so many words.

This finding is supported by our research, which indicates that many primary school-aged mental health clients have a remarkably 'mature' (if one-sided) conception of what they need to do to 'get ahead' in life.

> *"I have one client. She is P6 this year. She was the one who said, Oh, you know, I really need to get, like, in the new AL system, right? I need to get AL1, and that's like, almost close to perfect score for every subject. And I said, what will happen if you don't? [Her response was] you know, I won't do well in life. You know, I won't get a good job, yeah, I will be poor. And she comes from a very middle to upper income family. 'Where did you get that idea from? Did your parents tell you that?' 'Not really.' Her parents are very successful, financially strong people. But I don't think it's a direct message. In fact, the parents themselves are quite wary of stressing her out, but it's just internalized."*

> *"I had a very honest client who said to me: 'I have an elitist mindset. I need to be in the top school. I need to be the best to feel good about myself.' The kids are more honest than the parents most times [laughs]."*

4. Spillover effects of academic stress

4a. PSLE and the loss of childhood and play

We asked practitioners to share their opinion on whether the PSLE is developmentally-appropriate. A majority agreed that, while standardized tests in and of themselves are not developmentally-inappropriate for 12-year-olds, the tremendous amount of stress that typically accompanies PSLE test preparation is.

> *[Is PSLE ramp-up pressure developmentally appropriate?] "For sure, no."*

> *"No. That kind of stress is not good for anyone. I don't care if you're 12 or 20 or 40."*

From a mental health perspective, the practitioners we interviewed for this report were much less concerned with *PSLE itself* than with its tendency to dominate Singaporean childhoods. The quotes below are representative:

> *"I think generally in Singapore, my issue with the PSLE is that it is too early in a child's life. Not just because it's 12 when they do it – if you just looked at it as 12 on its own, okay, maybe it's not that bad – but because I think the preparation starts way before that. You start prepping this child from even, you know, some parents start when they're from Primary 1. I've got two kids. One is in Primary 2, and my older one is in P6, actually, this year. And I've heard from my younger one that from P1 parents send [their children] for tuition, and not just one subject, not just, you know, Mandarin, which is quite challenging,*

but multiple subjects. So I feel that that has a trickle-down effect. PSLE has a trickle-down effect."

"Primary 1 to Primary 2 – [most children are] still pretty happy, pretty chill in general, just maybe frustration with all these grading stuff. When they hit Primary 3, you see all the surface-level [behavioural issues] start to appear because the jump [in terms of academic expectations] is big, and it's really then [that] the PSLE drilling starts to happen. So it's P3, 4, 5, 6, yeah. So about three, four years of their life [devoted to this exam]."

Practitioners expressed concern that this may cause some children to experience 'chronic' (long-term) stress, which has no benefits (and many risks) from a mental health perspective. By contrast, 'acute' stress – stress which is intense but fleeting, such as children may experience on the day of a big exam or sporting competition – has far fewer mental health risks, and may actually be beneficial to children's mental health over the long run [cite].

One practitioner explained the difference between the two kinds of stress this way:

"When you try to cross the road and then a car passes by, that's acute stress, right? Your heart starts beating fast, and you are in shock, right? So you either fight, flight, or freeze. A lot of the time, it's like you stand frozen, but then you have time to compose yourself and get back to that 'safe base' level. And then you go, Okay, next time I will look left and right before I cross the road! And you build resilience that way.

But then imagine if you're crossing the road and there are just cars zooming past you, and then you don't even see the end, or the end is really far away, and you're like, I gotta do this for so long [and] I don't have time to catch my breath. And I feel that's how children – that's what children are feeling now, especially in primary school. I mean, the brain is not fully formed yet to even be able to self-regulate, right? They are still lacking executive functioning skills. They're lacking a lot of skills, but we expect them to go through this long haul of just cars zooming past and they have to cross the street. So they're always on hyper-vigilant mode."

In this analogy, who is it that keeps sending the cars zooming down the road? One common answer, alluded to in the quotes that began this section, is the tuition industry. Nearly 4 in 10 preschoolers take private tuition classes; among primary school students, this rises to 8 in 10 (Davie, 2016). In total, Singaporean households spent $1.8B on private tuition in 2023 (Tushara, 2025a).

Tuition has become a major feature of Singaporean childhood. The mental health practitioners we interviewed were consistently concerned about its effects on their young clients.

Almost without exception, the mental health professionals we interviewed expressed concern about the amount of tuition that their primary school-aged clients were enrolled in. Quite a few made unprompted allusions to the difficulties of scheduling recurring sessions with clients in this age group:

> *"We see a lot of over-scheduled children, especially at the upper primary levels – in fact, trying to coordinate a time for them to come in for therapy, wow, that's hard for like just one client! Imagine I have like 10, yeah, it's a nightmare, right?"*

> *"I had a client who was facing extreme anxiety. The parent told me they could not continue with therapy because they had tuition five nights a week. It's an example of the problem. Kids are overbooked."*

Critically, practitioners' concerns were not related to the quality, or type, of tuition that children are receiving, nor even to negative or stressful experiences that clients may have had at tuition centers. Rather, *the sheer amount of time spent in tuition was, in itself, enough to raise concerns for these mental health practitioners.* Practitioners related stories of young children with grueling daily schedules that would be likely to exhaust most adults. General burnout and exhaustion, combined with the loss of control that children may experience as their free time is replaced by tuition and enrichment classes, can seriously damage a child's mental health.

> *"So I saw a 10 year old child. When I first met them, I was shocked at how their schedule, at 10 years old, was even more intense than mine as a working adult. They would tell me that their day starts at 6am, and it ends every day at about 11 at night. From 6am, of course, [they are] getting ready for school, and then [after school] it's straight off to tuition. So on the weekdays, it's usually tuition all the way 'til about dinner time, when they get picked up, head home for dinner, and then they get started with homework. [And] not just homework, but the parent would kind of check in with the child, like, What are they learning right now? And the parent will sit down with the child and read through the syllabus together with the child. This all finishes around 10, after which the child is given one hour of play time on their own, at 10 years old, to finish at 11. And then it's getting ready for bed. And this is the weekday. On the weekend, it's a little bit more forgiving in the sense that they didn't have to wake up at 6, [but] there would be maybe about two to three hours of tuition, followed up by extracurricular stuff. So whether or not it was swimming, whether or not it was a sport, whether or not it was music, whether or not it was something [else], like, didn't matter [what it was]. I think it's one thing if, if the child enjoyed it, it's another when what started out as fun quickly turned into a chore.*
>
> *So naturally, they developed very defiant kind of behaviours about not wanting to do this, not wanting to do that, showing resistance, really just meltdowns [because of] how overwhelmed they were. So that was the state in which they came to see me. And unfortunately, actually, the reason why they came in was because* ***they were cutting***

> ***themselves at 10 years old****. And I think that really gives you an idea of how overwhelmed the child can feel sometimes.*
>
> *Yeah, so of course, this is an extreme case, right? Not every minor that I saw [was] as intense. But I think there were themes that cut across all of them, which is about how there's a lack of control over their own schedules. They were really, truly not able to really enjoy the things that they do actually want to do."*

Tuition also comes with an opportunity cost, even for children that may appear to be coping relatively well overall. Every hour spent in tuition is an hour subtracted from what, echoing Maria Montessori, we can call the 'real work of childhood' – brain-building free play (Lim et al., 2024), which is developmentally-necessary for children even in the primary school years (Ginsburg, 2007), and which cannot be effectively replaced by structured activities, even those which are more 'playful' in nature (i.e., sports and arts enrichment classes) (Pellegrini and Smith, 1998).

In his popular book, *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt describes smartphones as "experience blockers": by monopolizing children's free time, smartphones prevent children from engaging in the diverse real-world experiences that are necessary for their development into healthy, resilient, fully-formed adults (Haidt, 2024). **We think it is fair to ask if excessive tuition could also be characterized as an 'experience blocker' in the Singapore context, by significantly reducing the unstructured, exploratory time that is necessary for their growth.**

> *"I think we need to be asking ourselves: How many opportunities do young people actually have to connect with other humans? Because they're spending so much time in structured activities, be it tuition, I mean, the window of freedom has got so small that I think that's more my question to parents is, how much freedom do you give your child to go out and roam the streets, and ride a bike and hang out with friends? The problem is that their window is very small because they have so much to do….*
>
> *"The journey through school is mainly about outcomes. There's little emphasis, as far as I can tell, for a lot of kids, on having deep relationships and connections and friendships. One of the main pieces around adolescence is forming these lifelong friendships, and yet, there's very little time for that, and there's also little time to explore interests. [And so I think there are] certain pieces that are missed out of that developmental journey, around developing interests, around risk taking, around identity formation, friendships, because there's so much spent on academics. And so although you know, some may be successful academically and therefore don't feel that they didn't succeed, they [still] miss out on these key pillars. And what we know is that all those pieces need to come together in order to start your adult life."*

By monopolizing children's time and attention, excessive tuition – indicative of the school system's narrow focus on academics – limits children's range of experiences. One psychologist who trained in the United States expressed it this way:

> *"There are fewer experiences young people can have here. In the U.S., you've got skiing, camping, the arts and creativity. Many of my clients' parents were working in creative industries. Kids can see lots of different life paths and have lots of experiences organically. There's a big need for non-academic educational experiences for young people here."*[6]

The point, of course, is not that Singapore requires more 'skiing and camping'; rather, it's that children benefit from exposure to a wide range of activities and life paths, which is logistically difficult to accomplish when so much of a child's 'free' time is monopolized by academic tuition and structured enrichment classes.

In another example of opportunity cost, the time pressures that characterize Singaporean childhoods may also impinge upon the parent-child relationship:

> *"One of my colleagues saw a primary school boy, and the parents tell us that the son has got 13 tuition a week, **a week**! Yeah. And I remember a case where there is this five year old kid, pre-Primary 1, and already has got four tuition a week. So, so we have got situations like this happening, and inevitably, you can see how this might damage the relationship between parent and child. I think the other thing is, then there's a lack of time to build that relationship. I mean, a child will only have 24 hours a day, so does the parent. If time is spent in school, in tuition, lessons, ballet – it's not just studies, you know, there's also all these other lessons – there really isn't enough time to spend with the parents to build that bond."*

Once again, we must return to the idea that children's social, physical, and mental health needs are being deprioritized in the pursuit of academic excellence. In their eagerness to help children succeed, adults may – perhaps without fully realizing it – be signalling to children that the child's own individual interests, mental health, and developmentally-appropriate needs for play and rest, are less important than their ability to meet adult expectations. Even the simple act of increasing tuition and decreasing leisure time can send a powerful message to children about what the adults around them truly value:

> *[Question: How do adults transmit their own anxieties to children without realizing it?]*
> *"I guess, a lot of focus on studying, yeah, homework, tuition, work on top of homework, maybe even reducing leisure activities, recreational activities in favor of academic stuff, especially around upper primary levels. So indirectly, I feel it sends a message that you have to put in more effort, more time, right? Yeah, and you might have to give up some*

[6] Paraphrase from notes: subject did not wish to be recorded

of your other things which are 'inconsequential,' but which make the child happy and are necessary for balance."

Like the overzealous school policies discussed in a previous section, which can *"[send] a bad message from young that you can compromise on rest,"* an overly-packed daily schedule can 'teach' a child that resting and recharging is not necessary. To return to the analogy with which we opened this section, we can see that tuition classes, enrichment classes, school-related clubs and other extracurricular commitments, homework (whether assigned by the school or by the tuition center), and any time spent reviewing material/drilling with parents and other caregivers at home, are all 'cars zooming across the street' of a child's consciousness, potentially contributing to a state of 'chronic stress' at a young age.

"[The problem is] the consistent exposure to that level of stress, right? I mean, if it's a one time thing, or it happens once in a blue moon, generally, kids are quite adaptable. I don't think it will actually lead to mental illness. With things like stress, it's always because you don't get a break from it, and your body needs a break from it. So good stress is when your body gets a break from it, not when you consistently are on high alert for a prolonged period of time, which is the argument that [this] happens mostly with our children, because they're spelling things every single week [in Primary 1]. And then they will add on something else later on, and then they will add on something else later on. So there is no real coming [down from the stress]. You get a break from it during the one month school holiday or something. But then you're worried about after the school holiday, you have this test and this test. So it's the lack of really having a break from this stress, I think, is the issue, right? And then the thought of having to work towards that bigger exam at the end of the six years? So the point is, [the problem is] not even the test [PSLE] per se. It's just not getting relief from it, at all, from a very young age."

4b. Straining the parent-child bond

The world that PSLE creates is not only stressful for children. It can be intensely stressful for parents, too, especially in the years leading up to the exam. One psychologist we interviewed noted that she has recently seen an uptick in adult clients that are experiencing mental health problems related to their child's PSLE preparations. PSLE stress in parents has been documented by other researchers, who note that Singaporean parents (especially mothers) feel a profound responsibility to ensure their child's academic success, often leading to very high stress levels during the child's primary school years (Teo, Y., 2022; Singapore Children's Society, 2021).

The mental health practitioners we interviewed for this report noted that parents may feel this pressure whether or not they are particularly 'kiasu.' Even parents that have doubts about the benefits of academic competition, and/or the desirability of encouraging a narrow academic focus in their children, may be 'pulled in' to this world out of perceived pressure from other

societal actors and anxiety about their child's future. Parents, like children, do not operate in a vacuum; they are often keenly attuned to the values, expectations, and reward structure of the society around them, and can be quick to change their behavior in response to the implicit (or, in the cases below, somewhat explicit) judgment of others in society.

> *"I've seen in many of my professional experiences, the parents are really stumped. Like, then they get anxious, or they get phone calls from the teachers, 'Oh, Mrs. So-and-So, could you get your child to …?' But the parents really are not educators. They really don't know how to support the child, right? But then some of them have shared, like, they felt judged, right? Like they are a bad parent. Like, even I felt judged [when my child was in school]! [laughs]"*

> *"This is more anecdotal from my peers, friends, or friends of friends. I sometimes hear them talk about how, like, you know, at first I thought I wasn't going to do this. So, you know, when my child entered primary school, you know, 'I'm just not going to be that parent. I'm going to let my child be a child,' right? Yeah. And then week after week, month after month, they start to feel the pressure. Why? Because sometimes, you know, especially nowadays where there are those teacher/parent kind of chat groups and all that. Especially if the child's not doing well in a particular subject, the teacher will be following up with the parent, right? Like, oh, what support are you doing? What support are you giving? You know, how can we, how else can we help your child, you know? So, you know, I remember [parents] talking about how they didn't start out this way, but because* ***everyone*** *was doing it, right? Then you start to question, you know, and for a parent it's really hard not to then rationalize [increasing their focus on the child's academics]. 'This is what I need to do to help my child, that I need to give my child the best possible chance,' right?"*

Parents are then faced with two, less-than-ideal options: enroll their child in tuition, or tutor their child at home. The drawbacks of excessive tuition have already been explored, but taking on the role of 'parent/tutor' is also not desirable for many parents, and may quickly lead to conflicts within the home.

> *"Parents who try to teach their own kids often end up affecting their relationship with the kids. Invariably, you would have to raise your voice. You would have to, instead of having fun time with the kids at the beach or in the park, you're at the kitchen table or the study table, trying to drill home, teaching the kid algebra. I think it really is really quite difficult. I think parents should guide the kid, but for the parents to become the tutor, I think at some level that will affect the relationship, because parents are human, too. They get frustrated, right? So, sometimes, if parents can afford it, they tend to outsource and have someone else do it [in the form of tuition]."*

One further complicating factor is that the parent-child relationship naturally begins to change in the lead-up to puberty, demanding an emotionally-attuned, autonomy-supportive style of parenting that can sometimes be at odds with the practical demands of PSLE preparation.

> *"[Puberty] is the stage which requires a lot of experimentation, figuring out success and failures, and how to deal with that. It's also the phase where I [the child] want to establish a different kind of connection with my family and caregivers, with my parents and my teachers. I need more support. I don't want you to constantly judge me and remind me, and nag me, that I'm not doing well, which is what happens, you know, because of the PSLE pressure. All parents, all teachers, everyone, like, it's not that their intention is [bad], but the time is limited. Resources are limited. You have to, like, focus on what seems to be the most important thing at the moment to get you through this year and to get you through this grade, and to get you to this particular school, right? And so although I want to ask you how your day was at school with this particular friend, or, you know, whether you managed to solve a conflict or something like that, which I want to ask, but I don't have the time, so I'm going to ask, like, Did you submit that homework? Right? And then that becomes [the] important [thing].*

> *"So the whole nurturing space that the child has and **should** have at that age when they are figuring things out and things are changing, and I suddenly feel I don't have the nurturing support that I should have had from my parents. My parents were lovely people. What happened to them? My teachers, I had as a role model, like what happened to them, they're only asking me about that one thing, and understandably so, they don't have the time or the energy to focus on the other things. But that age is the age for figuring life out, figuring themselves out. So I think something like this [the PSLE], **it's too early, at that age to be going through this**. They are not emotionally ready or ready in psychosocial ways, to be going through something where, not only are they pressured to perform, but also they're losing their caregivers and their nurturers and the people who are their role models."*

Parents must perform a kind of tightrope act, neither *under*-supporting their child's academic performance (which risks both social censure and material harm to the child's future prospects), nor *over*-supporting it (which can lead to the child suppressing his or her own needs, and/or adopting a competitive, elitist set of values). The mental health practitioners we interviewed had no 'silver bullets' to offer (though, they did leave us with quite a lot of helpful parenting advice, which we've included in Appendix A). They emphasized, however, that parents who are engaged and present, and consciously take time to connect with their child on non-academic matters, can make a difference.

> *"The parent-child relationship evolves from one where there is high control in the [early] primary school levels to one where, like I mentioned, there is less control. It's very practical, right? Like, I will give you tuition if you need [it], make sure that you have your three meals, right? I will ferry you to classes. I know from personal experience that there*

are many mothers who quit their jobs or take extended no-pay leave when the children are in P6 to hover around the children. Or, you know, they said, I can't do much with the teaching, [so I'll] send them for tuition, but I can fetch them from school. I can just make sure that they're okay, you know, that they feel safe and secure. Which is quite nice! It's the best of intentions. So now they focus on the practical side of things. But what I feel is lacking might be that emotional attunement and knowing how to navigate conversations with their child as the child grows older."

Academic stress and harsh punishments

In some cases, parents are not able to manage the stress that they themselves feel related to their child's academic performance, leading to inappropriate punishments:

"For Primary, maybe, 3 or 4 onwards, academic stress does play a big factor in [children's] stress. It also changes the parent-child relationship, right? So it's a compounded problem. If you're not already doing well, your parents, out of their own anxiety, or their anxiety for you, come down hard. They might discipline you, you know, inappropriately, that fractures the relationship in turn, the child withdraws, pulls away, you know, looks outwards for support, focuses even less, or wants to [study] even less. That's a spiral."

*"**Academic stress is one of the triggers to things like harsh physical punishment.** So a lot of times, parents get anxious and they get frustrated, and many of them will resort [to harsh physical punishment], at least the ones that I've seen, right? So I have to, like, you know, put a caveat, because of the nature of my work [in a public-serving institution], I tend to see those [parents] when they're in crisis or they're reported, right, for harsh physical punishment. So in that setting, academic stress is one of the stressors that's quite significant."*

"When we talk about [children's] behavior with [clients' parents], it's [typically] 'They're not doing their homework.' And the punishment is so severe that children are shocked into doing what they're told. They're not processing, they're not really learning, but they're shocked, and so they stop. They're not misbehaving [anymore] because they're shocked, but they're [also] not concentrating on their [school]work. You know, they're, they're – yeah. They're shocked!"

This type of relationship damage need not always be permanent. According to one psychologist:

"I have probably a dozen or so [cases of parents & children working through damaged relationships due to academics] in the last few years. Not that the relationship isn't repairable, but the parents do kind of go overboard, and afterwards, like in hindsight, they go, 'Oh, wow. I think I really did some pretty negative things to my child because we

were so stressed about PSLE.' And it doesn't feel like it's permanent to me, at least for the majority of the kids I work with, they seem to kind of rebound. And then, to some extent, the kids are able to kind of conceptualize what happened around PSLE in a way that's constructive. Sure, so, you know, yeah, did we really have to do all that name calling and yelling and punishing? No. But why did mom and dad do that? They did it because they were so worried about, you know, the future and all that. [...] I get a skewed population. If they come in to see me, that means the parent, to some extent, is aware of their challenges and amenable to some discussion about what happened, like, what happened that led to where things are [now], right? And yes, I can imagine that if you have a child who's in a situation where the parents don't ever really acknowledge, you know, some role in the trauma, ***then, yes, there can be probably more permanent damage****."*

4c. Loss of identity

One practitioner succinctly summed up what she described as her young clients' "core belief" about themselves: *"**My self-worth depends on my academic achievement and my future will be ruined if I don't do well.**"* Like the child quoted earlier who feared she would be "poor" if she failed to achieve top marks on the PSLE, these students have internalized a rigid, high-stakes narrative around success – one that leaves little room for alternative pathways to self-worth or for a sense of a 'self' that remains valuable even in the absence of achievement.

"I think that for my local clients, there's been a message that has been pretty consistent for them, that they ***need*** *to perform in order to be successful and be happy, and I think that unrelenting pressure starts very young, that you need to continue to succeed [and] achieve in order to be supported by the community, in order to be successful, in order to be recognized, status is a big thing. Yeah, there's a lot about, there's a lot of anxiety about status, meeting expectations."*

"I have adults who come with issues about their aged parents and stuff like that, how siblings are not getting along, or something like that. And those are the times that you realize what I'm saying about, 'They have grown up [understanding] their identity as 'What I ***do'*** *rather than 'Who I* ***am'****.' There's this constant insecurity about, where is my place in the family, where is my place in the society? And there's a lot of fear. There's a lot of competition."*

"One of the main things we see in mental health is how flexible you are, emotionally and mentally. But if you're so rigidly tied to, 'I am this person who gets this grade or performs or does this or gets this gold medal,' then if, by any chance, I'm not able to then it's not that, 'Oh, I didn't do well.' It's about, 'Now, who am I if I'm not that person?'"

In 2025, Minister for Education Chan Chun Sing shared a story about his visit to a local Junior College. He asked the students, most of whom were between the ages of 16 and 18, a question: if MOE reduced the curriculum, and students had more time to pursue their individual intellectual interests, what would they study?

According to one Singapore MP's retelling of the incident, Minister Chan was "saddened" to observe that the students had difficulty answering him (Tan 2025). They appeared to have few genuine intellectual interests or intrinsic desire to learn. Somewhere along the line – before even reaching university – their curiosity and initiative appears to have been snuffed out.

Our research suggests that the problem goes much deeper. Too many children appear to have been stymied at a much more fundamental level, frustrated in their development of an individual identity that is not dependent for its self-worth on achievement, conformity, and 'measuring up' to a narrow set of externally-imposed metrics. As explored in previous sections, **children are often asked to 'trade in' their individual interests for exam prep** when they are 10, 11, or 12 years old; it perhaps should not surprise us that, **when the exam is finally done, so few children seem to go back to retrieve them**.

5. Protective Factors

Researchers and policymakers have been keen to identify protective factors that may shield children and youth from the possible negative impacts of academic pressure. Chief among these is "resilience," defined by the Yeo Boon Khim Mind Science Centre at NUS/NUHS as "the process, or achievement of positive adaptation despite adversities or challenging life conditions." The YEAR study, referenced earlier (and also a project of the Mind Science Centre) found a high negative correlation between resilience and mental health symptoms – that is, participants with higher resilience scores were much less likely to report clinically-significant mental health symptoms. The study also found that "adolescents with higher resilience tended to report lower levels of perceived stress [and] lower levels of perceived academic expectations stress" (Mind Science Centre 2024).

Our interviewees also agreed that resilience is a powerful protective factor, but they cautioned against falling into a lay or "pop" understanding of what it is and how to foster it. For instance, some members of the public may view "resilience" simply as the ability to "do hard things," and thus may falsely believe they are fostering "resilience" by exacting developmentally-inappropriate levels of focus, discipline, or dedication from children. Genuine resilience cannot be developed when a child's primary motivation for "doing hard things" is fear; rather, it requires psychological safety to develop.

> *"[When children have] a lot of unresolved, unprocessed emotions that they don't know what to do with, it doesn't build resilience. They're in chronic survival mode, right, where I have to get up. I have to do this. I have to do the next tuition. I have to do this, this and this. People say, Oh, children are resilient. It's because they have to [be] to survive,*

right? It is not true resilience where they know how to process their emotions and then bounce back from a state where they have felt safety."

Further, resilience is not promoted by saddling children with adult-sized worries:

"Sometimes the parents' own anxieties stem from their worry that they are not preparing the child for life, right? So I need to be harsh on you right now, because that's what life is, right? Life is harsh. You're not going to have, like, people be nice to you, you're not going to have time [for yourself]. You're going to be subjected to a lot of stress and pressure in the workplace, and that maybe is used to justify some of their own harsher parenting practices. But I don't think it's fair. The children will have time. You're talking about someone dealing with stress in their 30s versus someone dealing with that same stress when they're 10 or 11. It's not a good justification, right?...

The children who are overstressed when they're young don't actually grow up resilient. *They become very paranoid and anxious, like, oh my God, you know, like my parents keep warning me, like, This is what life is. There are going to be bullies. People are going to talk harshly to you. You're not going to have time to do whatever you want. How is that healthy for a 10 year old whose brain is not physically able to manage that amount of information and stress?"*

6. Discussion: What can be done?

The professionals interviewed for this report are mental health experts, not policy wonks. While they offered us a wealth of advice for parents and other responsible adults (presented, in their own words, in Appendix A), highlighting ways in which parents and teachers can foster protective factors that may make children less vulnerable to academic stress, we did not emerge from the interviews with a clear 'policy agenda' that all interviewees agreed on. In this section of the report, then, we share some general considerations for policymakers that are informed by our analysis of the interviews as a whole, while emphasizing that these considerations do not necessarily reflect the policy views of every professional interviewed.

Consideration 1: Academic stress does not generate in a vacuum.

Every stakeholder in Singapore's primary education system – whether parents, teachers, school administrators, or children themselves – is a rational actor responding to the incentives, values, and priorities of the education system in which they are embedded. It is thus nonsensical to admonish parents to be less 'kiasu' of their own accord, or to encourage primary school-aged children to 'zoom out' from exam prep and develop their own interests. It may also be too much to ask primary school educators to truly value the 'whole child,' and work on developing his or her unique, possibly non-academic strengths, when their/their school's KPIs heavily prioritize students' PSLE performance.

At the risk of extending 'sympathy to the devil,' it can be noted that this is also true of the bogeyman of the moment: the unscrupulous tuition operator. We agree with the mental health practitioners that excessive tuition diverts too much of children's time and mental energy from the developmentally-necessary, non-academic pursuits that are crucial for their development into healthy, fully-formed, confident adults (not to mention, adults that are internally-motivated and capable of doing things for the joy of it, rather than externally motivated by the endless pursuit of achievement or status). Yet, tuition only has a narrow academic focus because the national curriculum does; if the national curriculum and national assessments looked different, the tuition industry would morph too.

In short, this is a case in which meaningful change cannot only come 'from below.'

EveryChild.SG's View: EveryChild.SG has called for the elimination of stack-ranking at PSLE by introducing through-train primary-secondary school pairings that would serve 80-90% of students. While a few primary schools could choose to remain selective, and some students would certainly opt to compete for these slots, parents that place more weight on holistic development, have concerns about the negative mental health impacts of high-stakes exams and excessive tuition, or simply want to "let kids be kids," would be able to do so under a through-train system, without worrying that their children will be relegated to the lowest-ranked schools as a result. This would significantly reduce stress for students, parents, and primary school educators.

Consideration 2: Aligning high-stakes exams with the onset of puberty compounds pressure, with long-lasting effects.

Singapore is the only developed country in which a student's first high-stakes exam occurs during the onset of puberty, i.e. PSLE at the end of Primary 6. Notably, delaying the first high-stakes exam to avoid puberty's onset was one of the few policy ideas on which the mental health practitioners interviewed for this report were broadly aligned. Doing so would allow for children's greater emotional maturation, and would let them develop their identities to a fuller extent before being 'sorted' into high-, mid-, and low-achieving schools/ streams, perhaps leading them to tie their identities less closely to the results of said high-stakes exam. This may also lessen the strain that preparing for the first high-stakes exam exerts on the parent-child bond, as the 'crunch period' in the year or two leading up to the exam would not coincide so closely with the challenging shifts in parent-child dynamics that naturally occur at the onset of puberty.

EveryChild.SG's View: Instead of using a single, high-stakes exam to determine secondary school admissions, EveryChild.SG has called for testing in other real world formats like projects, group work and presentations, as well as bite-sized, computerized testing to be done on a regular basis throughout primary school. These assessments would provide broader and more age-appropriate point-in-time information that teachers could use to better understand students' strengths and weaknesses. Regular computerised testing can be used to track the trend line of

a child's progress through primary school learning, and provide a more accurate picture of a child's academic aptitude that would not be dependent on their performance on any single day.

Consideration 3: Academic stress during primary school doesn't build up Singapore's pool of human capital – it weakens it.

Singapore's public education system was famously established to develop "Singapore's only available natural resource, its people" (Yiannouka, 2015). Yet, the mental health practitioners we spoke to expressed skepticism that the high level of pressure exerted upon children during primary school has any benefits, either to their personal mental health, or to their long-term ability to serve as top-tier 'human capital' in the market.

> *"I guess in every system there will be children who do well and children who don't. But we cannot just base our conclusions [about who's doing well or poorly] on academic outcomes. If you look at [academics], then, yeah, definitely there are maybe half, [maybe] more than half, who are doing very well and excelling. But what's the cost to themselves, to the families, to the parent/child relationship, to their own mental health to get there?"*

With a declining birthrate and a shrinking native-born population, it is in Singapore's long-term economic interests to ensure that *every* child is nurtured to be mentally strong. The evidence is clear that academic stress during primary school is not conducive to this.

EveryChild.SG's View: MOE has initiated on-going efforts in schools to foster resilience, and has sought to widen the definition of "achievement" by promoting 21st Century Skills and students' holistic development. However, as long as secondary schools are allocated by stack-ranking children by their PSLE results, the bar needed to do well on PSLE will continue to move higher and higher each year. We fear that, under these conditions, too many children will continue to be subjected to the kind of developmentally-inappropriate pressure that undermines resilience, rather than developing it. EveryChild.SG's 10-Year Plan to Transform Primary Education offers a concrete roadmap for updating the primary education system to better promote resilience, 21st Century Skills, and students' mental wellbeing.

Appendix A

Fostering protective factors: Advice for parents and other responsible adults

We reject the idea that parents, broadly speaking, are 'to blame' for academic stress; however, it's likely that many people reading this are themselves parents, who may be wondering what actions they can take *now* to protect their children from this type of stress. The psychologists and psychiatrists had plenty to say on this topic – we present their advice, grouped in 3 broad categories, below:

1. Practice Flexible Problem-Solving as a Parent

   "[One of the biggest protective factors for children] is having exposure to different ways of thinking, and parents being flexible about that, so that [children have] options. You know, if you have a dilemma, you've got a few different ways [to solve it], and it's okay to problem solve in different ways. ***That seems to build up resilience.*** *It's when it's, like, all or nothing, quite dogmatic, then I think that's when people feel more trapped, and then their problem solving becomes unhealthy and unhelpful. [Instead of] 'You have to do homework at this time,' [it could be] 'Okay, this is your homework. How are we going to solve it together?' Or, 'Let's put a star chart together.' Or, 'That piece of homework is actually really hard, so we'll just leave that for the teacher and I'll send them a letter. But why don't we do these bits?'"*

   "[In cases] where the child is refusing to go to school in secondary school, I would say [to the parent], like, I know the O levels are coming up, but can we take it as like, the worst case scenario is, if your child needs to repeat, [then they will repeat]? But let's look back at rebuilding your relationship with your child, build your child's confidence first, right? The most important thing is, like, if your child's going to stay at home, is there a study program so they can study at their own pace, at least, so that they then they won't be so far behind that then later on, when they try to catch up on the academic performance, that there's additional stress? And just really ***focus on the relationship*** *and getting their mental health back on track?"*

   [If child refuses to go to tuition]: "Sit down and understand, from the child's perspective, what is the cause of this 'I don't want to go'? Kids want to be good at what they do, this is natural, but something's hindering them [in this case]. What is it about this particular class that they don't like?"

2. Understand Resilience

   "Sometimes the parents' own anxieties stem from their worry that they are not preparing the child for life, right? So I need to be harsh on you right now, because that's what life

is, right? Life is harsh. You're not going to have, like, people be nice to you, you're not going to have time [for yourself]. You're going to be subjected to a lot of stress and pressure in the workplace, and that maybe is used to justify some of their own harsher parenting practices. But I don't think it's fair. The children will have time. You're talking about someone dealing with stress in their 30s versus someone dealing with that same stress when they're 10 or 11. It's not a good justification, right?...

The children who are overstressed when they're young don't actually grow up resilient. *They become very paranoid and anxious, like, oh my God, you know, like my parents keep warning me, like, This is what life is. There are going to be bullies. People are going to talk harshly to you. You're not going to have time to do whatever you want. How is that healthy for a 10 year old whose brain is not physically able to manage that amount of information and stress?"*

"[When children have] a lot of unresolved, unprocessed emotions that they don't know what to do with, it doesn't build resilience. They're in chronic survival mode, right, where I have to get up. I have to do this. I have to do the next tuition. I have to do this, this and this. People say, Oh, children are resilient. It's because they have to [be] to survive, right? It is not true resilience where they know how to process their emotions and then bounce back from a state where they have felt safety. They bounce back because they have to, cos, if not, the other option is worse. What we see as resilience is not really the true resilience."

*"**Maturity doesn't come through duress**."*

3. Prioritize Connection

*"The young people I work with often develop some level of trauma towards schooling because their parents are often very loving but in a physical, task-oriented way (i.e., I show my love for you by giving you things and taking care of your physical needs). They are not often in tune with their child's emotions. Children thus grow up with **unmet emotional needs**. When they do well in school and suddenly get a bunch of parental attention and praise, then it becomes almost like a drug for them: they keep chasing it."*[7]

"Although it feels like the youth, they don't want to talk to the adults. But the fact is, they do. They want some adults to validate what they're saying, to be present in what's happening. They feel more settled [when they can] have more conversations with the teachers, mentors, or anyone who's an adult figure in their life. Just to be able to have conversations where there's no right or wrong, which is not about a grade or a science project or a math assignment, just about who I am and what am I doing and my social circle, friends, things like that, which are very important at that age. [...] That gives me a

[7] Paraphrase from notes: Subject did not wish to be recorded

kind of psychological safety and resource, and I am [then better] equipped to deal with stress."

"It's common to hear from my young clients that no one helps them to process what happens to them, or they can't find anyone to help them process."

"I think what's important [for children] is to have that space to process whatever it is that they're feeling, and it doesn't have to be the both parents necessarily. All they need is ***one safe adult*** *that is constant in their lives for them to process."*

"I don't know if you've heard of the Harvard Development Study? So what they seem to find, consistently, is that the one thing that keeps people happy and living longer are relationships. Not money, not academic success, not careers. It's not even how many relationships: it's the quality, it's the depth of the relationships. So they've found that over the past 75 years, consistently, people [with deep relationships] live longer, happier lives. So I talk to my [client] families about that. Even in the face of adversity, what we ultimately want for our kids is happier, longer, fulfilled lives. So what do we need to be focusing on? That doesn't mean that we throw academics out the window, but ***we need to be focusing on helping [children] feel valued, that they matter, they matter to you, they matter to others, they matter to themselves, and are deeply connected.*** *[...] You can't control the rest. You can't control what the economy does, you can't control what financial institutions will decide, what AI tools will be developed, you just can't control that. So control what you can, which is fostering those connections."*

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