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Citation

Singapore Management University. Home-based learning of a COVID-19 work-from-home parent. (2020). Available at: <https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/pers/538>

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Home-based learning of a COVID-19 work-from-home parent

29 Apr 2020

After three months of managing a seven-year-old's home-based learning, one parent discovered the secret of making it work: Cut your kid some slack

When Hong Kong suspended all school classes for two weeks at the end of January because of COVID-19, parents of school-going children in the southern Chinese city batted down to tackle the two-headed monster: playing teacher in home-based learning (HBL) lessons while simultaneously fulfilling professional obligations on office-issued laptops.

Since then, suspension of classes have been extended three times, the last of which effectively became an indefinite school closure with a three-week notice for resumption.

For **Vince Chong**, a Singaporean father-of-two currently living in Hong Kong, it has been a steep, and painful, learning curve.

"The first month was tough," the former newspaper journalist tells Perspectives@SMU. His seven-year-old son, Chase, has two 30-minute online classes at 9am and 11.30am plus online exercises to complete throughout the day. But like most young children, he "would laze in bed [and] take his own sweet time to take out his stationery and notebook, just so to avoid starting on his online work".

"As you can imagine it didn't take long for me - within the first hour of HBL, to be precise - to start nagging at and berating him," recounts the 43-year-old, who works part-time as a news editor with a MNC that analyses and curates financial data. "I would be working too beside him, tapping on my keyboard trying to focus while getting him to focus."

LEARNING TO LET GO

As his frustration grew, Chase's unhappiness with the situation manifested in his posture ("resting his head on one hand while writing with the other or slouching over the table") and performance ("he would forget how to spell some word just five seconds after he learnt it"). Even though every parent appreciates a child's dislike of homework, Chong concedes that understanding the psychology and keeping one's cool are different things.

After a few weeks of being a 'Tiger dad' he never thought he would be, Chong adapted his approach as he got to grips with the new reality, or in his own words, "to prevent an aneurysm". He offered rewards for good behaviour: reading a book to the boy, TV time, a packet of football or Pokémon cards, a small toy etc. "It worked for about a week and a half and then it got stale", laments Chong.

That was when it all clicked.

"I just had to expect less and to focus on Chase's strengths," says Chong, who once served as Singapore Press Holdings' Straits Times Hong Kong Bureau Chief. "So I began letting him have a more leisurely breakfast, talked to him more about books, games and movies even during 'school' hours, bit my tongue literally when it felt ready to lash out.

"I told myself he doesn't have to be Stephen Hawking or get into Oxbridge. And suddenly I realised his posture was better, he could focus for a longer time, his handwriting, especially in cursive, was actually pretty good, and miracle of miracles he finished his work faster. These days he takes about half to three-quarters the time he used to at the start of HBL for the same kind of exercise."

ALL FOR THE FAMILY

While Chong's mental paradigm shift has helped in managing the stress of juggling HBL and working from home simultaneously, Chase's two-year-old sister, Tate, interrupts for daddy's attention "about five times on average" each day.

"I spend no more than two or three minutes placating her before sending her off to a new activity with the helper," Chong says. "Then at lunch I make sure I eat beside her and let her know daddy's around for her too."

Wife Penny has a high-stress job as a lawyer and has limited bandwidth to help with HBL, which finishes up around 4pm on average. Husband and wife then take a breather by walking to the supermarket while Tate has her afternoon nap and Chase gets his free time to play or read. Evening time is spent on the rooftop of their walkup apartment, which affords them some socially-distanced outdoor time in space-starved Hong Kong.

Indeed, throngs of Hong Kongers packed the beaches and hiking trails over the Easter weekend after weeks of being cooped up in the city's infamously tiny apartments. Although the number of new COVID-19 infections have fallen to similar levels before the second wave hit the city in the third week of March, government officials are urging against complacency.

For Chong, who goes hiking with Chase at nearby Mount Butler "maybe two, three times a week", a visit to the malls or beaches with the kids is inconceivable. When Hong Kong is finally declared free of COVID-19, Chong says he intends to take the kids to Disneyland. "We went there once or twice every month before this. They love the place and they won't stay kids forever.

"And if travel is allowed, I suppose we'll be booking tickets back to Singapore to see my children's grandparents, as well as a beach holiday."

WORDS OF WISDOM

For Chong, the decision to work part-time about 18 months ago has turned out to be a fortuitous one in hindsight. While the original intention was to "spend more time with my two young kids, rather than have them be brought up by helpers", HBL has brought him closer to Chase.

"I'm thankful for HBL actually," he muses. "I know a lot more about my son, what makes him tick, what motivates him. It's been good for him too: in school it's two teachers to a class of about 25, now it's one-on-one. I think he's learnt a lot more with the laser attention."

What would he say to parents who are struggling with managing HBL assignments?

"Don't expect too much from your kids! Cut them lots of slack! Otherwise you'll get a heart attack and that's never worth it."

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