

Early Childhood Parenting Landscape Study 2014
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Early Childhood Parenting Landscape Study is the first nationwide study involving more than 3,800 parents of young children from birth to eight years of age. The study, done in collaboration with SIM University, is designed to provide a landscape perspective of parental knowledge and beliefs of early years childhood development, parental aspirations for their children and their parenting practices.

The study obtained information on parental attitudes and beliefs, parents' knowledge of how children develop, their practices and the resources that they access to help them in their parenting roles and responsibilities. Issues and challenges that parents face and the types of resources that are useful for them in their parenting journey were explored in order to inform the development of further outreach strategies.

The kinds of information and resources parents need, the preferred forms and modalities of such information and resources, how parents use these information, and the challenges parents face also form part of the study focus. Specifically, the research interest encompasses the following:

- (a) The extent of child development and early years knowledge that parents possess;
- (b) Parenting goals, attitudes, values and beliefs;
- (c) Parenting practices;
- (d) Home learning environments;
- (e) Parenting issues and challenges in raising young children from birth to eight years; and
- (f) Support and resources needed, as well as information sources and modalities that parents turn to at different stages of their parenting journey.

Parents, as we know from research, are the key influencers in their children's lives and play an integral role in their early formative years. Their involvement and the home learning environments they create form an inextricable link to ensuring positive outcomes for children across a range of developments – physical, cognitive, language, moral and socio-emotional. What parents understand and do matter, and children stand to reap considerable benefits in terms of their well-being, confidence and readiness to learn.

The study aims to provide information to guide:

- (a) ECDA's outreach strategies and public messaging on the importance of child development, early childhood and quality home learning environments;
- (b) Development of suitable content and resources for parents; and
- (c) Key stakeholders' outreach strategies in their work with parents of children from birth to 8 years.

The methodology of the study comprised both a survey, as well as focus group discussions. Fieldwork for the survey was conducted from November 2013 to May 2014, involving face-to-face interviews with 3,800 Singaporean parents from different ethnic groups and dwelling types. The target population for this survey was Singaporean parents with Singaporean citizen children up to eight years of age. Parents responded to items in the questionnaire grouped under the following themes: (i) Parental Knowledge; (ii) Attitudes and Aspirations; (iii) Parenting Practices; and (iv) Resources and Information. The questionnaire adopted a 4-point scale for most of the items. A series of focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted prior to the survey to determine the focus and content of the questionnaire while post-survey FGDs were initiated to further understand the parents' motivations behind their responses to the questionnaire.

This executive summary highlights the key findings arising from the study.

WHAT WE FOUND

A. *What Parents Know*

- The study found parents to be knowledgeable about child development. Most parents (in excess of 90%) indicated all seven domains of child development as important or very important. These domains include physical, cognitive, language, literacy, social, emotional, and moral development.
- By level of importance, parents cited physical (26%) and intellectual development which encompasses cognitive and language development (25%) as the topmost important development domains. Moral development (23%) was also prominent in the minds of parents (refer to [Figure 1](#)).
- Parents tend to place emphasis on their children's cognitive and language development in the earlier years compared to literacy which increased in emphasis as children reached school-going age.

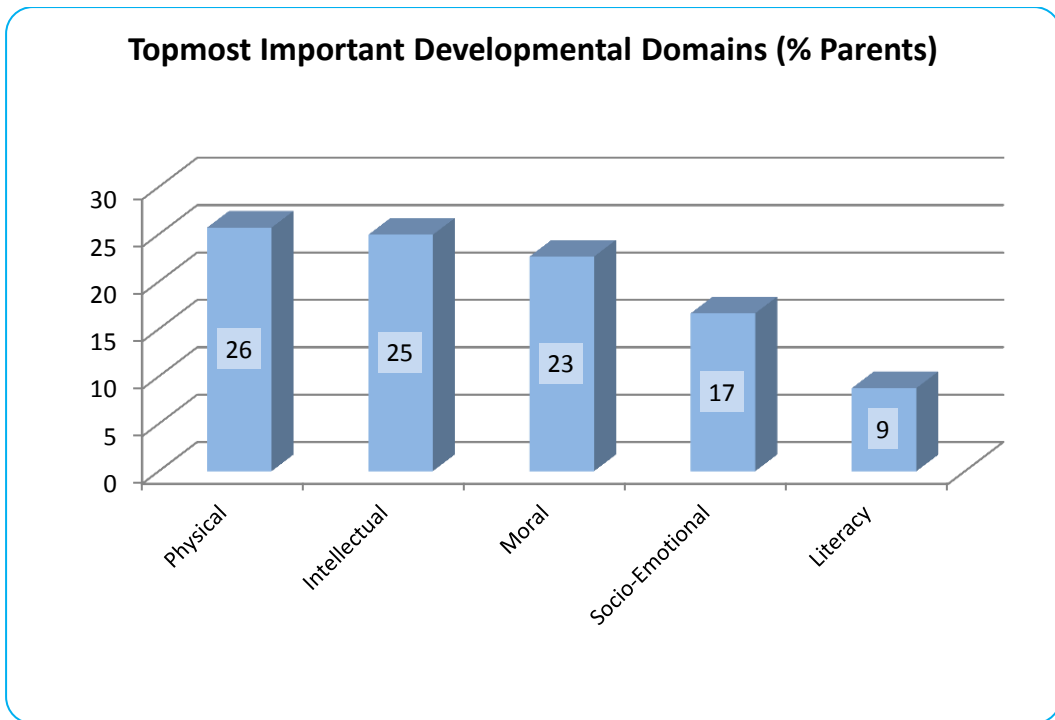


Figure 1 – Topmost Important Developmental Domains (% Parents)

B. Parental Attitudes and Aspirations

Parents tend to put the happiness of their child first, over academic and other material successes. When asked for their aspirations for their children, moral and character development was ranked higher than academic achievements and material success. Aspirations for a happy life, being gracious and caring, being a useful person and a good citizen were each scored as important or very important by more than 90% of parents. Of the 13 options presented to parents, academic success ranked 10th in importance (refer to [Figure 2](#)). More than 1 in 5 parents did not indicate academic success as “important” or “very important”.

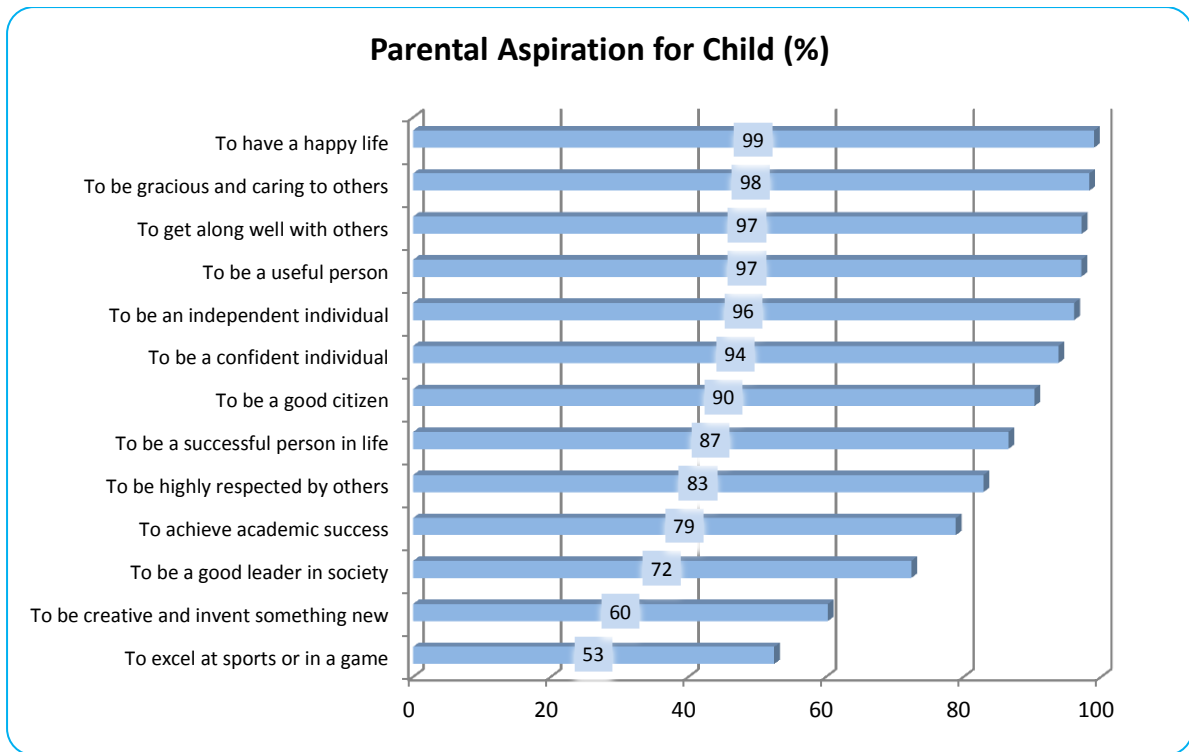


Figure 2 – Parental Aspirations for their children (%)

C. Parenting Practices

On Discipline

On the whole, parents tend to avoid punitive strategies when disciplining their child. The top three most commonly used disciplinary strategies are: (i) talk/reason, (ii) praise when child is good and (iii) distract the child from bad behaviour. Over 90% of parents surveyed preferred to reason with the child or offered praise when the child was good, to enable the child to learn appropriate behaviour. Conversely, the least used strategies were caning and spanking and ignoring the child, with only a third or less of parents using these approaches to discipline their children (refer to [Figure 3](#)).

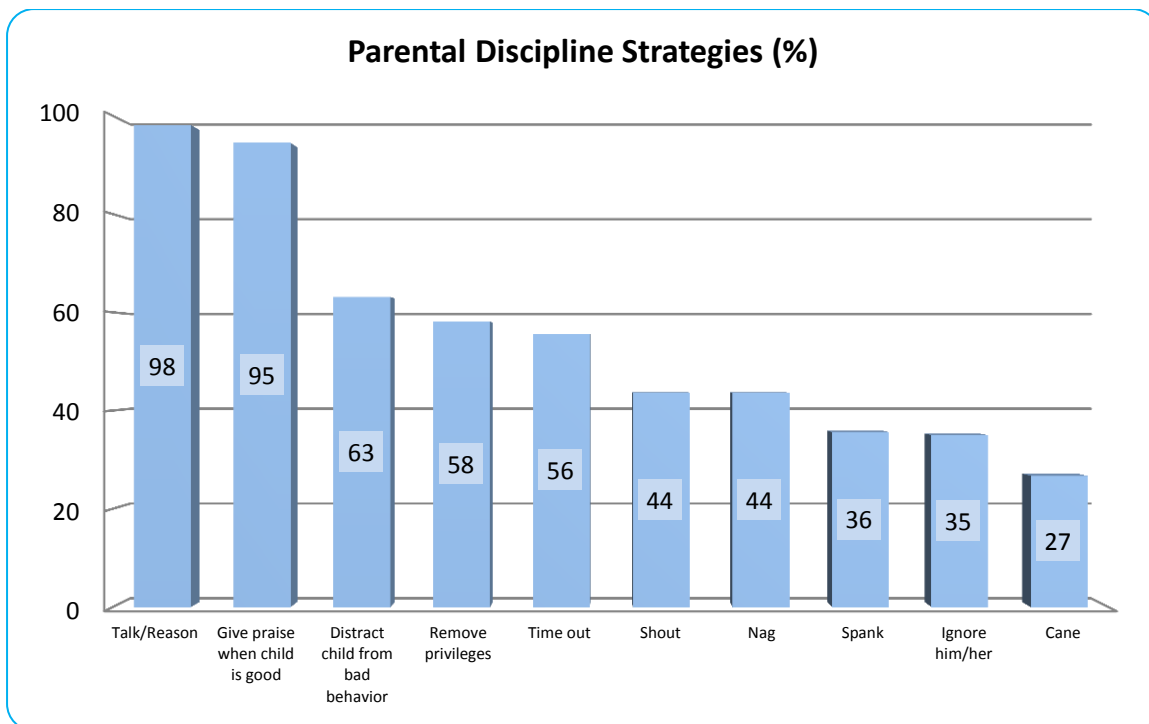


Figure 3 – Parental Discipline Strategies (%)

Usage of Learning Aids to Facilitate Child Learning

Parents used the following materials: (i) Blocks/construction toys (ii) Puzzles of shapes/animals/numbers, and (iii) Alphabet/picture card games to help the child learn about colours, shapes, sizes, names of animals, alphabet and numbers, which predominantly relate to the cognitive domain of development. The general responses from parents during the focus group discussions were that it was more important for them to be involved with their children’s play than the types of toys used.

Books and Reading

Parents endeavour to provide their children with a conducive environment for learning. To do this, most parents provide reading and play materials in the home. Almost all parents surveyed (96%) had books in the home for the child, with fiction taking up two-thirds of the collection of books.

While parents associated reading with the child as spending quality time, the practice of reading with their child showed a variation in terms of frequency. While it was encouraging that more than 57% of parents read storybooks to their child twice a week or even daily, a sizeable percentage did not read with their child, or did so infrequently (refer to [Figure 4](#)).

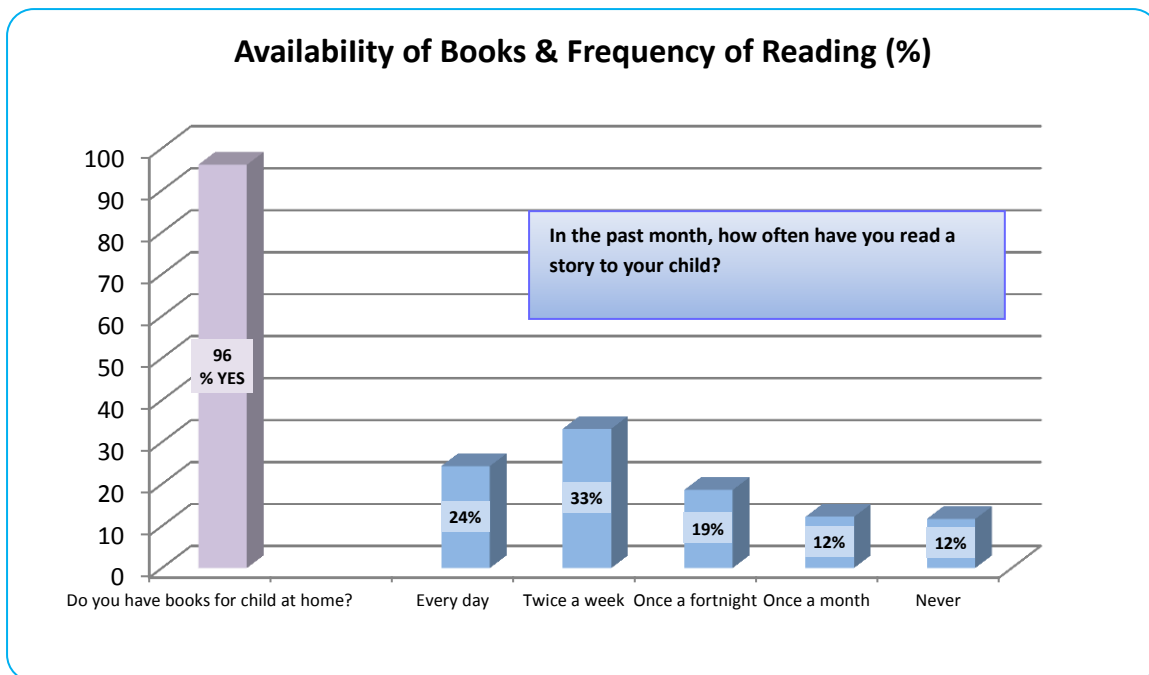


Figure 4- Availability of Books and Frequency of Reading (%)

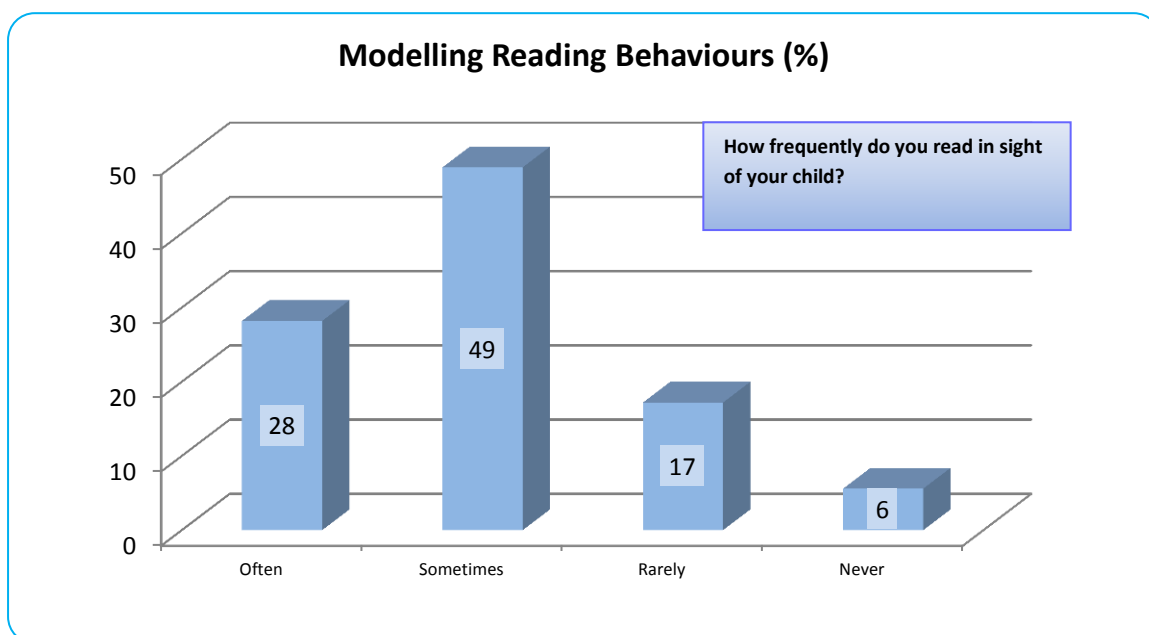


Figure 5 - Modelling Reading Behaviours (%)

In terms of modelling good reading behaviours in front of their children, 28% of parents indicated that they often read in the presence of the child, with 23% of parents indicating that they rarely or never read in sight of their child (refer to [Figure 5](#)).

Usage of ICT Tools

Parents are aware of the influence of technology in their lives of their children and the vast majority impose restrictions on their child's usage of ICT tools (smart phone/ iPad/

computer). More than 56% of parents restricted their child’s usage (by frequency or duration), while 18% of parents did not allow their child to use ICT tools. Only 6% of parents allowed their children unrestricted access to ICT tools (refer to [Figure 6](#)).

Responses in the FGDs were consistent with the results of the survey as the majority of parents said that they imposed restrictions on television and ICT use for their children (e.g. *“I cap the duration of television watching to an hour. I do not let my child use tablet PCs”*; *“I feel however that the way that these devices are used should still be controlled by the parents”*).

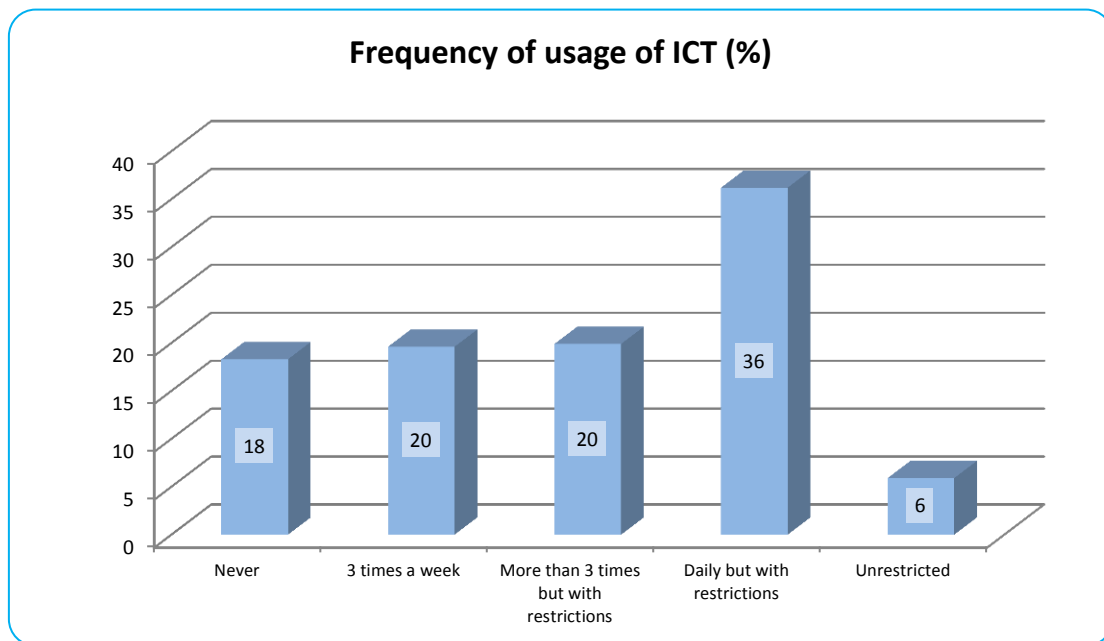


Figure 6 – Frequency of usage of ICT (%)

Enrichment Classes

Regarding enrichment classes, 36% of parents of young children enrol their children in 1 or more enrichment classes, with English language, Art and/or Music, and Mother Tongue Languages being the most popular classes.

Art and/or Music classes were more highly attended by children in the younger age groups from birth to 4 years, while English Language was more highly attended by children in the older age groups of 4+ to 8 years. This is consistent with the finding that parents view the development of literacy as being more important as children approach the transition stage into primary school.

Engaging in Activities with Children

Parental involvement in the child’s development also takes the form of doing things together with the child on a regular basis, some of which may constitute spending quality

time with the child to foster a strong parent-child bond in the early years of a child's development. In general, activities that were rated highly by parents as spending quality time with children include:

- Having meals together;
- Reading a book together or other material together;
- Engaging in play activities at home, such as dramatic play (role play with toys), constructive play (building blocks), board games;
- Helping child in personal care routines (bathing, feeding, dressing, putting child to bed);
- Outdoor play: going to the playground/park in the neighbourhood, playing outdoor games;
- Spending time talking about the child's experiences and feelings during the day;
- Field trips e.g. going to the zoo/bird park/museums;
- Bringing child to the market /supermarket; and
- Helping child to learn at home.

Those perceived to be contributing least to quality time were 'Watching TV' and 'Using ICT tools with child'.

- a) Overall, parents most frequently (i) had meals at home with their child, (ii) took their child for outings to the market, supermarket or mall, and (iii) played with their child at home; and
- b) Outdoor activities with the child were common and nearly 96% of parents took their children to places such as the market, supermarket and shopping malls most frequently, followed by the park and playground. Trips to community places, which hold considerable benefits to a child's learning and development, such as the libraries, museums, the zoo and places of interest tended to be less frequently conducted.

Fathers were equally involved in spending time with their child, although overall, mothers tend to be slightly more involved in the everyday care of the child, sourcing for parenting-related information and discipline of the child.

In terms of accessing resources in the community, generally, supermarkets, shopping malls and parks were the most common places that parents take their children to (refer to [Figure 7](#)). The high scores for these two places can be attributed to their accessibility for parents in comparison to other places such as the zoo, places of interest, performances, and museums which require planning and may incur costs.

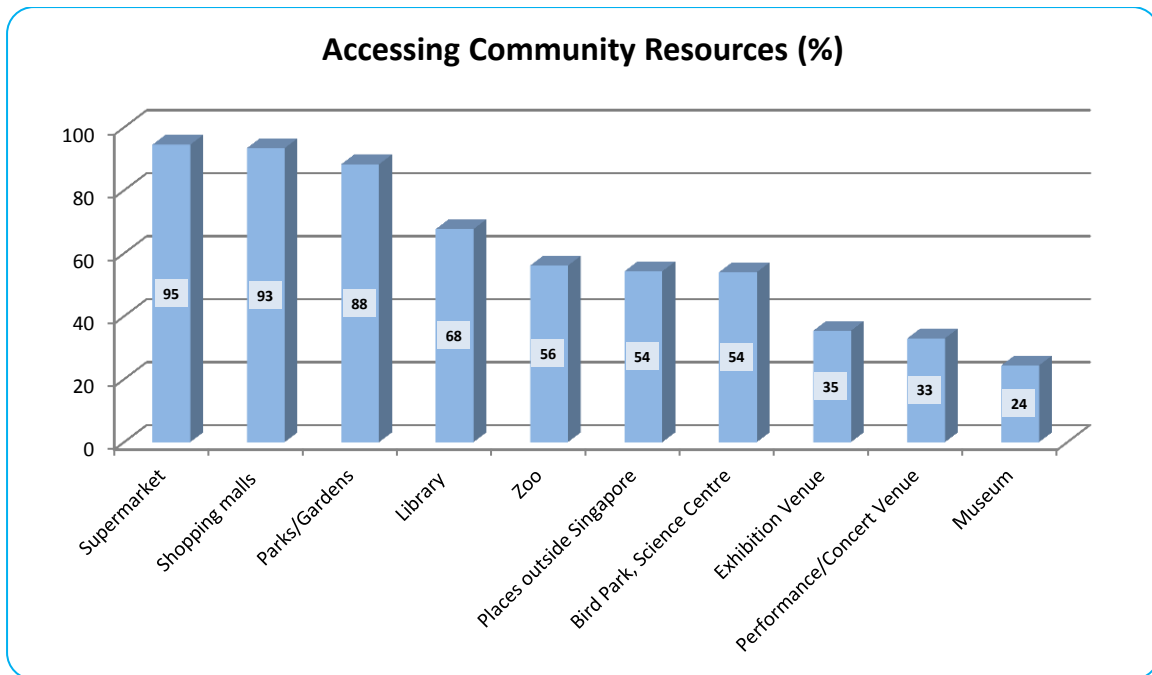


Figure 7 - Accessing Community Resources (%)

It was also found that parents' frequency of visits to the library with the child increased with the age of the child (refer to [Figure 8](#)).

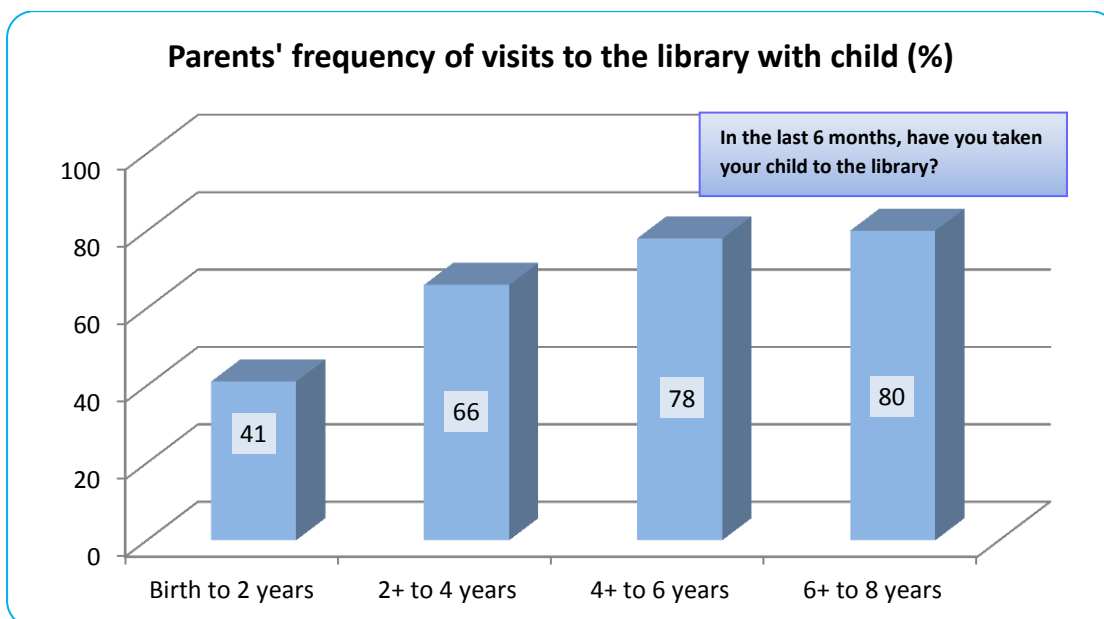


Figure 8 – Parents' frequency of visits to the library with child (%)

D. Resources and Information

In order to formulate parenting strategies and to better support parents in fulfilling their parenting duties, reliable and useful sources of information on child development and parenting are necessary.

The study found that the majority of parents (86%) relied on their own growing up experiences as a guide. In addition, reliance on spouses was found to be higher at 84% when the child is younger, that is between birth and two years of age, and 80% when the child is between two and four years of age.

Informational Sources and Resources Relied upon by Parents

In general, there appears to be a high level of reliance on personal experience when it comes to acquiring knowledge about parenting followed by reading material on child growth and development (80%), online sources including parenting forums and blogs (66%), their child's school or childcare centre (55%) and finally, workshops or talks on parenting (38%) (Refer to [Figure 9](#)).

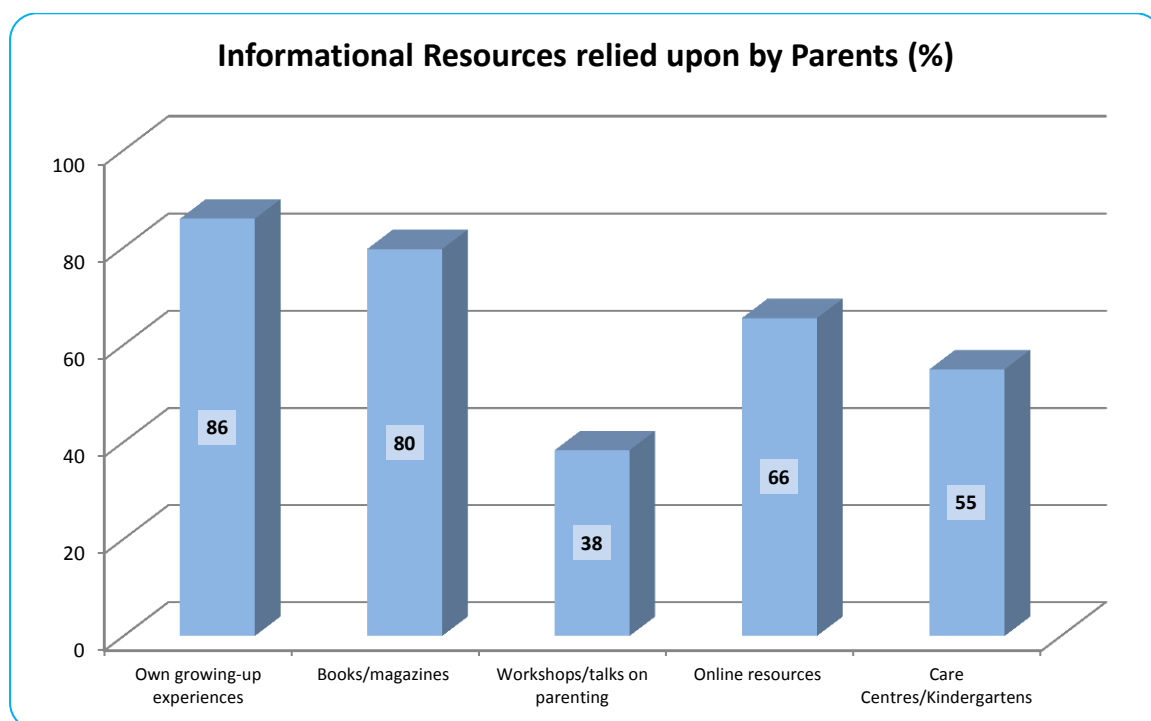


Figure 9 - Informational Resources Relied upon by Parents (%)

In addition, information that parents considered to be the most important and helpful included that pertaining to how children learn (89%), children's development and learning (88%), importance of child development and early childhood education (84%), stimulating a specific domain of children's development and learning (84%) and parenting strategies (80%) (Refer to [Figure 10](#)).

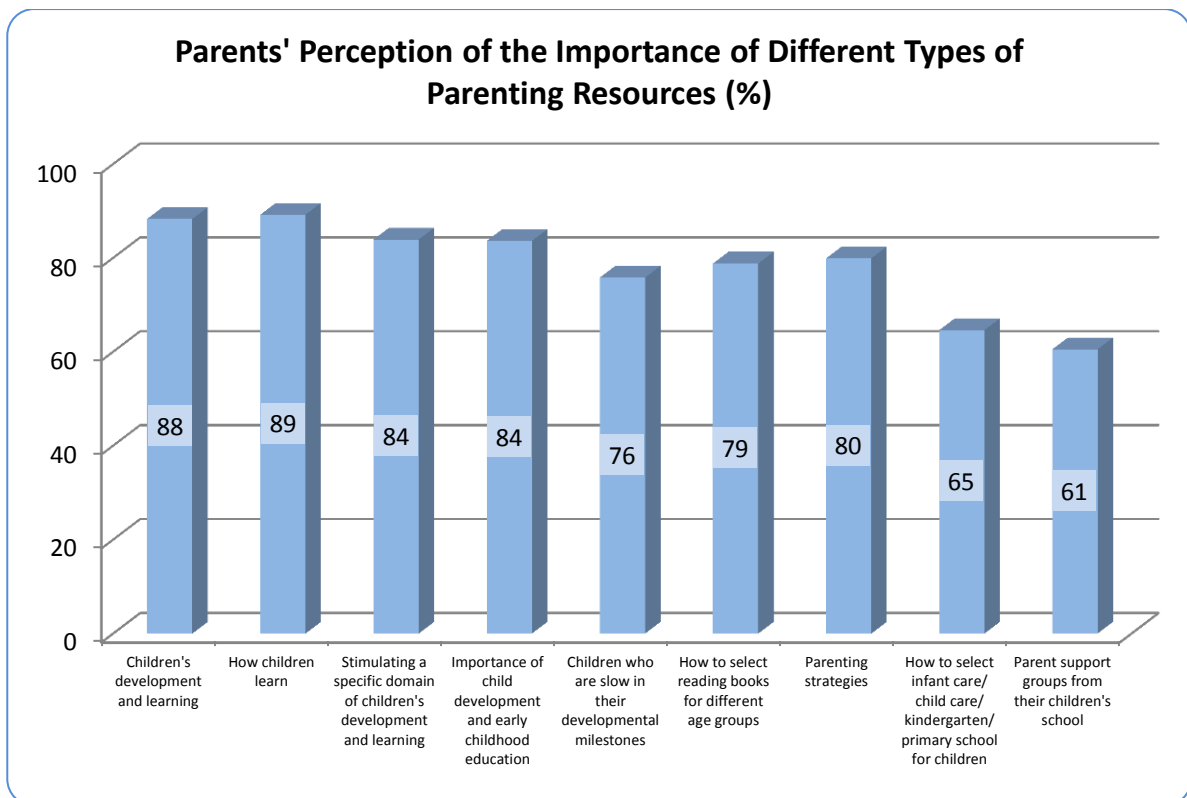


Figure 10 – Parents' perception of the importance of different types of parenting resources

Parents sometimes require additional support and guidance in caring for their child as well as helping their child to self-regulate behaviour. About a third of parents regardless of the child's age expressed that they required help in coping with the child's tantrums, managing a child who is fussy with food or who does not listen, and identifying developmental or behavioural problems.

Other areas where parents expressed need for more help include managing the child's behaviour in public places and at bedtime. Parents have expressed hope that centres and teachers could conduct workshops on topics such as preparing children to enter primary school and activities where parents can be involved in their children's learning.

Usefulness of Parenting Information

Parents ranked the following sources of parenting information as being the most useful in helping them understand their child's learning and development:

- A significant person, e.g. a teacher, a school counsellor, social worker;
- Early childhood educator – Parents found workshops conducted by centres and teachers as being most helpful e.g. preparation of children for primary school, parent involvement activities, and time for feedback sessions with the teachers. ('I have also gone for some workshops at my child's child care centre and it was about how to

prepare kids for primary school, not just academic but also the behaviours of the children...I do feel that it is practical and useful’);

- Child’s doctor - parents shared that they sought help from doctors when they needed advice and treatment of the child’s health, medical and developmental conditions;
- The Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA).

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM STUDY

The study broadens our understanding of parents’ knowledge, attitudes, aspirations, practices, and the resources and information they need in their parenting journey. The following recommendations suggest areas where various stakeholders can better support parents of young children from birth to eight years of age:

- a) To ensure a balanced approach to early years development, more emphasis needs to be placed on the importance of holistic development in young children and how the different developmental domains are interdependent. As the findings suggest that parents tend to prioritize cognitive and physical development more highly across the child’s growing years, we can do more to help parents understand the importance of nurturing positive relationships with their children. This will enhance children’s socio-emotional development through positive interactions in their daily routines and will have long-term benefits in nurturing and developing self-confident learners.

ECDA will further develop its online resources that are available at Grow@Beanstalk portal to help parents gain a better understanding of child development across developmental domains as well as strategies to nurture and support children’s holistic development.

- b) Parents in the study have indicated interest to attend workshops and talks by relevant experts and resource persons related to child development and learning. Given the importance of a positive early home learning environment, there can be more targeted outreach programmes to impart knowledge to parents on how they can make the home the first learning place for their young children. Teaching parents how to interact positively with their children and suggesting activities which they can engage in with their children will be helpful. Importantly, parents need to realize that positive interactions through simple, daily activities with their children will have long-term cognitive and socio-emotional benefits. As early childhood professionals were also cited as being an important source of information, pre-school centres can play a key role in reaching out to parents.

Pre-school centres could engage parents through interactive workshops to share strategies on how parents can support children's learning and development at home and provide them with more ideas in areas of positive guidance strategies. Another key area that parents can be supported is how to nurture early literacy, in which pre-schools and libraries can play an important role. ECDA will explore measures to support centres to develop their competencies and resources to conduct interactive workshops for parents.

- c) Making various community resources and places of interest more family-friendly could encourage more families to access and tap into these educationally enriching information resources that would enhance children's learning and development. A more collaborative approach among key stakeholders such as child care centres, libraries, health agencies, museums and other places of interest could be adopted. As parents increasingly seek out information online, various stakeholders could work towards developing more family-friendly online resources for parents to use with their children.

More opportunities to involve parents through the pre-school centres in the various collaborative projects with relevant partners will be developed to provide parents and children access to the rich resources and learning opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The Early Childhood Parenting Landscape Study offers a snapshot on how parents raise their children during their formative years across different ethnic groups and dwelling types. The findings from this study were consistent across the various groups. Through a better understanding of parents' perspectives, aspirations and needs, more targeted resources and strategies to further support parents' role as primary caregivers during this critical phase can be developed.