



Co-parenting after divorce: More in S'pore seek support to ensure children's needs not neglected



Self-referred clients they see mainly want to learn skills as to how best not to hurt their children in the process of divorce. PHOTO: ST FILE



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SINGAPORE - More people are seeking support after going through a divorce, say social workers, who note that co-parenting is one of the main issues that arise from marital splits.

In 2023, there were 6,000 people, either divorced or going through a divorce, who received support at 10 specialised family service centres and a divorce support specialist agency in Singapore, said the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) in response to queries.

The ministry did not provide numbers for other years before that.

One of the centres is run by Thye Hua Kwan Moral Charities (THKMC), which saw an average increase of 20 per cent in cases where co-parenting support was sought from 2019 to 2023.

Methodist Welfare Services (MWS), which runs a similar centre in Buangkok, said that it served 377 clients under its divorce support programmes between April 2023 and March 2024. This is a 32.7 per cent increase from 284 clients between July 2022 and March 2023.

The numbers do not include clients who are receiving counselling support for their divorce, said the head of MWS' FAM@FSC Yeow Ming Zhen.

The specialised family service centres are run by social service agencies, and are formally known as Strengthening Families Programme@Family Service Centres, or FAM@FSCs.

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A key divorce support programme available at FAM@FSCs is the mandatory co-parenting programme, which couples in civil marriages with children under 21 years are required to attend before filing for divorce.

It aims to help parents make informed decisions that prioritise their children's well-being and practise cooperative co-parenting, MSF said.

Social service agencies that run FAM@FSCs told The Straits Times that co-parenting is a big concern for those who go to the centres for divorce support.

Ms Yeow said: "I once had clients who were divorcing parents of a one-year-old child. The child cried frequently on handover days, but the parents, preoccupied with their legal proceedings, did not make the connection.

"When I highlighted this to the mother, she became emotional, realising the impact of the divorce on her child."

Dr Peronna Lee, director at THKMC, said court-mandated cases are one reason the centre has seen an increase in the number of cases where co-parenting support is sought. She also pointed to greater public awareness of the availability of co-parenting counselling.

Self-referred clients THKMC sees mainly want to learn skills on how best not to hurt their children in the process of divorce, she added.

Co-parenting counselling attempts to rebuild minimal trust between parents so that they can work on short- and long-term goals regarding their children, Dr Lee said.

"At the same time, it aims to help parents slowly heal and come to terms with the hurt of their divorce."

THKMC also runs a workshop for divorcing or divorced parents to learn about managing their emotions and understanding the needs of children. The workshop has supported about 28 people between 2022 and 2023.

A total of 7,118 marriages ended in a divorce or an annulment in 2023, according to data from the Department of Statistics. This was a 0.2 per cent increase from 7,107 in 2022.

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Seeking support to ensure children are not hurt in the process of divorce is important, social workers said.

Ms Yeow said that during a major life transition like divorce, children experience significant changes alongside their parents.

"They often face the loss of familiar relationships, especially if one parent moves out and becomes less present in their daily lives. This can lead to many questions and uncertainties about their own lives and future."

But, parents are often so preoccupied with the legal proceedings of their divorce and their own emotional turmoil that they neglect their children's emotional needs and how the divorce is affecting them.

For 40-year-old James (not his real name), co-parenting an eight-year-old son with his former wife was a struggle. His marriage dissolved in 2022 due to her adultery, and he found it tough to put aside the hurt he felt towards her.

"She has always been a good mother to our son, but when she cheated on me, it was hard for me to remember her good qualities. I just kept blaming her for breaking our family apart, and so I was unwilling to properly talk to her to co-parent our son. I just wanted to do everything myself as I did not want to interact with her," he said.

He would sometimes ignore her texts, but realised he was being selfish when his son said that he missed his mother. The former spouses sat down for a talk and decided to go for private counselling to help them find closure and deal with negative emotions.

James said: "I can't say I no longer feel any pain when I see her, but I am learning to put that aside when it comes to discussing our son's needs. He should not be caught in the middle."

Head of Care Corner Singapore's FAM@FSC Chrys Ong said that one reason divorced couples struggle with co-parenting is that one parent may be so involved with the children that they are unable to recognise that they need a continuous relationship with the other parent, even if that parent was not an ideal spouse.

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"Parents who are hit hardest by the divorce may see their children as their lifeline, and will fear the loss of their children to their ex-spouse after already losing their marriage," he added.

MWS' Ms Yeow said that some parents may communicate through their children as they are unwilling to communicate directly with their former spouse, which can place an emotional burden on the children and cause them stress and anxiety. This can lead to long-term implications such as difficulties in forming healthy relationships, trust issues, and emotional and behavioural problems.

At FAM@FSCs, children of divorced families who are feeling torn between their parents are taught how to communicate their feelings, concerns and needs in a non-blaming manner, and to reframe unhelpful thought patterns.

THKMC's Dr Lee said that social workers help these children understand that their parents' divorce is not their fault and that they have the right to love both parents.

"They are encouraged to tell their parents, when they feel safe enough, not to put them in between their conflicts or ask them to choose sides, as what is most important for them is to be a child," she added.

Ms Yeow said that in many cases, when the parents understand the effects of divorce on their children, they see the importance of discussing important matters with their former spouse for the sake of their children's future.

"This awareness and willingness to cooperate are crucial steps towards successful co-parenting."

In July 2024, the Women's Charter was changed to allow married couples to cite mutual agreement as grounds for divorce, if they agree that their marriage has broken down irretrievably.

Previously, grounds for divorce were adultery, desertion, unreasonable behaviour, and separation for three years with consent and four years without consent.

Managing director of Integro Law Chambers Angelina Hing said that while this change means one might not need to find blame against their spouse for grounds for divorce, it is too simplistic to say there will be less acrimony among divorced couples, as the list of issues that lead to a marriage dissolution is not exhaustive.

"However, I feel that a divorce by mutual agreement is a good start because it might put people in a better frame of mind when separating.

"There may be more people who can now mutually agree to end the marriage and discuss issues concerning their children amicably as they know they are mutually dealing with the situation for their own good."

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