

An exploratory study on the types of social support that protect children from cumulative risk

Toh, S. M.¹, Fu, C. S. L.¹, Wong, J. H. S., Liu, D., Chew, K. M., & Quah, S. H.²

1. Singapore Children's Society, 2. T. A. P: The Affinity People Pte Ltd

Introduction

- Children from low-income families are likely to be exposed to multiple income-related risk factors (i.e., cumulative risk), such as living in an overcrowded house and not having enough food to eat. High levels of cumulative risk exposure have been consistently associated with more internalising, externalising, and attention problems.
- Previous studies have shown that general social support can buffer the negative impact of cumulative risk on child outcomes, but not investigated which types of social support, which is multidimensional, are protective.

Objectives

- Study 1 explored whether specific types of social support moderated the impact of cumulative risk on children's internalising, externalising, and attention problems.
- Study 2 examined factors facilitating and preventing children from seeking support from their existing networks.

Methodology for Study 1

- Participants were 270 children aged between 10 and 15 years ($M = 12.3$ years) and their caregivers.
- Eligibility Criteria: General Household Income of $\leq \$4000$ SGD (approximately \$4331 AUD) or Per Capita Income of $\leq \$1000$ SGD (approximately \$1083 AUD)
- Simple moderation analyses were conducted. Each analysis included cumulative risk (predictor), one type of social support (moderator), and one outcome variable.

Measures

- Cumulative risk (Predictor):** An index was formed based on 14 risk factors ($M = 6.90$, $SD = 2.52$), such as poor caregiver health, and having a large family size with four or more children.
- Eight types of social support (Moderators):** Children listed the people whom they sought support from for the following types of support: 1) Reliable alliance, 2) emotional support, 3) guidance support, 4) academic support, 5) home support, 6) social integration, 7) companionship, 8) self-esteem support. The number of people were then summed up for each type of support.

These are examples of some of the questions:

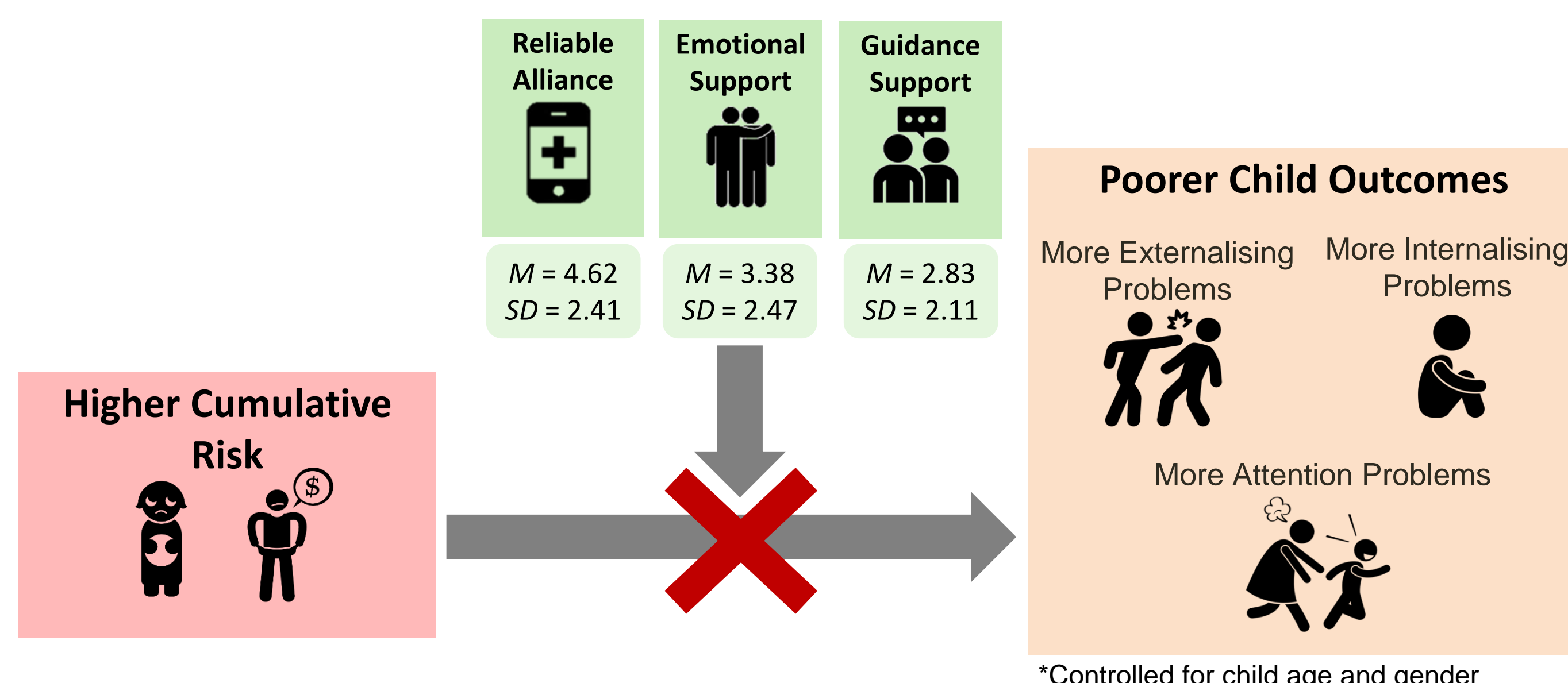
Type of Social Support	Question
Reliable Alliance	Who can you count on for help if you really need it?
Emotional Support	Who can you really count on to help you feel better when you are very upset?
Guidance Support	Who can you talk to about your problems and turn to for guidance?

Note. Questions were inspired by other social support questionnaires (Cutrona & Russell, 1987; Reid et al., 1989; Sarason et al., 1983).

- Internalising, externalising, and attention problems (Outcome):** Caregivers rated their child's internalising, externalising, and attention problems on the Brief Problem Monitor (Achenbach et al., 2017).

Study 1 Results

Out of 8 types of social support, 3 types of social support moderated the impact of cumulative risk on child outcomes.



- At low levels (1 standard deviation below mean) of people providing each of these types of support, higher cumulative risk was associated with poorer child outcomes.
- At high levels (1 standard deviation above mean) of people providing each of these types of support, there was no association or a weaker association between cumulative risk and child outcomes.
- The impact of cumulative risk can be mitigated if children have more people** (e.g., friends, parents, siblings, teachers) **to turn to for these three types of support.**

Methodology for Study 2

- 21 youths aged between 12 and 17 years ($M = 13.7$ years) were recruited from Study 1.
- Eligibility Criteria: General Household Income of $\leq \$4500$ SGD (approximately \$4870 AUD) or Per Capita Income of $\leq \$1125$ SGD (approximately \$1217 AUD)
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants. Participants were asked if they approached anyone for support in times of difficulty, reasons for seeking / not seeking support from others, who they approached, and what made them feel supported or not supported.

Study 2 Results

What facilitated youths to seek support from their existing networks?

1. Availability of reliable support

Youths tended to seek support from someone who was available, trustworthy and supportive based on their past experiences with that person.



12-year-old youth

"She [mother] is the only person that always supports me, she [is] here for me on all the things and she don't give up on me."

2. Empathy for youths' experiences: Understanding from the youths' perspective

Youths felt encouraged to seek support and to share openly about their struggles with those who previously tried to understand the situation from their point of view, rather than those who blame or judge them.



14-year-old youth

"I know that they [aunt, brother, and grandparents] can take whatever I tell about [sic] them and they will support me. Not like my mum. ... they will understand, they will not support my friend that their drama on me [sic]. And like yeah, they won't say that it's my fault 'cause they know it's not my fault but, ... other people that I tell my story will say that it's actually my fault ... They [aunt, brother, and grandparents] will side my side."

3. Active support and guidance for the youth

Youths tended to seek support from someone in their existing network who has previously actively supported and guided them when they needed advice or ideas on how they can solve their problems.



14-year-old youth

"She [aunt] will support me like, saying that.. I shouldn't ignore and do something about it and like, she give me ideas, on like what should I do rather than ignoring. 'Cause ... she said if I ignore, it will hurt more and it will become worse if you attempt to hurt yourself. ... Then ... she just, giving me like ... moral support, you know." "Like I should um, do something ... stand up to your bully and not ignore, [because] it [will] get worse!"

What prevented youths from seeking support from their existing networks?

1. Youths' fear of burdening others

Youths who felt that their family members, teachers, or friends would be burdened or frustrated by their problems were afraid of seeking support from their existing network and tried to resolve their problems on their own.

"I will try to handle my situation because she [mother] has other problems to handle too so my problem might be a little small for her so she might be frustrated when I tell her of this small small [sic] problems, but to me it's a big problem. So I will try to sort it out myself."



14-year-old youth

2. Lack of emotional validation

Youths who had their thoughts and feelings dismissed or minimised previously by some of their sources of support were discouraged from seeking those people for support again.

"I can tell them [peers] my problems easily . . . without feeling like guilty or anything. . . Every time my mum is like, "You shouldn't think this way, oh my god why do you think this way? Is your life not good enough?" I'm like ok, later turn into a nagging session."



15-year-old youth

3. Mismatch between the support needed and the support received

Youths tended to avoid seeking support from those who previously assumed and failed to ask youths about what support they required, and provided support that were incongruent with youths' needs.

"I don't usually open up to my family. ... because to them, they thought that if I tell them my problems they are helping me, but sometimes to me they will usually say that "You are just acting weak" or they'll go like, "Why do you always need friends, why can't you be alone?". 'Cause to me, I thought those were like insults ... because they keep saying, comparing with my sister ... So it makes it harder for me to like open up to them anymore."



13-year-old youth

Implications and Conclusion

- It is important to consider the types of support that youths perceive to be useful and to increase the number of people who can offer these types of support to ameliorate the negative impact of cumulative risk. To increase the number of people who can provide support from youths' existing social networks, it is crucial to consider youths' experiences in help-seeking so that the help-seeking process of youths can be eased and their barriers to seeking support can be reduced.
- Studying the different effects of specific types of social support can be a new and valuable research approach to further our understanding of how social support can be capitalised on as a protective factor that promotes resilience. On a practical front, findings suggest that limited resources for intervention may be most impactful when focussed on building relationships that provide the most critical types of support to mitigate the impact of cumulative risk.

References

- Achenbach, T., McConaughy, S., Ivanova, M. & Rescorla, L. (2017). *Manual for the ASEBA Brief Problem Monitor for ages 6-18*. University of Vermont Research Center for Children, Youth, and Families. <https://aseba.org/wp-content/uploads/2017-Manual-for-the-ASEBA-Brief-Problem-Monitor-for-Ages-6-18.pdf>
- Cutrona, C. E., & Russell, D. (1987). *The provisions of social relationships and adaptation to stress* (W. H. Jones & D. Perlman, Vol. 1). Greenwich, Connecticut: JAI Press.
- Reid, M., Landesman, S., Treder, R., & Jaccard, J. (1989). "My Family and Friends": Six- to twelve-year-old children's perceptions of social support. *Child Development*, 60(4), 896-910. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1131031>
- Sarason, I. G., Levine, H. M., Basham, R. B., & Sarason, B. R. (1983). Assessing social support: The social support questionnaire. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 44(1), 127-139.