



# OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

## First aid for parents

*Morning Star Community Services has a growing list of programmes to help parents cope with the challenges of raising children today. This is the first in a new series on member organisations of Caritas Singapore.*

"HAVE you done your homework?"  
"How many marks did you get?"  
"Get off the computer now!"  
After 10 years of helping parents and children, the staff of Morning Star Community Services have a finger on the pulse of some critical family life issues in Singapore.

"We observe several key areas of stress faced by our children, teenagers and their parents," said Ms Petrine Woo, the agency's Community Engagement Manager. "These are stress from the high demands of school, stress from the influence of negative peers and unhealthy use of the Internet, and stress from family conflict."

These issues stand out starkly when parents seek help at Morning Star. "School has become more a place to perform rather than a place to learn, and parents feel the pressure to prepare their children for success in school," said Ms Woo, 38, who is married with two children.

For many couples with young children, family time is reduced to study time, tuition and enrichment time. It takes away from spending time to develop and nurture family relationships.

The influence of peers and the Internet means children are increasingly exposed to external influences and as they grow up,



Trainer Chong Pik Yee (left) says parenting "is not instant noodles" because raising a child needs time and effort. "The earlier we start to learn the skills, the more our families benefit."

parents feel inadequate in guiding them. When it comes to the Internet, many parents have been left behind and have not kept up with the technology.

"Many pre-teens and teens feel their parents do not understand them and so they turn to friends for emotional support," said Ms Woo. "The sad truth is that both teens and their parents long to be understood and connected to each other."

Now Morning Star has added a new programme, the Pharos Parenting Workshop, to help parents of primary school children and teenagers master skills to mentor and coach their young ones, develop a closer relationship and feel more confident about themselves.

It will cover issues parents are grappling with today: computer usage, the influence

of the media, the difference in values between parents and children, managing school-related challenges, and working out parent-child conflicts.

The workshop will be held as two half-day sessions, and participants will be taught how to acquire skills, but they will also learn from each other to identify ways to avoid parenting mistakes and stay focused on developing children to be successful while keeping family life warm and stable.

Ms Chong Pik Yee is a mother who knows that parents can benefit from being open to learning new skills. "We all love our children. But we can still be ineffective as parents," she said.

She knew she needed help when her army officer husband, Kenneth Pereira,

came home one day and said that he was in the car park below their block and could hear her screaming at their children.

Nathaniel was seven years old and in Primary 1, and displaying disciplinary problems. Cheryl was two. Mealtimes were an ordeal because the children ate so slowly that lunch could stretch for two hours.

Frustrated and desperate, Ms Chong, a housewife, decided to attend Morning Star's six-week Common Sense Parenting workshop and put the skills she learnt into practice.

"After two weeks, Nathaniel said to me, 'Mum, you're shouting less at me.' It worked! I was screaming less, and our relationship improved," she said.

That was seven years ago. Ms Chong, now 44, volunteered to be a trainer and has been running the workshop for the past six years. Her children are now 14 and nine years old, and she is convinced that the skills she learnt have helped over the years.

She says that by sharing experiences, parents realise they are not alone. And while they come seeking ways to change their children, many learn that sometimes, it is the parents who need to change first. More fathers are coming to the workshops too. "It's interesting to see that mothers and fathers apply the same parenting skills differently. But either way, the child benefits," she said.

Ms Chong said that many struggling parents want immediate solutions, but she tells them: "This is not instant noodles." Parenting takes time and effort.

"We all want the best for our children. The earlier we start to learn the skills to nurture them, the more our families benefit."

## 10 years of strengthening families

IT WAS in 1999 that Christian and Juliana Choo decided that they wanted to do something to help strengthen and enrich family relationships. He worked in the corporate world, she was a social worker and they had five children.

Using space offered by the Canossian sisters in Hougang, the Chooos started a Student Care Service with a staff of five and drew 30 children needing supervision before and after school as they were from homes where both parents worked, or there was only one parent.

The project has grown significantly over the past 10 years, and today offers a wide range of family-centred services at its Hougang and Sengkang branches, as well as in schools and prisons.

Morning Star Community Services now has almost 40 staff assisted by a team of 30 active volunteers. Aside from the Student Care Service, its programmes include the following:

**NOVA - Learning Support Services:** This is for children struggling with the demands of school. To help a child with specific difficulties, the staff work with parents, family members, teachers and

others to devise an individualised education programme to bring about change for the better.

**Family Life Education:** Several programmes are available to help parents learn useful parenting and relationship skills, enrich marriages and learn life skills.

**Community Events:** Fun activities are held regularly to bring together families and participants of Morning Star programmes. This provides a relaxed environment for family activity and allows people to connect, share experiences, draw support or just relax.

**Counselling:** Individuals, couples and families who need help to bring about positive change in their situations may use the counselling service.

**Social Work Services:** Social workers identify individuals and families who may benefit from early help, before further problems develop. Those with specific needs are referred to relevant social service agencies or government bodies, and the social workers also provide in-depth, longer-term support to those who need it.

How do you spend time together?



engaging hearts engaging lives

To mark its 10th anniversary, Morning Star Community Services is preparing a commemorative publication titled "The Things We Do", to showcase how families spend quality time together.

"We would like to show that there is more to do in Singapore besides shopping and eating out," said Ms Petrine Woo, Morning Star's Community Engagement Manager.

If your family has a unique way of spending time together - playing a game, sharing a hobby, or visiting your favourite secret corner of Singapore - Morning Star wants to hear from you.

Send an email to Ms Woo at [petrine@morningstar.org.sg](mailto:petrine@morningstar.org.sg) and tell her what your special family activity is, and why you love doing it.



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