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Submission to Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau on  
An outline of the topics in the third report of the  
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region under  
the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

The Hong Kong College of Paediatricians would like to comment on the rights of children and adolescents in the areas covered by the captioned consultation. We hope that the final government report is not just confined to information / explanations about any significant development since the last report and what services are available, but it should also be a good opportunity to review what rights could be further strengthened and the accessibility, adequacy of quantity, and quality of the services for children.

**Article 10: Protection of the family**

Family Council: can a child's rights be protected?

Despite the unanimous passage of a Legislative Council Motion in June 2007 to form a Commission for Children, the government instead formed the Family Council in December 2007. Our College fully supports the strengthening of family values and harmony, however, we are concerned all along that children's rights are not adequately protected and are even violated by other family members. By now the Family Council had been established for over 2 years but measurable improvements remain to be seen. Corporal punishment or parental assault of children in the name of discipline remains a legitimate means of teaching children. At the same time, we are saddened by the repeated incidents of children killed by their parents who committed suicide at the same time. To these parents their children are still considered as their own properties rather than individuals with personal rights. With the Family Council unable to fulfill the

function of advancing the rights of children the establishment of a Child Commission in Hong Kong is still a necessity.

#### Cultivating effective parenting

Good parenting is important in the development of physical, psychological and social health. On the other hand, ineffective parenting is associated with child abuse, household injuries and adolescent problems. Positive parenting programmes are available in Maternal & Child Health Centres for motivated parents while some support services for parents in need are also organized by social welfare agencies. Good parenting is not necessarily an inborn skill but many parents, irrespective of education or income level, are not aware of their needs for such skills or are unable to put the skills into practice for various reasons. Hong Kong needs to develop strategies towards cultivating good parenting for the entire population, and providing adequate services to those in need, particularly the hard to reach groups. To assist low income parents in performing their child-rearing responsibilities, tangible measures should also include reasonable living wages and reasonable working hours, other than the Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project.

#### Protection of children and juveniles

We feel sorry to witness the rising incidence of child abuse and domestic accidents leading to injuries and deaths. Existing social services can hardly meet the escalating demands. There needs to be a coordinated effort in devising preventive measures that include legislation on children left unattended, home safety measures as well as desirable housing and road designs.

#### Youth suicide: tackling adolescent problems at their roots

The increasing number of suicidal deaths in adolescents is alarming. In the recent report on Child Fatality Review for 2006, 14 of 46 (30%) of the non-natural deaths were from suicide. Suicide is but the tragic tip of the iceberg of adolescent problems. It is important to understand that suicide, like many adolescent problems including teenage

pregnancy and drug abuse, has its roots in ineffective parenting, family disharmony and school failure. Tackling the problem upstream and strengthening the vulnerable adolescent are most important.

#### Respecting the early years

Research showed that good nurturing in the early years is associated with higher intelligence and emotional stability in the long run. The government can help by supporting breastfeeding in practice, legislating longer maternity leaves, allowing paternal leaves and encouraging mother baby-friendly work arrangements. The Comprehensive Child Development Service was started in 2005 to support early development of at risk infants, for example, from teenage mothers or those with drug addiction or psychiatric illness. The service was meant to cover the whole territory in phases but it appeared that expansion had stopped after 3 centres were established. We would like to urge the government to expedite the coverage of the service to all districts of Hong Kong.

### **Article 12: The right to health**

#### Hong Kong needs a child health policy

We are pleased to find ‘policy’ on the list of suggested topics but we are not aware of a child health policy in Hong Kong. Health in the child comprises many dimensions - physical, psychological, educational and social well-being. Different bureaux of the government may have their own policies whether stated or unstated. Without a central policy, the various departments may have different priorities with services being uncoordinated or gaps not filled. By having a comprehensive child health policy, services to our children can be better aligned and coordinated.

#### Shortage of mental health services for children and adolescents

The increasing demand for child psychiatry services is unmet by the shortage of child psychiatrists and supporting personnel. Affected individuals belonging to the ‘non-

urgent' category (for example, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, behavioural problems) often need to wait for 2 to 3 years to see a psychiatrist. Although their conditions may not pose immediate danger, the delay in intervention not only results in loss of a golden opportunity for learning and development, but also leads to a cascade of emotional, behavioural and social problems including drug abuse and delinquency.

#### Combating obesity in the young

Obesity is an alarming health problem in children and adolescents in Hong Kong. According to the Student Health Service, 21% of primary school children are obese in 2007-8. An obese child will likely become an obese adult, and stands a higher risk for diabetes mellitus, hypertension and coronary heart disease. Every effort should be made to prevent obesity at a young age. Through education at school and campaigns conducted by the Department of Health, most people know the importance of a healthy lifestyle. However, hurdles in practicing a healthy lifestyle remain to be overcome. Examples of obstacles include, parents are ineffective or too busy to cultivate good eating habits in their children, much time is spent in doing homework leaving no time for exercise, indulgence in electronic games or television, schools are not providing adequate exercise time or restricting sale of unhealthy food. These issues need to be addressed before we can get a better outcome.

#### **Article 13 and Article 14: Right to education**

##### Learning difficulties

Local studies showed that the prevalence of specific learning difficulties in reading and writing were as high as 9.7 to 12.6%. Though this problem is receiving increasing attention, provision of assessment and remediation services is disproportional to the large caseloads. Learning difficulty is an important cause of school failure which further leads to various adolescent problems.

### Children with special needs

The government needs to look into the adequacy and effectiveness of integrated education for children with milder disabilities. The long waiting times for services for children with special needs including transition care services into adult programmes need to be addressed.

### **Conclusion**

We hope our government would seriously address the rights and needs of our children. A government with vision would invest wisely in the young to yield a healthy and resilient future generation.