

APPROACHING SENSITIVE CONVERSATIONS WITH CHILDREN: MATERNAL EFFORTS IN FACILITATING MENTAL HEALTH DISCUSSIONS

Nur Zafira Edwin Kurniawan

Department of Sociology & Anthropology, AHAS KIRKHS

International Islamic University Malaysia, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Email: zafiraedwin@gmail.com

Nurazzura Mohamad Diah

Department of Sociology & Anthropology, AHAS KIRKHS

International Islamic University Malaysia, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Email: nurazzura@iiium.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Emotionally and physically involved parents is vital in the development of a healthy mental well-being among children. However, open discussions on the topic of mental health in Malaysia remains hindered by existing cultural stigmas despite the grave repercussions it carries. This makes the communication of mental health between parent and child more complex, and influences whether mental health issues can be discussed candidly or are simply glossed over. This study aims to examine maternal experience in communicating about their children's mental health. This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to obtain meaningful data. Seven mothers between 26-53 years old with higher education qualifications were recruited via the purposeful sampling technique. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The results found that all mothers had general levels of mental health literacy but faced communication apprehension in directly addressing the topic of mental health with their children. However, they practiced authoritative parenting styles in their methods of providing support for their children. The results also show that mothers noticed improvements in their child's social functioning through their engagement efforts. The mothers handled communication barriers by expressing their concerns and offering support through other means, such as sharing relevant social media posts, practicing firm but nurturing parenting, and emphasising the importance of socialisation skills in children. This study highlights the importance of maternal engagement in the development of a healthy mental well-being among children. Therefore, it is imperative to break the stigma associated with mental health in Malaysian society in order to educate more parents on the significance of the issue and better fulfil the psychological needs of their children.

Keywords: maternal engagement, mental health, parenting style, sensitive conversation, wellbeing.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's multicultural society introduces cultural factors that make communication about mental health more complex. With each ethnic group possessing their own cultural beliefs and attitudes, there are many varied perceptions associated with mental health. Consequently, the concept of mental health is regarded as taboo, and often culturally unacceptable in Malaysia (Chong et al., 2013). While mental health awareness has improved over the years, the stigma surrounding the topic has not been eliminated entirely in Malaysian communities. These factors serve as determinants of whether mental health issues are discussed openly or glossed over in parent-child communications. By understanding the barriers to parent-child communication, parents would be able to participate more efficiently in their child's lives, and in turn, foster a better mental well-being among them.

Parents are the primary architects of their child's early cognitive development—shaping their characters, self-esteem, self-worth, and emotional regulation. It is through this involvement that secure attachments are facilitated and a healthy environment for self-expression is created. The main cause of the rise in mental health issues among adolescents is the lack of involvement and support from parents (Lanjekar et al., 2022). Therefore, parents who are emotionally and physically present in the lives of their children can act as a barrier to the development of psychological disorders in children. Various studies have shown that the amount of parental involvement and support was directly proportional to an improved mental health among children (Hassett et al., 2018; Maiuolo et al., 2019; Shahril et al., 2021). Indeed, parental involvement, particularly in communicating sensitive issues like mental health, has a fundamental role in the development of a positive mental wellbeing among children. Communication between parent and child has a great impact on the child's psychosocial outcomes (Zapf et al., 2022). The lack of open communication about mental health has caused a relative delay in the construction and regulation of mental health policies in Malaysia. Currently, Malaysia's 2001 National Mental Health Act is the main framework for treating mental disorders and for the establishment of mental health centres. However, this act has been criticised for purely treating mental health as a medical problem without considering social influences (Crabtree & Chong, 2000, as cited in Chong et al., 2013). Besides that, Malaysia's Mental Health Service Framework, created in 2001 (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2011), is used to guide the planning, delivery, and evaluation of mental health services provided to different target groups such as children and adolescents.

Despite this, significant improvements are still needed in education, policies, awareness, and treatment within Malaysia's mental health sector. Therefore, studying how mothers communicate with children can help bring more recognition to the issue and foster a deeper understanding and openness towards mental health discussions. Additionally, the present study also supports SDG Goals 3 and 4 by exploring factors associated with children's mental health and promoting the inclusion of mental health literacy in educational institutions. Therefore, this study aims to examine maternal involvement and strategies adopted by mothers to communicate about mental health issues with their children.

TALKING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH WITH CHILDREN: AN OVERVIEW

Communications on the topic of mental health in Malaysia are still hindered by social stigmas, despite the potential detrimental effects it has on individuals suffering from mental health issues. In the Ministry of Health's 2015 National Health and Morbidity Survey, it was found that one in three Malaysians experience mental health issues with the highest prevalence among adolescents aged 16-19 years old and members of low-income groups (Subramaniam, 2016). This indicates that the demands of living may be the causes of mental health issues among young Malaysians. On top of that, this statistic highlights the extent to which mental health issues have affected Malaysian individuals and further expresses the need to better understand the matter. In spite of that, mental health is still regarded as a sensitive area of discussion among families with mentally ill individuals due to the negative labels and discrimination associated with it (Hanafiah & Bortel, 2015). This may explain why individuals with mental health issues prefer to suffer in silence rather than confide in family. With better understanding, parents and children may recognize the importance of open communication about mental health.

Moreover, effective parent child communication is vital to ensure that children feel more comfortable to confide in their parents. Open parent-child communication may help parents to share information and needs with their children as well as increase their trust in their children, thus being able to provide help and support (Kim et al., 2017, as cited in Zhen et al., 2022). Mizzi et al. (2020) found that the most helpful parenting strategies to support their children's mental health are through practical assistance and personal interactions that promoted positive thoughts. However, studies have shown that parents may feel disinclined to discussing sensitive or uncomfortable conversations with their children due to factors such as the appropriate use of language when discussing such matters as well as the right time to initiate such conversations (Hendricks et al., 2014).

Prior literatures have shown that in Malaysia, the understanding of mental health is more affected by cultural practices and social taboos. A study by Phoa et al. (2023) noted that parents and guardians have a higher pre-existing stigma on psychotherapies and mental health help-seeking behaviours. This may affect their openness to discussing topics of mental health with their children, and their acceptance towards mental illness in general. A study by Hanafiah and Bortel (2015) found that parents were among the main stigmatisers and discriminators towards family members with mental health issues which leads to decreased self-esteem within themselves. The same study stated that the mental health professionals involved in that study stated such feelings can lead to the failure for mentally ill individuals to function in society if this issue is not tackled.

In other societies, it was found that the changing values and cultures that occur in acculturation also affected the communication of mental health issues between parents and children. Bismar (2018) explained that the American-born children of immigrants who perceived a greater acculturation gap with their parents as well as higher mental illness stigma, found it more difficult to communicate mental health related issues with their parents. However, when discussing mental health issues, it was found that children still felt more open to communicate such issues with their parents over seeking professional help. He noted that although personal mental illness stigma existed among American-born children of immigrants, the factor of family cohesion made them prefer to communicate such issues with their parents over seeking professional help. In a study based in South Africa, Benjamin et al. (2022) found that the parents in their study lacked comprehension and knowledge of what mental health is, and that their understanding of it was primarily negative. Additionally, the parents in their study associated mental health with depression, stress, and being 'crazy'. These negative perceptions may contribute to their disinclination to discuss the topic openly.

Today, there is still a need for a better understanding of the role of parental communication with regards to their children's mental well-being in order to foster emotional resilience among children, create a healthy environment for their upbringing, and ultimately improve parent-child relationships. Prior studies have not been clear in discussing the role mothers play in their child's mental health in the local context. This study will fill the existing gap by contributing more insight on the social and cultural factors that influence parental participation and communication in their children's mental health within the Malaysian context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical construct that has been adopted to guide this research is the ecological systems theory by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979. Bronfenbrenner's theory states that every aspect of human development is influenced by our personal relationships and surrounding environment. He studied the socialisation between children and their surrounding environment, while using concepts from the field of Ecology to further elaborate his theory (Antony, 2022; Härkönen, 2007). In other words, our social and environmental contexts are the determinants of how we think, feel, and behave. He identified five different ecological levels that influences an individual's development: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.

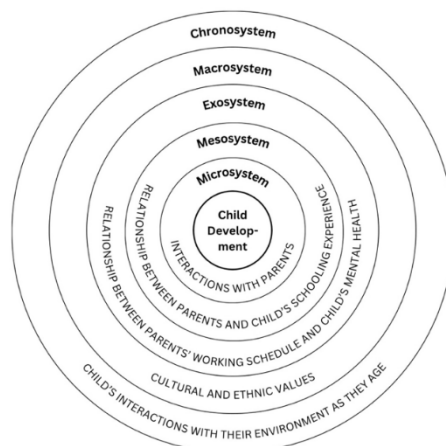


Figure 1. Theoretical framework adapted in this study

This theory is applicable to the present study as it is able to elaborate the necessity of parental involvement in their child's development and achievements through the explanation of social influences on human development. The theory explains how a child's development and the respective systems are interconnected. For instance, the chronosystem portrays how a child's experiences in various environments, like at home, can shape the exosystem. This is exemplified in the relationship between a parent's work schedule and their child's mental health. When parents are occupied with work commitments, their presence at home may decrease, thus impacting the child's social environment and overall development.

METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative study that looks into the opinions of mothers on their efforts to communicate about their children's mental health. Qualitative research is often used to achieve a greater depth of understanding towards the subjective experiences of humans' lives while accounting for their social and cultural influences (Fossey et al., 2002). This is because the qualitative approach accepts that various accounts of the same experiences exist, and what is presented is the researcher's subjective understanding which is supported by referencing participant responses (Bradshaw et al., 2017). The same study noted that this approach is often used in healthcare research, such as nursing and midwifery, as it emphasises understanding and supporting those involved while examining how they interpret and find meaning in their experiences. Therefore, considering the subjective nature of the present research topic, the qualitative method appeared the most applicable to employ for this study.

This study involved a sample of seven mothers from Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. The participants were recruited through social media platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram, or via telephone calls and emails. Purposeful sampling based on age, ethnicity, marital status, and occupation were used in the recruitment of participants for this study. This type of sampling involves the selection of participants based on their adequate knowledge of the research topic (Morse, 1991). The participants consisted of mothers who are married between the ages of 26 and 53. The mothers obtained higher education qualifications such as a bachelor's degree, master's degree, or an academic doctorate. Both working and stay-at-home mothers were involved in the study. This allowed for a better and more extensive representation of the experiences faced by participants (Coyne, 1997) with regards to the research topic. In other words, this sampling is driven by the motive of including different variations of the experiences related to the study.

In order to obtain relevant data, semi-structured interviews were conducted through face-to-face meetings in the interviewees' homes as well as through online platforms such as Google Meet. This provides better scheduling flexibility for the participants. The interviews were conducted with the participants' explicit consent and recorded with the purpose of better analysis. All interview transcriptions were studied to get an accurate reflection of the interviews. The results were then analysed thematically based on the responses provided by the mothers in this study. To ensure participant anonymity and the confidentiality of information gathered from the interviews, pseudonyms were used.

RESULTS

Based on the analysis, communication apprehension was identified as the main barrier preventing mothers from discussing mental health with their children. In order to reduce the barrier, mothers prefer the authoritative parenting style which they believe allows their children to open up confidently about their mental health situation. Lastly, mothers ensure that their children's social functioning is enhanced so that a more positive relationship is established.

a) Communication Apprehension

Nearly all the mothers mentioned how the general barrier of mental health discussions between mother and child was due to the sensitive nature of the topic in the Malaysian culture. Mental health is regarded as a taboo or a stigma in most Malaysian societies, across various ethnic groups and demographic areas. The majority of the mothers mentioned that people are still not as open to

discussing the topic as it remains regarded as quite sensitive in nature. One of the mothers, Reem, described it as a ‘hush-hush’ topic whereby it should not be discussed if possible:

I think it’s more of a cultural thing where everyone is ‘hush’ about it. That means, if can, don’t talk about it.

This sensitivity was described by the mothers as resulting from a lack of awareness, knowledge, and the topic not being open for discussion by the older generations. Another mother, Lisa, felt that issues relating to mental health in Malaysia was a seed only planted after the Covid-19 pandemic, that still requires time to be properly understood:

It’s just that after the pandemic, everybody realized that there is something called mental health that we need to look into. But before that, nobody talked about it. But again, it is a small seed that was planted during the MCO, but it will still take time for everybody to really understand what mental health is all about.

The mothers also explained how their knowledge of mental health were a result of their own readings and efforts to understand the topic, such as through awareness posts on social media or magazines. However, some mothers shared that their knowledge on the topic stemmed from personal experiences with mental health issues. Alia, elaborately shared how her personal experience with postpartum depression has shaped her views on the topic:

If you experience these mental issues it doesn’t necessarily mean that you lack in terms of your religion, or that you don’t believe in God. And most people who have these issues, it’s not that they wanted to experience it, it’s very difficult. Like myself, last time I experienced postpartum depression. It’s very, very, very hard and I almost started on medication because I was diagnosed with depression.

Because of existing stigma and an overall lack of knowledge on the topic, most of the mothers addressed how it is often misunderstood with negative undertones or simply equated to something wrong in the mind. Additionally, most of the mothers in this study noted that because they did not have such discussions with their own parents while they were growing up, they wanted their children to be more open with them. Deena, a mother of four children in their teenage and young adulthood ages explained how she wanted her children to be more open to talking to her since she did not get the same opportunity with her parents:

Before, we didn’t have the opportunity to talk to our parents like this because we were afraid that you know, the conversation might lead to something else. But its different now, we are more open to our children and we ask them to be more open to us. So, if they have problems, they can just come to us anytime without feeling hesitant or scared to discuss about it.

However, some found difficulty in bringing up the topics to their children due to various factors like age, gender, the child’s disability, and the relationship between stepmother and stepchildren. Because of this, they were unsure of how to approach more sensitive topics in their conversations but found alternative ways to express their concerns. Alia, a mother of a 9-year-old daughter and a 7-year-old son with autism, shared how she has to take her time to appropriately explain sensitive topics with her children in order for them to understand it properly:

It’s kind of difficult because of the way in which they understand things. Let’s say, they prefer much more direct words but if we were to say those things directly, then it will be a bit harsh...So with kids, if we’re talking about someone’s mental state being unstable, they’ll question what we mean by unstable and whether that person is okay or not. And then, when you have a mental problem, it doesn’t mean that you are crazy. There are types of mental health issues like depression, bipolar, all these kinds of things. So it’s a bit too heavy of a topic to really discuss with the kids, because they have never encountered these kinds of situations in real life so far.

Furthermore, Bella, who is raising a stepson and is currently expecting another child, mentioned how she sometimes hesitated from having certain discussions with her stepson as she did not want him to perceive her negatively:

There are a lot of things that I want to say but have to control myself because I don’t want him to be shocked with my methods.

As a result, she shared that she would normally wait for her stepson to approach her whenever he had anything to share, or that she would let his father handle it first before stepping in. Similarly, a few other mothers in this study also trusted that their children would approach them whenever they had an issue to discuss. However, on occasions where their children do hold back from explaining everything, the mothers’ responses indicate that they have their own ways of getting their children to continue sharing. Lisa, a mother of an 11-year-old daughter and a 9-year-old son, explained that although her children would talk freely with her, her difficulty lies in figuring out the few things they refuse to share:

I don’t find that a problem for them to speak up to me, but at the same time, that is what they want me to know. But of course, being kids right, there are things that they don’t want me to know as well. So that is where my struggle is.

On the other hand, Nan, a mother of a 12-year-old daughter, shared how her daughter would typically initiate the discussions between them, but she would have to find ways to get her daughter to continue talking about the problem:

Normally, she will start the conversation. Then I'll try to talk. Of course it's not easy, sometimes she will shut me out but I'll try to find ways like finding a topic that would lead to that issue. You cannot be asking directly, so you can give a scenario and ask them what they think of it.

These results also show that while the children may be comfortable talking to their mothers, there will be some reservations that prevent them from completely opening up to them. The mothers with children in their teenage or young adulthood ages had mentioned how their children were more open towards them when they were younger, but preferred to discuss such topics with other people like friends or siblings once they grew older. Deena explained how her children became less open to sharing things with her as they grew older:

The girls were more open when they were younger, but as they got older, there are things that they won't share with me or prefer to share with their friends.

The child's older age has also played a role in the mothers' communication apprehension, whereby the mothers found alternative ways to portray their concerns instead of directly telling them. Siti, a mother of a 22-year-old son, shared how she does not know how to initiate conversations about mental health with her son, and instead would share relevant social media postings with him to show her concern:

I've never discussed with him regarding what he knows about mental health. But I know that he reads and I read and sometimes to let him know... I'd have to send Instagram or Facebook postings instead. So, he knows that I might not be able to tell him but he knows that this is the way I feel and this is how I communicate it to him.

On top of that, the mothers who were working felt that they had commitments that had affected their time with their children, which was an additional barrier they had to navigate through. Deena, who works about an hour away from home expressed how her travel time impacts the time spent with her family:

I spend a lot of time travelling from work to home so it really affects the time I can spend with my children because my the time I get home, it'll be around *Maghrib* so we pray, we have dinner, then everyone is already tired, I am tired so we just sleep.

On the other hand, Reem considers her closeness with her daughter to be a result of her role as a stay-at-home mother. She expressed how this allows her to have more time to learn more about her daughter and not miss out on anything. She said:

Because of my choice, I'm very like 'bonded' (to her) that means, I know when she's down, somethings troubling her... I can already sense it. The moment she gets in the car, after school, or in the morning, I can sense from her body language, her facial expression. So certain things I would avoid saying that could trigger her mood, or spoil her mood.

Based on the findings, it appears that the mothers in the study have faced some form of communication apprehension in discussing the topic of mental health with their children. This apprehension was stimulated by several factors, among which includes the heavy nature of the topic and the different, unique mother-child communication styles.

b) Authoritative Parenting Style

Authoritative parenting combines parental attentiveness and support with established boundaries for their children. The children's behaviours are guided with clear explanations and proper reasoning, while still considering their children's thoughts and opinions (American Psychological Association, 2017). This allows for the child to develop a sense of autonomy while maintaining respect towards parental authority. Authoritative parenting has also been found to improve life satisfaction, with social support being the most significant factor for adolescents (Suldo & Huebner, 2004). This social support can be fostered through strong parent-child relationships, which can be achieved with effective communication. The mothers of this study described the various ways they interact with their children to connect and keep updated on their lives. Conversations during car rides and over meals were the most common responses among the mothers in this study.

Lisa, states that her family's daily dinner sessions is the only period of time in their day where everyone is able to be together and communicate:

Dinner time is our bonding time where we catch up with one another. In fact, I think the home dinner, for that one hour, is the only time where I can see that there's no gadgets around... so that is the time where we can really catch up. It's a very short time but at least it's a check in for everybody.

Bella, shared how the meals she has after fetching her stepson from school provides them the opportunity to communicate and bond with each other:

I feel like the times I can talk to him is during the car ride after I pick him up from school. I'll go and treat him to a meal. During those times we can talk and he'll share his food with me.

Nan, shared how she is able to determine how her daughter's mood right after she fetches her daughter from school. She said:

I see how she reacts when I pick her up from school. If she's happy then I know that she had a good day in school. If she sulks or keeps quiet, then I know that something's not right. But sometimes, she won't open up immediately, she will just keep quiet and I'll let her be because maybe she's too tired and all that. But after dinner, she will start opening up and she will tell me why.

Verbal support was another common response among mothers, whereby they would offer advice or encouragement to their children regarding various concerns like academics, big decisions, and managing their problems. Siti, who expressed that her son has difficulty expressing himself, shared how she would remind him that he can share anything with her or his father:

During the Movement Control Order, he kept it (his feelings) to himself, meaning he doesn't know how to express it. But after that incident I actually told him, 'With anything, you can always talk to me. You can talk to me, or you can talk to Baba (father). We don't have anybody else; we have you and you have us.

Lisa also shared how she involves her children in decision-making processes to express that their opinions are considered and respected:

We try to involve each other and try to do it together in any decision-making (process) like 'should we buy this or that?', 'how do you want your room to look like?', to really show that we mean what we say when respect doesn't depend on age.

Additionally, the mothers in this study showed an openness towards their children discussing whatever topics with them. For instance, Deena and Nan shared the idea of occasionally having a friend-like relationship when talking to their children which can encourage them to share their concerns without fear of judgement:

You have to constantly ask what they have been up to and most importantly, you have to be a loving mother. You can also be like a friend to them and listen to whatever they have to tell you without judgement.

I have times where I talk to her like a friend, and not like a mother. So not nagging and all that but, you know, just open up like a friend. So, she will open up to me talking about boys—things that I couldn't share with my own mother.

These findings show that the mothers in the study exhibit traits of authoritative parenting in the maternal practices they conduct in order to connect with their children. This includes having open conversations about their days, providing verbal support, and being less authoritarian in handling their child's social needs.

c) Enhanced Social Functioning

An individual's social functioning determines how they interact with their environments and how they fulfil their roles within those environments like social activities, work, and relationships with others (Bosc, 2000). Having good social functioning carries many benefits such as healthy mental and physical health, positive interpersonal relationships, and an overall improved well-being (Chesson, 2023). Therefore, it is crucial for social functioning to be developed from childhood, which can be achieved with good parental involvement. The importance of socialisation was conveyed by some of the mothers in this study as the mentioned their efforts to boost their child's social skills.

Reem, shared how she took her daughter to a children's play-gym regularly to improve her social skills:

I want her to socialise so instead of only relying on church and kindergarten, I would bring her here so she meets strangers, and is forced to make friends and play with them. So that was a way of me training her to socialise instead of being very introverted. Because if we don't expose them, they wouldn't know how to socialise.

Nan explained how enrolling her daughter in chess lessons and competitions has improved her daughters social functioning:

I think chess is one of the activities that's giving her some positive attitudes. She can concentrate, think out of the box, be more creative, and also through the tournaments that she's involved in, she gets to meet new friends and socialise. That's building up her confidence.

The mothers in this study were also asked whether they had noticed any changes in their child's well-being from their engagement efforts. Their responses suggest that their communication has positively impacted their child's attitude, academic performance, and overall mother-child relationship.

Lisa, explained how her efforts to discuss her daughter's troubles has helped to instil positive character traits within her like a heightened sense of responsibility and self-reflection. She stated:

She knows what are the things that need to be compromised, and that she understands the consequences of her actions. So that is how she is willing to open up and tell us what she wants and what she's willing to compromise.

Siti and Alia noticed improvements to their children's academic performances after they provided encouragement to them:

I said to him, 'I know you are doing fine but if you can do better, why not? Because I also feel like you can do a bit better if you work harder'. So, the recent semester, he only got one result that wasn't an A grade.

Because I always tell them that whatever you do is for yourself, it's not for me. If you excel in your studies, that's for you. So from there you can see that she will try her best to make sure that everything is being sorted out.

Additionally, Nan shared an instance where her daughter has outwardly conveyed her appreciation towards her mother. This occurred when her daughter expressed a positive relationship with her mother towards her friends, which she regards as a result of her parenting efforts:

She has told me before that her friends would say 'I hate my mum, I hate my mum', then she said she kept telling them 'my mum's the best' so that made me feel that...in a way she appreciates me and I'm glad.

These findings suggest that the mothers' communication efforts have successfully helped their children develop skills that improve social functioning, as reflected in the children's academic performances, positive behaviour, and healthier relationships with their mothers.

DISCUSSION

All the mothers in the study appear to have general levels of mental health literacy, which were attributed to their own reading efforts or personal experiences with mental health issues. The mothers in this study were also aware of the existence of negative stigmas tied to mental health in the Malaysian community, but all of them showed an openness to discussing the topic with their children and have encouraged their children to confide in them. This contrasts the findings of Phoa et al. (2023), who discussed that the parents in their study had pre-existing stigmas regarding mental health which may impact their openness to discussing the topic with their children. However, the same study also noted that mental health literacy was more prevalent among Malaysian parents in higher income households, which may be relevant to the mothers in the present study as they all currently reside in urban areas of Malaysia. Instead, the communication apprehension faced by the mothers in this study was mostly influenced by other aspects including their child's age, gender, relationship with mother, and disability. The struggle of mothers with younger or disabled children stemmed from the limitations in how their children perceived and understood such topics. This is similar to the findings of Hendricks et al. (2014), who noted the disinclination of parents in discussing sensitive topics with their children as they were unsure of the appropriate use of language.

At the same time, the children were described to have preferences in what they share and with whom, of which poses an additional struggle for the mothers to navigate through. This highlights the importance of effective parent-child communication in the discussion of mental health, which could be fostered by having open conversations on the topic without judgement. On top of that, the results show that the work commitments of working mothers affect their time to bond with their children, which may hinder their ability to address sensitive topics like mental health, which require extensive periods of attention and discussion. Consequently, the mothers have expressed their own ways of overcoming these challenges, such as by sharing social media posts with them or introducing related topics that their child can engage in. On top of that, the mothers would react based on their initial observation of their child's non-verbal communication, such as their body language and facial expressions. This indicates that the mothers of the study still had efforts to communicate concerns regarding their children's well-being, regardless of the topic's sensitivity.

Besides that, authoritative parenting characteristics were present in the mothers' communication strategies. The mothers demonstrated nurturing parenting and were considerate towards their child's autonomy, while simultaneously maintaining firm expectations for their children. This approach shows the balance that is encouraged in authoritative parenting, and has been regarded as beneficial to Japanese children's future mental health (Uji et al., 2014). Additionally, Suldo and Huebner (2004) identified authoritative parental social support as the strongest determinant of adolescent life satisfaction in the United States, which was regarded as a protective factor against adolescent problem behaviour. Additionally, authoritative parenting styles that encourages open communication may result in improved behaviours among children as children who were open to sharing their thoughts with their parents displayed less problem behaviours (Kerr and Stattin, 2000, as cited in Ayala-Nunes et al., 2018). The preceding discussion suggests that authoritative parenting styles have had success in promoting good mental health among children across cultures. Comparably, the present study provides explanations to why mothers in Malaysian societies have also adopted authoritative maternal practices and similarly suggests that these practices could facilitate a healthier mental well-being and positive behaviours in their children.

In exploring the theme of enhanced social functioning, Lata (2015) pointed out that children with highly involved parents have better cooperation and conversation skills. This supports the present analysis that suggests a positive correlation between effective maternal communication and a child's social functioning in Malaysian families. Families who promote open discussions of feelings were able to boost the child's social competence (Schrodt et al., 2008, as cited in Ayala-Nunes et al., 2018) by being able to evaluate various situations and determine social expectations. Some of the mothers in the present study emphasised the value of socialisation among children from an early age, noting its benefits to their children's social confidence.

Furthermore, Chen et al. (1997) found that academic achievement was associated with the levels of social functioning in children. This could explain the academic improvements mentioned by the mothers in this study, which occurred with the help of their involvement in developing their child's social functioning. Highlighting Bronfenbrenner's microsystem concept, Antony (2022) argues that resilience can be instilled in children through their relationships with their parents. This aligns with the present findings, highlighting how maternal guidance can foster mental health resilience among children by enhancing their ability to self-reflect, understanding the consequences of their actions, and learning to recover from previous academic challenges.

SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

In light of these findings, it is recommended for mothers to consider adding discussions of mental health in their conversations with their children. This approach could destigmatise the topic and foster an environment where children feel more comfortable sharing personal feelings with their mothers. Mothers can also allocate 'no-gadget' time with their children to engage in more meaningful conversations. During these discussions, non-judgemental listening is vital to create a safe environment for children to express their thoughts and feelings honestly. Moreover, mothers are encouraged to continually deepen their understanding of mental health through various platforms to improve mental health literacy and provide more effective support to children.

The findings of this study are not able to be generalised to all Malaysian mothers due to the small sample size of mothers from urban areas of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. The opinions of mothers from rural areas and lower socioeconomic standings were not assessed in this research. Additionally, this study only included mothers with higher educational backgrounds, which may have played influence on their levels of mental health literacy. Further research can be conducted with mothers who have lower educational backgrounds to see if this is a contributing factor in the understanding and openness to mental health discussions. The cross-sectional research design of this study is also unable to determine the long-term effects of the mothers' behaviours towards their children's mental health. Therefore, future longitudinal research is necessary to expand this field of study. On top of that, only the experiences of mothers, who normally are more involved in caregiving, were analysed in this study. Future studies could examine the roles of paternal behaviours and communication in their children's mental well-being to get a comparative analysis on the subject matter.

Overall, the present study contributes to the existing body of research on children's mental health by analysing its relationship with maternal involvement. The results underscore the importance of effective communication between a mother and their children in the development of a healthy mental well-being among children. Therefore, breaking the stigma surrounding mental health in the Malaysian society is critical to educate more parents on the gravity of the topic and better cater to their children's needs. By being well-informed on the mental health of children, parents can effectively recognise the warning signs of mental illnesses and conduct early intervention strategies to properly address the issue.

REFERENCES

- A Parenting Program By The American Psychological Association. (2017). Parenting styles. American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/act/resources/fact-sheets/parenting-styles#:~:text=Authoritative,don%E2%80%99t%20always%20accept%20it>
- Antony, E. M. (2022). Framing Childhood Resilience Through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory: A Discussion Paper. *Cambridge Educational Research e-Journal*, 9, 244-257. <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.90564>
- Ayala-Nunes, L., Jiménez, L., Jesus, S., Nunes, C., & Hidalgo, V. (2018). A ecological model of well-being in child welfare referred children. *Social Indicators Research*, 140(2), 811-836. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48715082>
- Benjamin, F., Sonn, I. K., Rich, E. G., Rose, J., & Roman, N. V. (2022). Parental Understanding of Mental Health in Early Childhood Development: A Human Capabilities Approach. *Journal of Family Strengths*, 21(2), Article 6. <http://dx.doi.org/10.58464/2168-670X.1454>
- Bismar, D. (2018). *Mental Illness Stigma, Parent-Child Communication, and Help Seeking of Young American Adults with Immigrant Parents* [Doctoral dissertation, University of North Texas]. UNT Digital Library. https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1248426/m2/1/high_res_d/BISMAR- THESIS-2018.pdf
- Bosc M. (2000). Assessment of social functioning in depression. *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, 41(1), 63-69. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0010-440x\(00\)90133-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0010-440x(00)90133-0)
- Bradshaw, C., Atkinson, S., & Doody, O. (2017). Employing a Qualitative Description Approach in Health Care Research. *Global Qualitative Nursing Research*, 4, 2333393617742282. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2333393617742282>
- Chen, X., Rubin, K. H., & Li, D. (1997). Relation between academic achievement and social adjustment: evidence from Chinese children. *Developmental Psychology*, 33(3), 518. DOI:10.1037/0012-1649.33.3.518
- Chesson, M. (2023, June 19). Social functioning and development: Understanding the importance of social connections. *Medium*. <https://medium.com/@michelledaceynewman/social-functioning-and-development-understanding-the-importance-of-social-connections-8a26c03ef5fe>
- Chong, S. T., Mohamad, M. S., & Er, A. C. (2013). The mental health development in Malaysia: History, current issue and future development. *Asian Social Science*, 9(6). <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ass.v9n6p1>
- Coyne, I. T. (1997). Sampling in qualitative research. Purposeful and theoretical sampling; merging or clear boundaries?. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 26(3), 623-630. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.1997.t01-25-00999.x>
- Fossey, E., Harvey, C., McDermott, F., & Davidson, L. (2002). Understanding and evaluating qualitative research. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 36(6), 717-732. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1440-1614.2002.01100.x>
- Hanafiah, A. N., & Van Bortel, T. (2015). A qualitative exploration of the perspectives of mental health professionals on stigma and discrimination of mental illness in Malaysia. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*, 9(1), Article 10. <https://ijmhs.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13033-015-0002-1>

- Härkönen, U. (2007). The Bronfenbrenner ecological systems theory of human development. *Scientific Articles of V International Conference PERSON.COLOR.NATURE.MUSIC*, 1-17. Daugavpils University, Saule. Latvia.
- Hassett, A., Green, C., & Zundel, T. (2018). Parental involvement: a grounded theory of the role of parents in adolescent help seeking for mental health problems. *Sage Open*, 8(4), 1-15. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2158244018807786>
- Hendricks, N. L., Jee, E. H., & Robbins, T. E. (2014). *Talking with children about potentially sensitive topics: birth, sex, death, and Santa* [Bachelor's thesis, California Polytechnic State University]. DigitalCommons@CalPoly. <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/psycdsp/46/>
- Lanjekar, P. D., Joshi, S. H., Lanjekar, P. D., & Wagh, V. (2022). The Effect of Parenting and the Parent-Child Relationship on a Child's Cognitive Development: A Literature Review. *Cureus*, 14(10), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.30574>
- Lata, K. (2015). Impact of parental involvement on the social skills of middle school students. *Rayat Bahra Journal of Education*, 1 (2), 33-46. <http://www.journalepr.com/images/pdf/jan15/Journal-Jan-2015-19-22.pdf>
- Maiuolo, M., Deane, F. P., & Ciarrochi, J. (2019). Parental authoritativeness, social support and help-seeking for mental health problems in adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 48, 1056-1067. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10964-019-00994-4>
- Ministry of Health Malaysia. (2011). *Psychiatric and Mental Health Services Operational Policy*. Policy developed by the Drafting Committee for the Psychiatric and Mental Health Services Operational Policy and the Medical Services Unit of the Medical Services Development Section, Medical Development Division, Ministry of Health Malaysia.
- Mizzi, A., Honey, A., Scanlan, J. N., & Hancock, N. (2020). Parent strategies to support young people experiencing mental health problems in Australia: What is most helpful?. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 28(6), 2299-2311. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/hsc.13051>
- Morse, J. M. (1991). Strategies for sampling. *Qualitative Nursing Research: A Contemporary Dialogue*, 127-145. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483349015.n16>
- Phoa, P. K. A., Ab Razak, A., Kuay, H. S., Ghazali, A. K., Ab Rahman, A., Husain, M., Bakar, R. S., & Abdul Gani, F. (2023). Predictors of Mental Health Literacy among Parents, Guardians, and Teachers of Adolescents in West Malaysia. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(1), 825. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20010825>
- Shahril, N. S. S. A., Ahmad, S., & Arshat, Z. (2021). Parenting Styles, School Connectedness and Mental Health Among Adolescents in Selangor, Malaysia. *Int. J. Acad. Res. Bus. Soc. Sci*, 11, 865-873. 10.6007/IJARBSS/v11-i6/10217
- Subramaniam, S., (2016). *Mental Health Problems in Malaysia*. Press statement of the Minister of Health Malaysia. https://www.moh.gov.my/moh/modules_resources/english/database_stores/96/337_451.pdf
- Suldo, S. M., & Huebner, E. S. (2004). The role of life satisfaction in the relationship between authoritative parenting dimensions and adolescent problem behavior. *Social Indicators Research*, 66, 165-195. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27522064>
- Uji, M., Sakamoto, A., Adachi, K., & Kitamura, T. (2014). The impact of authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting styles on children's later mental health in Japan: Focusing on parent and child gender. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 23, 293-302. DOI:10.1007/s10826-013-9740-3
- Zapf, H., Boettcher, J., Haukeland, Y., Orm, S., Coslar, S., Wiegand-Grefe, S., & Fjermestad, K. (2022). A Systematic Review of Parent-Child Communication Measures: Instruments and Their Psychometric Properties. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 26(1), 121-142. 10.1007/s10567-022-00414-3
- Zhen, B., Yao, B., & Zhou, X. (2022). How does parent-child communication affects posttraumatic stress disorder and growth in adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic? The mediating roles of self-compassion and disclosure. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 306, 1-8. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0165032722002695?via%3Dihub>