



香港兒科基金  
Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation

## Press release

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## **Children with blood lead level below benchmark face risks of behavioral problems or even low intelligence Ad hoc remedies can be damaging to children's health The Hong Kong Paediatric Society and Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation urge the development of a comprehensive child health policy for Hong Kong**

Children are our future and should grow up in a safe, fair and healthy environment created by adults. However, in spite of the heart-breaking child abuse and lead poisoning incidents happened recently, the government failed to provide comprehensive and effective remedial measures to help the affected children.

*"Ad hoc remedies can be damaging to children's health," the Hong Kong Paediatric Society and Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation warned, "children nowadays face new health challenges and morbidities. The recent child abuse and lead poisoning cases are only tip of an iceberg. A child health policy for Hong Kong is imminent."*

It has been months since the first lead-poisoning case was reported. It is unfortunate that our children have to bear the detrimental consequences created by adults. A professional forum on Lead Poisoning in Children was organized by the Hong Kong Paediatric Society and the Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation recently. Two international experts, Professor Ruth ETZEL, Chair of the Environmental Health Advisory Group of the International Pediatric Association (IPA) and Dr. Mary-Jean BROWN, Chief of the Healthy Homes and Lead Poisoning Prevention Branch at the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), have been consulted on this important child health issue.

### **Lead poisoning victims are not exclusively limited to 6 year-olds, "so called safe" blood lead levels may also associate with intellectual impairments**

The government announced earlier to extend blood test for excessive lead level to children from 6 to 8 years old. However, lead poisoning victims are not exclusively limited to 6 years old - lead poisoning affects all ages, but is more detrimental to children who are below 6. Lead can damage almost all internal organs. If any children, irrespective to their age, are suspected to have lead exposure, they should be screened for blood lead level.

There is no safe blood lead level (BLL) for children because even low BLL can cause irreversible cognitive dysfunction and permanent neurological impairments. The current internationally adopted reference of BLL of 5µg/dL in children is a statistical reference only and not an absolute safety level.

*"Studies indicated that even when children's blood lead levels are below 5µg, they still face various potential health risks such as intellectual impairment, attention deficit disorders, other behavioral problems and reduced academic achievement. This problem is placing our future public health system in peril. We urge the government to implement a comprehensive and long term remedial and follow up plan for affected children," said Dr. WONG Hiu Lei, Lilian, President of the Hong Kong Paediatric Society.*



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### **Existing health policy related to children - piecemeal, lacks comprehensive strategies**

The government's failure in providing comprehensive remedies to the aforementioned child health problems is a negligence and unresponsive to our children's needs. An effective Child Health Policy should be child-centered and taking the best interests of the children as the primary concern in decision-making. It should guide all the actions and strategic planning for children. It is a pity that our government is only implementing departmental oriented, fragmented policies and there is so far no specific long term policy designated to children.

*"Although the government has taken measures on children's health such as the implementation of universal immunization programme, the focus is rather narrow-minded and mainly emphasizes on physical diseases. Our children and young people are now facing "new morbidities" such as physical (obesity and diabetes), environmental, developmental and behavioral risks. The recent incident of lead in water is a good demonstration of how environmental hazards jeopardize the health of children and yet the government has no effective solutions," said Dr. CHIU Cheung Shing, Daniel, Past President of the Hong Kong Pediatric Society.*

### **The Committee on the Rights of the Child of the United Nation criticized Hong Kong government for the lack of children policy**

The recent Report from the Committee on the Rights of the Child of the United Nation in 2013 confirmed our views. The Committee had criticized the Hong Kong government for inadequate resource allocations to education and social welfare. It recommended that Hong Kong should adopt a comprehensive policy on children and allocate adequate manpower, technical and financial resources and expedite the establishment of a Children's Commission for the implementation and monitoring of the Child Health Policy and safeguard children's rights.

### **Early intervention saves up to 75% of future health costs**

Intervention early in life is an essential element of a comprehensive child health policy. It helps to alleviate pressure on the healthcare system and eliminate some of the social problems in future, thus lowering the social costs. Study indicates that early intervention can save up to 75% of health costs that will be needed later in life.

### **Formulation of the "Child Health Policy Proposal for Hong Kong" by the Hong Kong Paediatric Society and the Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation**

*"An effective Child Health Policy should be child-centered. The policy should take into account of the needs in children at their different stages of life. It should be developed with in-depth analysis and long term follow-ups. The policy should be implemented across different government departments with appropriate resource allocation and holistic approach. A comprehensive child health policy should consist of aspects such as elimination of equity disparities, optimization of provision of care, enhancement of physical, mental and social needs for children and health literacy in the population and enhancement of Children's right," said Dr. CHAN Chok Wan, Chairman of Board of Directors of Hong Kong Pediatric Foundation, Past President of the International Pediatric Association (IPA).*



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In view of this, the Hong Kong Paediatric Society and the Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation gathered over hundreds of healthcare professionals, economist, educators and social welfare professionals to review the child health problems in our community and develop the first ever “Child Health Policy Proposal for Hong Kong”. The proposal serves to guide the development of an actionable, comprehensive and strategic planning framework for a Child Health Policy for Hong Kong. With 3 years time and over 4,320 hours of studies and consultations among healthcare professionals, inputs from public consultations via six public fora, the “Child Health Policy Proposal for Hong Kong” was finally completed in August, 2015, highlighting the policy priorities and recommending effective and strategic initiatives to the government.

## Policy priorities and recommendations

### ▪ Medical Perspective

- Promotion of breastfeeding at family, professional and community levels.
- Extension of newborn screening for metabolic diseases.
- Investment in early childhood to enhance early stimulation and nurturing to facilitate the best development of children.
- A comprehensive and long-lasting mental health policy for children is needed.
- Physical activity is beneficial to children growth and development and an effective preventive measure for a range of health problems, and thus adequate physical activity should be encouraged at school and in the family.
- Children's right to play should be enforced.
- Child safety at home and in playground should be promoted.
- To advocate and enhance health literacy in the population.

### ▪ Social Perspective

- Good coordination across government departments, education, medical, nursing and social sectors should be encouraged to enhance effective intervention.
- Favourable nurturing environments for children including caring family, safe neighbourhood and accommodating community should be encouraged.
- Families, parents, school and community are important partners supporting and promoting the wellbeing of children in poverty.
- Equity should be secured for all children with diverse needs.
- Reinforcement of children's rights should be the priority in all government's policies.

### ▪ Education Perspective

- Nowadays a lot of physical and mental morbidities in children can be traced to unrealistic parental expectations. Hence, parent education should be emphasized.
- Health literacy and media information literacy are important learning targets for the community as a whole.
- The 15-year free education should be implemented.
- The Hong Kong community as a whole should not over-emphasize academic performance or the personal achievement of an individual.
- Holistic education should cover life-skills and ethics in addition to academic knowledge.
- Children should have the right to learn at their own pace, to play, to rest, to enjoy life and to develop their own potential according to their interest.
- Special arrangement and support to families should be provided to those children with special care needs.
- Future education system should also cater for the needs of children with special education requirements.



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#### ▪ **Nursing and Allied Health Perspective**

- Most parents today understand the importance of the mental health and psychological wellbeing of their children. Yet no mental health screening nor adequate intervention is available in the community.
- Healthy eating should be encouraged both at school and in the family. More guidance and support should be given to parents on healthy eating and healthy lifestyle.
- A central registry for children with disabilities and special care is needed to guide the intervention services and rehabilitation measures for this group of children.
- More support should be given to families and children in the long term as rehabilitation target and throughout the transitional process from paediatric care to adult services.
- The needs of children of ethnic minority groups are being overlooked. More support should be given to this group of children and their families.
- Children are not able to voice out their needs. Parents, family, teachers, doctors, nurses, allied health professionals, and social workers in the community should be the strong child advocates to safeguard the best interest of children.

#### ▪ **Youth perspective**

- Youth should be encouraged to have dreams and fulfill their dreams through practical actions.
- Young people hope parents and adults could listen to their voice, respect their views and let them build up resilience rather than overprotective.
- The existing education system and competitive atmosphere in the community have created a lot of pressure to them.
- They hope parents and the community could provide more mental health support to them.
- Young people agree that there are a number of resources available for youth in Hong Kong but many of the resources and facilitates are scattered and uncoordinated. Therefore, it is very difficult for them to access those facilitates.
- Young people urge the government to provide more resources for diverse development of youth rather than just focus on academic achievements.

#### ▪ **Parent perspective**

- The current education system with “through-train” schools creates a lot of pressure to parents who worry a failure in the beginning will have huge impact to children’s future education.
- This creates “monster parents” who push their young children to undergo many training classes to ensure their successful entry into desirable schools.
- More communication should be encouraged between parents and schools to ensure trust and coordination
- More training courses should be provided to parents as the existing support and information to parents is not adequate.

#### ▪ **Environmental Perspective**

- Environment” in the board sense should not be limited to the “physical environment” such as living environment, air, noise, light and water. It should also include “social environment”, “family environment”, “school environment”, “peer environment”, “legal environment” and “play environment”.
- Education and awareness of the public especially parents on environmental health should be enhanced.
- Conjoint effort by the government, non-government organizations (NGOs) and professional bodies is important in carrying out epidemiological studies and research to facilitate evidence-based implementation of health policies and practice to improve the environment of our children.



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### **Development of a Child Health Policy for Hong Kong imminent**

*"We truly hope that this proposal will be served as the framework to guide the HKSAR government to develop a comprehensive and practical Child Health Policy. Establishment of a children's commission to oversee the research, monitoring and execution of the policy is essential. Children should never be treated as adult's appurtenance. They are independent entity and their rights should be well respected. It is the prime duty of the government and all responsible adults to ensure the best environment for our children and young people to grow and live happily and to develop their full potential in life." stated Dr. WONG Hiu Lei, Lilian.*

**The end**

### **The Hong Kong Pediatric Society**

Formed in 1962, the objectives of the society are to advance the knowledge of child health care, to maintain high standard of child health care, to promote child health through public education and to foster comradeship. [www.medicine.org.hk/hkps/](http://www.medicine.org.hk/hkps/)

### **The Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation**

The Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation is a charitable organization wholly owned by the Hong Kong Paediatric Society. It was established in 1994 by child health professionals from intersectoral domains and community celebrities for promotion of child health and child advocacy through public education. [www.hkpr.org.hk](http://www.hkpr.org.hk)

### **Appendix 1 :**

#### **Recommendation on follow up arrangement on lead poisoning in children :**

- Arrange blood lead level (BLL) screening for all children irrespective to their age if they have exposed to lead in water. According to CDC, it is recommended to have blood confirmation test if blood lead level > 5  $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$  in screening test.
- Establish a central registry to record and continuously monitor the health progress of children with raised blood lead level.
- Allocate resources to support children with raised blood lead level.
- Education and support should be provided to parents, schools and teachers who are taking care of these affected children.
- Allocate extra resources to schools that are providing supporting to these affected children.
- Coordinate relevant departments to work together to keep surveillance of other environmental hazards regularly, such as cadmium, mercury, carcinogenic substances. It is far more important to identify the source of environmental hazards as soon as possible and avoid large-scale of environmental health crisis in future.