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Character Montessori's Executive Director

WORKING MUMS ISSUE



Can you really
have it all?

HOW DO YOU RAISE A CHILD WITH GOOD
GRADES AND VALUES WHEN YOU'RE
SLOGGING AT THE OFFICE MOST OF THE
TIME? EVELINE GAN FINDS OUT.

Even without rigorous enrichment help, Yasmin Ziqin Mohamed Yousoof from Rulang Primary topped the 2011 PSLE cohort with an impressive score of 283. Now 13, she's currently studying at Raffles Girls' School.

For siblings Anthea and Ashley Cheo, aged 11 and nine respectively, scoring As for all four subjects is the norm rather than the exception. In fact, Ashley, who is consistently among the top three in class, has been earmarked to undergo the Gifted Education Programme this year.

So what do these high achievers have in common? The secret to their success, it seems, is a stay-at-home mum. The girls' mummies quit their high-flying jobs to support them during their growing-up years. They believe that nurturing a child is a full-time job that should not be outsourced.

Yasmin's mummy, Carrie Tan, 42, gave up her job as a corporate lawyer when Yasmin started primary school. Back then, Carrie's younger son was three and she was pregnant with her third child. Prior to that, the kids were cared for by a domestic helper.

Carrie wants to be there for her kids during their growing-up years. "We weren't comfortable with the whole idea of having other people bring up our kids. While our helpers were able to assist with the basic care-giving, we certainly could not expect them to instil the type of values we wanted in our kids," she says.

Speaking from his own childhood experience, entrepreneur and motivational speaker Adam Khoo, 38, feels that a stay-at-home mum is a "huge advantage" when it comes to nurturing children academically and emotionally.

His wife Sally, 41, is a full-time mum to their daughters Samantha and Kelly, aged eight and seven respectively. "My own mum was a career woman who worked long hours. She had little idea of what was going on in my schoolwork. To be honest, I think I might have done better at school if she had not worked," quips Adam, who was expelled for misbehaviour when he was in Primary 3.

But mum has to work

If raising a child with good grades and character is a full-time job, what then of children with working mums? Are these kids doomed to failure while their mummies slog it out at the office all day long? Not true, says professional counsellor Ling Chee Siah, a resource speaker with Marriage Central.

"There are no conclusive studies to show that a stay-at-home mum raises better kids than mothers who work – although, in general, a child learns better when he's emotionally secure," says Chee Siah, 42, a mother of three children.

Dr Yeak Hwee Lee, medical director of Singapore Medical Group's Singapore Aesthetic Centre, is one example of a working mum who has it all.

Despite her hectic work schedule, Dr Yeak, who is in her 40s, has raised four academically successful kids.

Her eldest son, 19, scored straight As for his core subjects in his A levels, while her younger sons, aged 17 and 15, are doing well under the International Baccalaureate programme. Meanwhile, her 11-year-old daughter is a prefect at school.

Dr Yeak worked part-time during their toddler years, but when they entered primary school, she reverted to full-time work. Despite her high academic achievements, she candidly lets on that she was unable to coach her kids in their schoolwork.

She channelled her extra income to engaging tuition help for her kids' weaker subjects. On her end, Dr Yeak provided them with a listening ear and emotional support. "Despite my long working hours, the kids know they can confide in me," she says.

Not just housewives

Anthea and Ashley's mummy, Shirley Cheo, 38, agrees that stay-at-home mums do not necessarily add value to the child's upbringing and academic performance.

"To me, being a stay-at-home mum isn't about breathing down the kids' necks and going after them for their homework. I've seen many stay-at-home mums who literally just stay at home and only do

routine chores like bringing the child back from school and sitting with them to do the homework. It doesn't add value to the child's development," says the former media researcher, who quit her job and became a full-time mum when her youngest son, now aged five, was born.

For their holistic development, Shirley says she makes sure the kids get fresh air outdoors for at least an hour every day.

More importantly, the experts say it's what the mums do when they're at home that makes a difference. "What's the point if the mum stays at home but just watches TV all the time and doesn't spend time with the kids?" says Adam.

Chee Siah adds that while it's tougher for tired and stressed working mums to give quality interaction and time to their kids, it's not an impossible task.

Unfortunately, in such scenarios, something has to give, she says.

For working mums like teacher Loh Ming Woon, 42, that may mean a pay cut or giving up career opportunities. Ming Woon, who has twin boys aged 13, could not bear to give up her job to become a full-time mum.

Instead, she down-scaled her teaching workload – along with accepting a pay cut – two years ago so she could be around more frequently to support the boys

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with their schoolwork. Her kids scored 251 and 244 for their PSLE last year.

"Working parents need to deliberately set aside time to be with their kids. I'm not talking about just the academic aspect but also to be there to bond with them, so that it lasts even when they grow up," says Ming Woon, who has now returned to a full-time position.

For working mums, finding the right balance between work and kids can be tough, says Dr Yeak, who gave up most of her hobbies and social life during her kids' early years.

"As a working mother, I had to consider my options and priorities. In the corporate world, there's always a strong urge to succeed. It can be difficult sometimes when you find your colleagues bypassing you on the fast track, but you have to hold your ground," she says.

Chee Siah says working mums need to make a conscious effort to leave work where it should be – at the office, and not at home.

"Many mums come home with leftover tension from work or they continue with their work at home. You need to make a mental decision that your kids come first, and be there for them after your work hours, even if it means fewer promotion opportunities or pay raises," she says.

"Think about what you're working so hard for. At the end of the day, isn't it for your family?"

Early childhood educator Grace Yong, executive director of Character Montessori, agrees. She believes her four sons, aged 20 to 11, might have turned out very differently had she not let her career take a back seat during their formative years.

"Looking back, the seven years when I worked part-time were well spent. I always made sure I was home by 3pm, as I needed the time and energy to manage them properly, ensure consistency in rules and routines, inculcate good character, and also to engage them in many fun ways," says Grace, 49.

"I'm proud to say they're all motivated learners, and have all grown up to be confident about their own abilities."

She adds: "I believe the early years, as well as the primary school age from six to 12, are the most important formative ones. When the kids are a lot older, it may not make such a great difference if Mummy stays home."

The experts say once you tighten the parent-child bond, and set the right values and habits in your child, it's easier to work on the academic aspect.

"Without a good relationship, there's no way you can talk to your child about schoolwork. Why would they listen to you and be motivated to do their work if they don't even enjoy being with you in the first place?" says Chee Siah.

And make sure your husband plays his part, too. "Studies show that a lot of teenagers who get into trouble tend to have absent fathers during their growing-up years," says Chee Siah.

"Mums are more nurturing and protective, while dads offer a more rough-and-tumble perspective of growing up. Children need a balance of the two to develop well, so working fathers need to be around for their kids, too." **YP**

SHE DID IT

HERE'S HOW DR YEAK HWEE LEE MANAGED HER BUSY CAREER AND MADE SURE HER FOUR KIDS TURNED OUT WELL.

❖ **Build a strong foundation** Dr Yeak worked part-time during their toddler years so that her kids would grow up healthy and strong – both physically and emotionally. She believes the crucial time to lay a strong foundation in values and good habits are during the early years, before other influences reach them. Having a strong foundation means they'll be able to "weather the storm" later.

❖ **Stay current** Even if you can't give it your all at work, working part-time can help keep you in the loop of things. Dr Yeak did this and gradually went back to full-time when her kids entered primary school.

❖ **Leave it to the experts** if you find you're of no help in your kids' schoolwork. Instead, take on a more supportive role. "I've personally found that encouragement works better than the rod. Mistakes have to be corrected, but not in a way that breaks the spirit of the child," says Dr Yeak.

❖ **Run the family unit like a high-performing organisation** This means everyone is regarded as equal and each is delegated a responsibility. After dinner, everyone sits down to discuss issues and problems. "The kids are taught to take care of each other. The elder ones are tasked with caring for the younger ones. The kids report to me if they detect any problems in their siblings," says Dr Yeak.

❖ **You'll have your social life back** But, in the meantime, you might have to give it up while you raise kids and run the rat race. Now that her kids have become more independent, Dr Yeak is easing back into the social scene and has taken up hobbies like dancing.

