



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

檳城消費人協會 பினாங்கு பயனரிடாளர் சங்கம்

10 Jalan Masjid Negeri, 11600 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia
Tel: 604-8299511 Fax: 604-8298109
email: consumerofpenang@gmail.com

Websites:
www.consumer.org.my

Press Statement

19 June 2020

Protect our children from the 'hidden epidemic'

The Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) is shocked by the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2019 revelation that about 424,000 children in Malaysia have mental health problems. NHMS called the escalating mental health crisis as the 'hidden epidemic'.

We are concerned because the afflicted children represent 9.5 per cent of those aged between five and 15, a significant number of them are from the rural population (8.8 per cent) and the Bottom 40 (B40) households (9.2 per cent).

The afflicted children from B40 households tend to be deprived of proper treatment because their parents are ignorant about mental health issues, concerned about high treatment cost, and often too busy in making their ends meet.

In fact, about 60 per cent of Malaysians suffering from a known mental disorder never seek help from a health professional. We urge Malaysians to empathise with people having mental disorder as they are often stigmatised, discriminated and neglected.

We urge parents to refrain from giving their children handphones or electronic gadgets to play as these will keep them from interacting socially with their peers. Almost 43% of children lacked the ability to interact with their peers which constituted a large part of their mental health problems.

The survey showed that other major factors were conduct disorder (15.9 per cent), emotional problem (8.3 per cent), and hyperactivity (2.3 per cent).

From a lack of interaction with people, children may also develop conduct disorder from deficits in the skill of processing social information or social cues to maintain appropriate behaviour in a social environment. Growing up in a dysfunctional family can be another contributing factor.

The survey also highlighted that 8.8 per cent of children with mental health problems live in rural areas, 8.4 per cent are girls, 9.5 per cent are aged between 10 and 15, and 9.2 per cent are from the B40 low-income group.

Parents' expectations of academic excellence and stress factors in schools contribute significantly to their children's mental health. The NHMS 2017 survey showed a rising trend in suicide among youths aged 13 to 17. In 2017, about 10 per cent of the youth had suicidal thoughts compared with 7.9 per cent in 2012. Thus, we call on parents not to put too much pressure on their children in their studies but to strike a balance between healthy lifestyle and study.

We appeal to the government to organise talks on mental health nationwide as the knowledge of this taboo subject is important in helping parents to identify early warning signs and symptoms of mental disorders. Such knowledge would be helpful for parents to seek professional help in providing early intervention.

The government and civil society organisations dealing with healthcare issues should provide mental health counselling in mosques, churches, temples, and *balai rakyat*. Schools and industries also should provide mental health counselling.

A study must be carried out to identify the causes of mental health problems, particularly in the rural areas where the incidence is high.

MOHIDEEN ABDUL KADER
President
Consumers Association of Penang