

Executive Summary: Building a Child-Centric Social Support System

A Study of Tak Takut Kids Club's Child-Centric, Community-Based Approach to Strengthening Social Support for Disadvantaged Children

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Executive Summary

In 2019, Tak Takut Kids Club (TTKC) was launched in Boon Lay with a mission to create a supportive, child-centred environment that nurtures children's well-being and holistic development.

TTKC entered the social landscape with the hypothesis that children from vulnerable backgrounds lack stable and positive relationship, hindering their self-esteem and aspirations. In addition to homes and schools, the neighbour serves as a third space fostering safety and belonging.

In 2023, TTKC integrated casework support into its structure to address complex and unseen issues children face due to systemic challenges. Leveraging its close community ties, TTKC aimed to strengthen connection between children and the ecosystem. Over the course of a year, TTKC collaborated with partners on casework to support 55 children and their families in overcoming challenges related to education, safety, physical and mental health, finances, and delinquency.

By June 2024, TTKC had built trusting relationship with 436 children in the neighbourhood, becoming a psychological haven where the children have access to trusted adults and a supportive community both highly valued by the children.





Entrance of Tak Takut Kids Club (2023) in Boon Lay. Open-ended activities are scheduled daily (as shown on the chalkboard), and children enter the centre independently to participate. The flexible programming allows adults to engage in child-centric conversations with the children, as seen with the pair sitting on the bench.



TTKC occupies a local shop space strategically located next to the playground, enabling its outreach and engagement to extend naturally into the Boon Lay neighbourhood.

Aim

Quantedge Foundation Singapore (QFS) co-authored this paper with TTKC with the following aims:

1. To analyse the challenges the social support ecosystem faces in working with children from lower-income families.
2. To demonstrate how TTKC, as a child-centric organisation, collaborates with formal agencies to address these challenges in providing social support.
3. To draw on the experiences of TTKC to contribute to discussions on best practices for supporting children from low-income families.

TTKC adopts Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to understand the interactions of systems surrounding a child. By placing the child at the centre of an ecological map (Figure 1), actors within this ecosystem are seen to operate at varying proximities to the child. The microsystem, comprising actors who interact with the child daily, greatly influences the child's behaviour, values, and well-being.

By dedicating 25 hours weekly to community engagement and building trusted relationships with children, TTKC positions itself as one of the key actors in this microsystem. The exosystem includes actors providing critical interventions for children with complex needs, but the limited connections between the child and the exosystem may make it difficult for children to access necessary services.

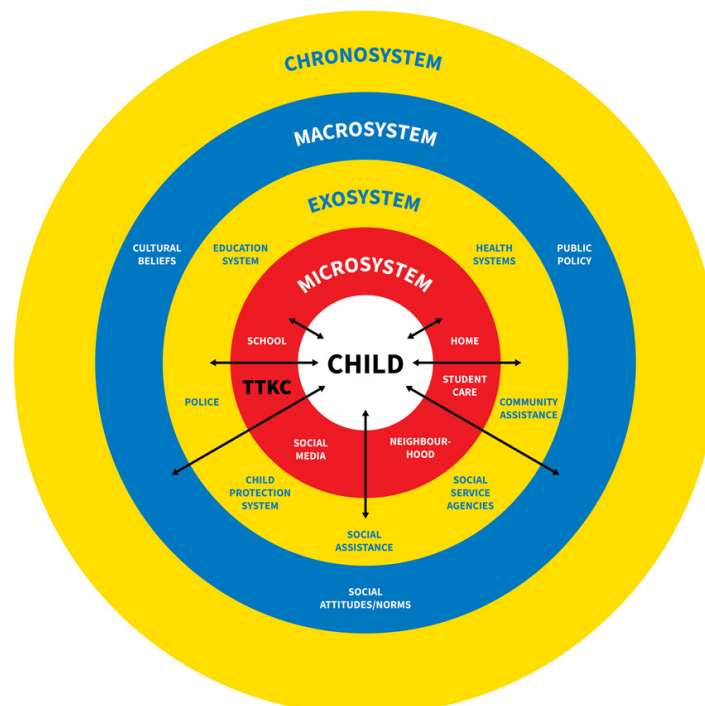


Figure 1: A child's ecological system of support, represented via this ecological map. In black, TTKC's role is shown as interacting frequently with the child in the microsystem and enhancing connections with stakeholders in the micro, exo and macro systems.



Figure 2: A map highlighting the service area of TTKC and key actors in Boon Lay, with public rental flats marked in orange. The children come primarily from nearby rental flats, 3-room flats (174-176, 185-187), and 2-room flexi flats located in the Build-to-Order estates. Most students attend Boon Lay Garden Primary School and Corporation Primary School, with which TTKC partners closely.

Key Findings

By maintaining proximity to children and their families, and fostering working relationships with actors in the microsystem, exosystem and macrosystem, TTKC facilitates support across three stages of intervention:

Stages of Intervention	Challenges Faced by Stakeholders	TTKC's Approach to Addressing Challenges
1) Outreach & Access	Engaging socially disconnected children	Build a strong community presence to enable organic outreach
	Overcoming parental gatekeeping	Keep an "open door" policy for children, who learn about TTKC organically
	Detecting mental health conditions, mental disabilities, and learning difficulties	Build trusted relationships and partner organisations with relevant expertise
2) Intervention	Building trusted relationships with children	Use a child-centred approach to build strong relationships
	Empowering children's voices	Engage children directly to understand their wishes.
	Integrating the community in the casework process	Establish casework workflows with key partners
3) Reinforcement	Ensuring consistency of intervention	Monitor and reinforce interventions
	Supporting the healing process	Foster social connectedness to build a community of support

Recommendations

This report maps the social support ecosystem in Boon Lay, focusing on the casework undertaken by TTKC for vulnerable children. It highlights three key sets of challenges — those in the outreach and access stage, those in the intervention stage, and those in the reinforcement stage. The report also outlines TTKC's crucial role in addressing these challenges and the difficulties it faces in this ongoing effort. Given TTKC's impact, this report highlights these key recommendations:

Adopt a More Organic Outreach Approach to Draw in Target Populations

One difficulty some agencies face is the challenge of reaching and engaging children effectively. Agencies could consider adopting elements of TTKC's organic outreach approach, such as creating spaces that are attractive and accessible to children, and building a strong community presence. In particular, the TTKC centre has multifunctional offerings that appeal to a range of interests. It is strategically located in an area with high footfall, welcoming any child who walks in.

Adopt a Relationship-First Child-Centric Approach

TTKC prioritises establishing stable, trusting relationships between the children and the adults who work closely with them. With these positive relationships forming the basis of a Social Service Agency's (SSA) service model, the SSA is better placed to effectively deliver programmes and services targeted at children, including enhancing access, identification, and reinforcement of casework interventions. Adopt a Relationship-First Child-Centric Approach Incorporate the Child's Voice into Casework

Incorporate the Child's Voice into Casework

The report emphasises the importance of integrating the child's voice into the casework process. When the children's perspectives and feelings are not sufficiently considered, interventions may not address their actual needs. To ensure children are better supported, their viewpoints should be heard, understood and included at all stages of the work. This can be achieved by carefully identifying and including key partners who hold trusted relationships with the child. These partners also help bridge gaps in trust and communication between the child and the other actors providing support.

Strengthen Sectoral Coordination and Integration of Ground-Up Organisations

Casework management could be strengthened at a broader sectoral level through closer coordination across different agencies and organisations. One way to achieve this is to build on the “Guidelines for Case Master Action Planning” by outlining the role of ground-up organisations such as TTKC and how they can be effectively integrated into the casework process for more holistic and individualised support. Ground-up organisations can play a unique role by providing first-hand information, insights from the children, and community-based support that complements formal casework.

Use TTKC’s Model as a Blueprint

TTKC’s approaches could be adopted by other agencies, particularly in areas where vulnerable children reside. Its success in organic outreach, child-centric engagement, and collaboration with various actors highlights the effectiveness of a community-driven approach. Strategies such as building trust within the community, ensuring that children’s voices are central to the support process, and fostering strong partnerships with local organisations and stakeholders can be adopted by other organisations to enhance support for children.



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