



Hong Kong College of Paediatricians
香港兒科醫學院
(Incorporated in Hong Kong with Limited Liability)



17 February 2014

Secretariat of the Steering Committee on Population Policy,
26/F, Central Government Offices,
2 Tim Mei Avenue,
Tamar, Hong Kong

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Views on Hong Kong Population Policy 2014 Submitted by Hong Kong College of Paediatricians

We have studied the consultation documents prepared by the Steering Committee on Population Policy. We agree that our challenges are aging population, declining workforce, skills mismatch, low birth rate, and social integration of new immigrants.

We fully support the views that the population policy should focus on giving every one of us the chance to develop our full potential and enhance our well-being. To achieve this, it is vital for Hong Kong to support the younger generation to develop into healthy, adaptive and productive adults to sustain the society in future. This should start by promoting early child health and development. We would like to base our proposal on existing sound scientific evidences, as follows:

(I) Unleashing the potential of existing population (Chapter 2) and enhancing the quality of our home-grown talent (Chapter 3)

Helping children grow and develop is something that cuts to the heart of every community. Heckman (1) believes that United states is not spending its child education money wisely – that they spend too little at critical points in child development before kindergarten and too much in ‘second-chance’ efforts when interventions have become costly and ineffective.

We strongly advocate for investments in early childhood development, starting from the time of conception (physical fitness of the mother) to at least the first 5 years of life. This can improve cognitive and non-cognitive / character traits (motivation, perseverance, tenacity etc.), prevent diseases and promote health (both physical and mental) of children so as to allow children to become highly adaptive, productive, and healthy adults. This is especially true for the disadvantaged children. Such early efforts promote schooling, reduce crime, foster workforce productivity, reduce teenage pregnancy, and develop healthy behaviors. The rates of return on these investments are higher than stock market returns, even in normal times. The longer society waits to intervene in the life of a child, the more costly it is to remediate disadvantage in the form of public job training, convict rehabilitation programs, adult literacy programs, or treatment of chronic health conditions (2).

Four core concepts important to devising sound social policy toward early childhood have emerged from decades of independent research in economics, neuroscience, and developmental psychology (3).

1. The architecture of the brain and the process of skill formation are influenced by an interaction between genetics and individual experience.
2. The mastery of skills that are essential for economic success and the development of their underlying neural pathways follow hierarchical rules. Later attainments build on foundations that are laid down earlier.
3. Cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional competencies are interdependent; all are shaped powerfully by the experiences of the developing child; and all contribute to success in the society at large.
4. Although adaptation continues throughout life, human abilities are formed in a predictable sequence of sensitive periods, during which the development of specific neural circuits and the behaviors they mediate are most plastic and therefore optimally receptive to environmental influences.

A landmark study concluded that “virtually every aspect of early human development, from the brain’s evolving circuitry to the child’s capacity for empathy, is affected by the environments and experiences that are encountered in a cumulative fashion, beginning in the prenatal period and extending throughout the early childhood years” (4). This principle stems from two characteristics that are

intrinsic to the nature of learning: (i) early learning confers value on acquired skills, which leads to self-reinforcing motivation to learn more, and (ii) early mastery of a range of cognitive, social, and emotional competencies makes learning at later ages more efficient and therefore easier and more likely to continue. Early family environments are major predictors of cognitive and non-cognitive abilities (5, 6).

In summary, all children should be given one-to-one tender loving responsive care to promote early brain development on which further learning and competencies can be built. Such a high quality developmental child care should be provided in early childhood especially for children aged below 5 years. Children and families need a full range of interventions tailored to their needs and circumstances such as different levels of parenting programmes, home visitation, quality childcare services that attend to the child's needs for not only feeding and safety, but also developmental play and learning. Such programmes and services have to be regularly evaluated and monitored to see if they meet the developmental needs of the growing child. Mothers who decide to care for their young children themselves should be supported and their effort valued.

(II) Fostering a supportive environment for our people to form and raise families (Chapter 5)

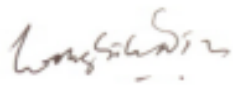
To be a strong and cohesive society, we must have a strong Hong Kong core. Strong families are the bedrock of our society, through which we pass on our values and sense of belonging from one generation to the next. To help Hong Kong people achieve their dreams to marry and have children, we need to have a Marriage & Parenthood Package / pro-family inducements similar to that in Singapore (7) or other developed countries, which have to be enhanced regularly.

The following measures have been used in other countries:

- (a) enable couples to get housing faster and more easily, so that they can marry and start families earlier;
- (b) provide support for conception and delivery costs;
- (c) facilitate breast feeding for at least 6 months;
- (d) defray child-raising costs, including healthcare costs;

- (e) enhance work-life measures to help working couples balance work and family commitments;
- (f) signal to fathers to play a bigger role through paternity and shared parental leave.
- (g) changing work patterns to allow more flexible working hours or places.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in brown ink, appearing to read 'Wong Sik Nin'.

Dr Wong Sik Nin
President
Hong Kong College of Paediatricians

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4. J. P. Shonkoff, D. Phillips, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The science of early child development* (National Academy Press, Washington, DC, 2000).
5. P. Carneiro, J. J. Heckman. In *Inequality in America: What role for human capital policies?* J.J. Heckman, A.B. Krueger, B. Friedman, Eds. (MIT press, Cambridge, MA, 2003), ch 2, pp. 77-237.
6. F. Cunha, J.J. Heckman, L.J. Lochner, D.V. Masterov, in *Handbook of the Economics of Education*, E.A. Hanushek, F. Welch, Eds (North Holland, Amsterdam).
7. A Sustainable population for a dynamic Singapore. Population White Paper Jan 2013.