

Focus on healthy child development

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CHILD psychologists and parenting experts are in agreement with the Education Ministry's decision to abolish Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) from this year.



Prince Court Medical Centre consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist Dr Norharlina Bahar said centralised exams like UPSR put young children through stress and pressure due to rigid and repetitive learning exercise and memorisation.

“Most children can manage the stress, but over the years, I see more and more children and their families affected by this exam pressure.

“Emotional and behavioural issues usually occur among vulnerable children or children with underlying family or parental issues.

“The children often face anxiety-related problems, such as generalised anxiety, phobia, panic attacks and school refusal.

“Symptoms of depression are also common among the kids, such as low mood, irritability, poor sleep, mood dysregulation, self isolation and loss of ability to feel pleasure in normally pleasurable activities.

“I also see many kids engage in selfharm, do more high-risk activities, and are over-dependent on smartmedia or gadgets.

“Exam pressure could lead to exaggeration of pre-existing mental health or family issues, thus creating conflict in the parent-child relationship.

“Some symptoms are prolonged but some are situational,” she told the New Straits Times.

Dr Norharlina suggested that areas of emotional intelligence should be used as a guide for school-based assessments.

“Removing UPSR means there won't be a one-assessment-fits-all as the demographic of students and their phases of development are different.

“This will give teachers some autonomy and ‘space’ to develop their own creative approaches, as they know their students best.

“It diverts the unnecessary focus, time and energy from exam-related activities to more important areas of healthy children development, learning through play and fun.

“School-based assessments, thus, cannot be too rigid as emotional intelligence development is a continuous process.

“A rigid assessment would not serve the original purpose of upholding and supporting continuous development of emotional intelligence,” she said.

Former PERMATApintar Nega

ra director Prof Datuk Dr Noriah Mohd Ishak echoed similar praises for the ministry’s move to abolish UPSR.

“Teachers are no longer forced to finish teaching a rigid curriculum using a rote learning approach (memorising information through repetition) within a given timeframe.

“Instead, they will have more opportunities to inculcate higher order thinking skills (HOTS) in students through learning activities that emphasise inquiry-based learning and cooperative learning, problem-based learning.

“These activities must be guided by clear and measurable learning outcomes as well.

“When learning becomes fun, students will feel less inclined to fight and bully their classmates or doze off in classrooms during lessons,” she said.

Noriah encouraged teachers to try out thematic learning approaches in classrooms which “cut across all subjects” to deliver more meaningful lessons to students.

Meanwhile, Individual, Family and Organisational Leadership expert Dr Azuraida Shahadan said exams matter

to parents because they are used to them and not because they are the best method to assess children.

Therefore, Azuraida suggested a two-tier assessment to replace UPSR, which emphasises “akhlak” and morality as well as continuous academic assessments.

Reflecting on her Child and Adolescents Development Milestones book, she said that children at the age of 11 and 12 tend to challenge adult knowledge and develop excessive feelings about competition and performance as they are in a stage of extreme rebellion.

“A research by the Education Ministry in Guyana proved that behaviour plays an important role in academic achievements.

“One student acting out can disrupt the learning of all students.

“Akhlak and morality will teach students to accept mistakes and differentiate the right from the wrong.

“When they realise this, they stop complaining and become more accountable and responsible, which lead to a good character development.

“By assessing akhlak and morality, students will learn how to respect their teachers and friends and pay attention to lessons, as well as stop disrupting other students, such as making noise or bullying.

“Otherwise, we might be missing the root cause to tackle their academic problem.

“A continuous assessment should also be conducted for each subject with one final assessment at the end of every subject.

“The United States and Finland use continuous assessments instead of centralised examinations to assess students’ performance,” she said.

Parents, she said, should contribute to their children’s learning and character by developing a caring relationship with them.

“For instance, parents can apply the ABCD (Ajar, Bantu, Cakap, Dengar) — Teach, Help, Talk and Listen formula — to build good ties with their children.

“They should spend probably one hour a day to sit down and revise with their children.

“Help children to understand about events around them and help them to understand the consequences of not studying.

“Talk to children about your dreams and aspirations as parents and listen to their voice as well,” she said.