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## Experts call for more help for low-income families to meet kids' developmental and health needs



Many parents from low-income families would have to sacrifice income in exchange for time spent on their children's health appointments. PHOTO: ST FILE



**Goh Yan Han**

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SINGAPORE - Childcare leave is important for low-income parents to be able to prioritise the health and developmental needs of their children, especially in the early years, said Dr Chong Shang Chee, head and senior consultant of the Child Development Unit at the Khoo Teck Puat-National University Children's Medical Institute at the National University Hospital.

She highlighted that parents from low-income families who may be employed in contract or daily wage work may not have childcare leave and this was a barrier in their ability to take their children for follow-up health appointments.

Many would have to sacrifice income in exchange for time spent on such appointments.

Dr Chong, one of the authors in a study on local intervention programme Circle of Care and the health habits of children from low-income families, put forth several recommendations for better support for low-income families during a media briefing on Tuesday (Feb 23).

Circle of Care associate director Jean Koh said: "Early identification of health and developmental needs play a critical role in helping us reduce the achievement gap (between children from low-income families and their peers).

"Many of the parents we work with either lack knowledge in this area or have limited time and resources due to their family circumstances."

Other barriers apart from a lack of childcare leave include a lack of time and lower priority placed on a child's health issues.

Some recommendations in the study include changing regulations such that childcare leave could shift in entitlement to the needs of the child rather than what parents as employees are entitled to, or removing the extra step of requiring a letter for specialist care.

Another recommendation was to improve multi-agency partnerships for health education and screening programmes in the community as well as stronger partnerships between professionals like pre-school teachers, social workers and healthcare workers.

"We may need a very differentiated approach for a group of kids who have higher vulnerabilities and higher barriers that cannot follow the usual health programmes," said Dr Chong.

The study also recommended that social work and pre-school teacher capacities within pre-schools be expanded.

This would allow the professionals closest to the children to receive training and have time for structured collaboration with health workers and health systems.

"We found that social workers and pre-school teachers were very invested. They actually have the capacity to be trained and they desire to have knowledge, but because they have many things to manage, and these are very complex families, we probably need to expand that capacity to do this," said Dr Chong.

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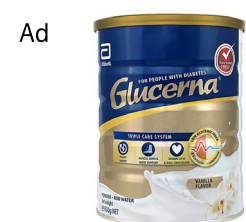
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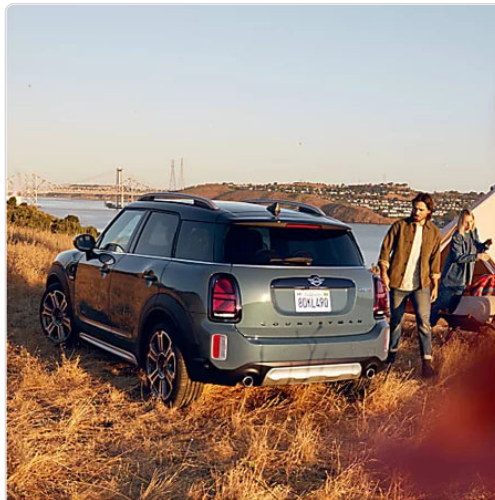
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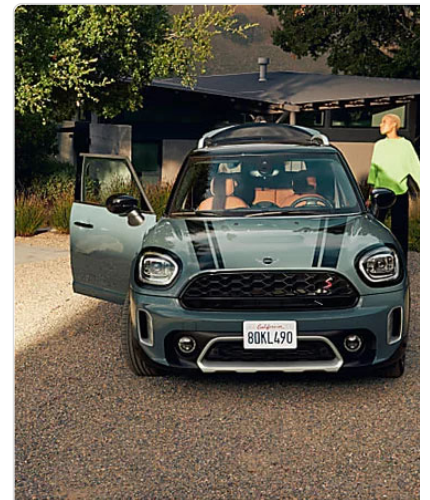
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