

Workshop Presentation

Topic: Youth Development and Volunteering

The Benefits of Family Volunteering to Families in Hong Kong

Ms. Venus Wai Mun CHAN
Hong Kong Family Welfare Society
venus.chan@hkfws.org.hk

Abstract

Family is important for the healthy growth of children. The experience of family life has a significant impact on children's future development. However, Hong Kong as the metropolitan has undergone sweeping economic and political changes for the last decade, resulting in many families being under tremendous stress. In addition, the traditional Chinese culture in communications, impact of individualization and changing family composition are affecting the way of socialization of our next generation. With a family perspective, the Hong Kong Family Welfare Society is fully aware that volunteering could strengthen family relationships, enhance family solidarity, as well as bring care and concern to the community. Therefore, we have launched various family volunteer¹ projects to achieve these objectives. In the evaluation studies for programs carried out in 2004, at least 70% of respondents agreed various benefits gained from family volunteering, namely, enhanced mutual understanding, and strengthened family's sense of belonging to the community. We figure out those elements and program designed which are likely to fulfill the needs of Hong Kong families and cope with challenges on the solidarity and kin-relationship.

Introduction

Family has long been a primary institution to provide basic socialization and nurturing for the youth. In the unique contemporary culture of Hong Kong society which undergone rapid social changes, impact of globalization and the advancement of information technologies etc., family functioning has been greatly affected. Being a social welfare organization with a family perspective, we have been promoting the family volunteering since 2002, as we believe that it not only enhances the spirit of volunteerism in the family but also strengthens the communication among family members. It is considered that family volunteering fits the needs of Hong Kong families that are embedded in both Chinese traditional culture and western culture. In this regard, we will review the current family phenomena and discuss on what the basic elements are and how the program design may help development of family relationship.

¹ The composition of family volunteer is confined to two or more family members with blood relationship or living together with close relationship.

Hong Kong Families

In 2004, Hong Kong Family Welfare Society (HKFWS) surveyed 1530 families to explore the crucial elements that contribute to family harmonies. It was found that most of youngster (primary four to secondary three) respondents recognized their own need as the prime concern; while family relationship and economic status were believed to be more important by parents instead. In particular, the first three elements contributed for family harmony that chosen by youngster respondents were possession of autonomy, parents understanding and skill at handling conflict harmoniously within family. In contrast, parents had very different priorities, which included mutual understanding and support among family members, good communication with their spouse, and stable financial conditions.

Communication Pattern

We believe that in spite of the expectation discrepancy between parents and children; communication is the tool for them to achieve their preferred status of family harmony. However, when we take into account of the communication characteristics of Chinese, namely implicit communication (hanxu 含蓄), listening centeredness (tinghua 聽話), politeness (keqi, 客氣), a focus on insiders (zijiren 自家人) and face-directed (mianzi 面子) communication strategies (Gao et al., 1996); we found that these characteristics could create obstacles to achieve open communication. Furthermore, children are traditionally taught the inhibition of expression, not to interrupt in family conversation (Goodwin and Tang, 1996). Consequently, parents play dominant roles in the family and children are expected to be obedient and not to voice their own opinions.

On the other hand, assertiveness is very alien to Chinese people with no single Chinese word for its proper translation. Assertiveness and eloquence are considered as signs of disrespect (Liu, 1986). Simply speaking, to express one's opinion directly is not desirable in social encounter, and even improper for children to be assertive in the family. Children have not learned to express themselves 'assertively' in traditional Chinese family. Gradually children may tend to keep their opinion to themselves and so parents can hardly understand their children.

The value of Hong Kong people especially youngster has been obviously affected by the influx of materialism, and individualism and western culture, generation gap is inevitably widened. The study of HKFWS in 2004 reviewed that children perceived autonomy as first crucial element for family harmony. On the contrary, this was only rated eighteenth in parents' point of view. To achieve a more well balanced family harmonious' situation, both parents and children should master well active listening, assertiveness and negotiation skills. However, for parents and children who have been nurtured under the traditional families with Chinese communication characteristics may found it difficult to achieve.

Role and Responsibility

Apart from that, the study reflected that children were more concerned about their own rights, yet neglected their role and responsibilities in family (HKFWS, 2004).

It can be explained by phenomena of low birth rate, single child, and maid support, leading to over-protection for the children. In addition, the academic-achievement-oriented parents assume that children's sole responsibility is to mind their own study and learning; while contribution to the family in terms of sharing of household chores, and taking care of younger children has seldom been a concern. Previous report in 2003 showed that about half of the students did not involve in household chores (Census and Statistics Dept., 2003). Gradually, children have little chances to learn their role and responsibility in the family, not mentioning caring for the community

Environmental Factor

In addition, it is obvious that the external environment also affects the Hong Kong families. Living in a city of metropolitan, Hong Kong people are used to working under tremendous stress and living in a hustle and bustle life style. This situation has been more adverse since 1997, due to the presence of economic crisis and negative equity. Because of this, people must work very hard to keep their job. At the same time, earning more money not only meets the people's pursue of better living, but also supports children's learning on various areas, like sports, arts and language, etc. Working overtime also becomes a common phenomenon. Therefore, quantity time of staying together and hence communication among family members are greatly diminished. As a result of these, it creates tremendous adverse impact on family relationship.

To sum up, we understand that effective communication is very important for enhancing the mutual understanding, compromise of discrepancies between family members and to achieve family solidarity. However, traditional Chinese communication characteristics hinder open communication between parents and children. While under competitive environment, Hong Kong families are lacking of time and space for communication because of different demands, like work, study, and social expectation. The socialization of family member on role and responsibility towards the family and society is put in a lower priority.

How Family Volunteering Helps

To cope with the above issues, family volunteering can be a means to handle the above unfavorable situations proactively, which can bring mutual benefits to both families and the community. Numerous studies and reports from the western society reviewed that if the family members serve the community together; it helps instilling important values to its children, youth and other adults, as well as helps encouraging whole family to spend quality time together with a sense of accomplishment (Porritt, 1995; Volunteer Canada, 2002; Beggren, 2004). An evaluation study for family volunteering programs carried out by HKFWS in 2004 supported the Western Studies. At least 76% of 102 respondents agreed that joining the family volunteer program enhanced negotiation skills and understanding between family members, and 82.7% of them believed the family's sense of belonging to the community was strengthened; while 70.1% agreed the programs could stimulate discussion with family members on social issues (HKFWS, 2005). It seems that, most of the participants were able to gain benefits through family

volunteering.

One may ask what elements are embedded in family volunteering facilitating these benefits. By reviewing 18 family volunteering programs organized in 2004, it was found that certain basic elements and program design might cultivate positive family relationship, which are:

1. Encouraging New Interaction Pattern and Bringing New Perspectives on Perceiving Each Other

Certain interaction patterns and beliefs have been developed and cultivated through the socialization process and daily family interaction, e.g. parents are obliged to take care of kids, children would never been grown up from parents point of view, or stereotypes on other family members. However, when participating in family volunteer program, family members are engaging in a context that is new to all family members or that is not in the control of any individual family members. They are allowed or being invited to behave differently through the program design or the social worker's intervention. Quoting a real case example, a daughter took initiative to help pouring tea for the elderly during an elderly service program. The mother appreciated daughter's eagerness to help, so she let her daughter try with a bit worry; because her daughter had never been doing it in her daily life. She thought her daughter was too small to hold the heavy teapot and it was dangerous to do so. Out of her expectation, her daughter managed it very well finally. Without this experience, she would not know that her daughter was able to do it. Thus, the family volunteering encourages the mother to have a new perspective on daughter's ability.

In many programs, the responsible social worker would ask family members to have a division of work, hence instilling teamwork and encouraging more equal level of participations among them. For instance, in a program called "Making of Elders Memoirs", memoirs for the elderly were produced. It required diverse skills to accomplish the task, namely interviewing, skills, organization of materials, and utilization of information technologies to make the album. Thus, each family member could contribute differently and it allowed rooms for youngster to develop and demonstrate their potential in front of their parents.

In another program called "10Cs Smart Leader Training Group", we asked children, instead of their parents, to be the program organizers. Parents just served as supporter. The children obviously gained satisfaction and confidence in front of other family members.

By these designs, the family volunteering introduces new interaction mode and rooms for every family member to contribute. In daily life, youngsters may not be provided with the chances for participation, or parents do not know how to or dare not to stretch their children a bit more. As we said before, there were many factors hindering youngsters to take care of others or participate in family matters. Family volunteering helps breaking the normal pattern and create room for exploration.

2. Changing communication pattern

On communication issue, Porritt (1995) demonstrated that volunteering also improves communication and support skills in families; it shows families' new ways to solve their own conflicts. In HKFWS evaluation study (HKFWS, 2005), more than 70% respondents agreed family volunteering facilitated enhancement of negotiation skills within family members and the program facilitated family member to initiate discussion of social issues respectively. One of the reasons is volunteering "creates an equality among people and good for children to see their parent just as a line worker rather than as an authority" (Berggren, 2004). Like the "10Cs Smart Leader Training Group" program, children played the leader role instead of a follower as they used to be in normal family interaction. Program design allows equalitarian participation. It provides opportunity for role reversal that breaks the traditional hierarchy of family relationship in a healthy and natural way.

Besides, pre-services training usually include communication skills, such as active listening, questioning techniques and assertiveness etc. All these skills are applicable to their daily life. Many families admitted that they were benefited after the services because it helped them reviewing many of their blind spots in daily communication. On the other hand, some programs required family members to practice the skills of compromise and negotiation. For instance, "Making of Elders Memoirs" involved a lot of discussion on content arrangement and presentation methods. It is somehow easier to achieve compromise when the matter is not closely related to individual's personal interest. These program designs help families break through the "implicit communication". Practice the skill of assertiveness and experience process of negotiation to compromise.

Family volunteering can be used as an early intervention for family relationship problem. Many families are not aware of the importance of learning communication skills before problem arises. Under the "face directed" culture of Chinese family, seeking advice or help from others to deal with family matter is "losing face"; while helping other is much more acceptable. After learning those communication skills in volunteer training, they may recognize that there is room for improvement. On the other hand, "change" is not easy for an individual especially when it involves long-term relationship. However, it is easier for someone to change certain long-term pattern only after he/she has practiced and gain satisfaction feedback. Generally speaking, practice new skills in volunteering are quite comfortable and safe, because the recipients always show welcome and positive attitude towards volunteers. In the post service debriefing, family members were also asked to consolidate their experience and give positive regards to their family members. Having got that positive and common experience among family members, families were able to develop a new communication pattern.

3. Mutual understanding

About 85% of respondents in HKFWS study (HKFWS, 2005) agreed that family volunteering enhanced understanding among family members. Usually with better communication, mutual understanding will be enhanced. In the program "Making of Elders Memoirs", we asked family member to draw their own lifeline and share with other family members. It provided an opportunity for mutual understanding, for instances parents shared their past to children, children shared the impressive and

memorable moment in their lives to parents. Parents reviewed that this program designs helped them understand their children more intensively. Moreover, volunteer experience usually helps family members to observe each other from another angle and know more about other members when observing their interactions with the service recipients.

4. Community Participation and Family Solidarity Development

Family volunteering is an “open door” for families to step into the community, let youngsters see their roles in the community; take up social responsibilities other than homework and study. When volunteers start reaching out to the community vividly through direct human interaction, not solely learned from media, their sense of belonging to the community would be enhanced. 82.7% of respondents felt it strengthened the family’s sense of belongings to community and know more about people from different walks of life (HKFWS, 2005). Family volunteering services, e.g. environmental protection activities, visit to the singleton elderly; provide chances for volunteers to contribute themselves to change the society for betterment.

To let families identify with this common goal, the message of serving and developing our community should be clearly conveyed to family volunteers at pre-service training. Having a common goal is important to a team; it is the foundation of building up the family solidarity. It also provides a fruitful parent-child communication channel when they shared with their common goals (Peysner, 1995).

Conclusion

Family volunteering is playing an important role on meeting the needs of families in Hong Kong, where family tie becoming weak under different extrinsic and intrinsic factors. It can cater for different types of families, providing various format of participation ranged from one-off to long-term, providing options of quality family activity for families who have little time spent together. Different program designs and basic elements of family volunteering helps family learn how to develop quality family life with better mutual understanding, establish healthier communication pattern, building cohesion among family members while bringing benefits to the community. It is worth to do further research study on verification of program design’s effectiveness and choices of program contents that might bringing the benefits mentioned above to families. With enough statistical support, it may facilitate promotion of development of family volunteering in Hong Kong and lobbying support from government, general public and social welfare agencies in promoting family volunteering, which surely brings tremendous benefits to the community. It is hope that “with a common goal, more families idea of good time is trying to change the world, not the television channel” (Berggren, 2004).

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our heartfelt thanks to all participating volunteers for their unflinching support and valuable contribution to our Family Volunteers Project. Thank all staff of the HKFWS, who support development of Family Volunteering.

Special thanks are extended to Mr. Otto Lau and Ms. Anthea Lee for guiding and managing the family volunteer project.

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