

# Cover Story

By **LEE CHONGHUI**  
educate@thestar.com.my

# Raising kids to have grit

While there are growing concerns about the lack of spunk among children and teens, the right education and parenting style may be what they need to face the challenges ahead.

Separated from his parents when he was five years-old, Ming\* had no one else to turn to but himself.

He went through a rough childhood and was often bullied in school.

Feeling depressed, defeated and hopeless, Ming (not his real name) questioned the meaning of his existence in life at age 16.

However, the determined youth persevered as he knew there were more to be accomplished and got back up on his own two feet to work towards his dream of getting an education in Japan.

The resourceful teen took to the internet to quench his thirst for knowledge about the Japanese culture and language for which he had a strong fascination in.

He learnt the Japanese language on his own when he was in Form Two and continued to do so till he completed his SPM some three years later in 2015.

He saved every sen he could from his post-SPM job at a local Japanese restaurant and finally enrolled at a language institute in Tokyo, Japan to pursue higher education.

To fund his monthly living expenses and study fees, Ming worked as a waiter at a Japanese restaurant and took up odd-jobs.

The grit he has developed over the years amazes me, says child therapist Priscilla Ho, who worked with Ming during his "low" times.

She shares that Ming even gave a talk to a group of his juniors in his school to help them move on in life, before he left for Japan in October last year.

"He asked them what they are fighting for, what is holding them back, and what are they going to do about it, to get them thinking about their future," says Ho.

Fast forward to today, the gritty youth who is now 19 years old, is waiting for his interview to be admitted into a university in Japan by the end of this year, after emerging as one of the top students in the language school.

"The learning process is not always fun and improvement does not come without effort," she says.

Puveshini Rao from Rekindle Centre for Systemic Therapy Malaysia, says grit is necessary throughout life as everyone will face challenges.

"Pushing through a hard path and having sustained effort to reach the end-goal shows strength of character," says the therapist who provides Employee Assistance and Organisational Wellness programmes, and who has had extensive experience working with children, adolescents, and adults.

She notes relationships, family bonds and career success need time, patience and perseverance to bear fruit.

## Shaping outlooks

Besides the home, school is where children spend majority of their time – making it the next most important element in shaping a child's outlook on life and themselves.

Despite the Education Ministry's efforts to move away from an exam-oriented culture, good results remain the focus of most teachers and parents.

Dr Mariani says academic achievement should not be the only focus for students, parents and teachers.

"Children need continuity and it means that they need to be resilient and must have commitment and patience," she says.

The 'examination syndrome', she adds, will lead children to focus on their studies and achieving good scores alone, leaving them with little time to socialise, hone other skills or engage in activities and sports. It leads to children being gritless.

She reminds that teachers need to be good role models as well as facilitators, and to conduct more engaging activities in class.

Ho echoes Dr Mariani's view, saying that the education system as well as people's mindset towards academic perfection must change.

"Teachers can help students develop grit, but sadly they are too focused on results, as are parents," says Ho.

She shares that many straight As scorers tend to break down more often than those who are not academically inclined. Again, it leads to gritless children.

"Stop segregating students into good, average and bad classes. Let all children learn together," she says, citing the education system in the United States, as an example.

Ho points out students need to learn from mistakes, rather than being right all the time.

"I've had good students who can't cope with university assignments because they can't think out of the box.

"Smart children may not necessarily make it in life, but those who have grit will," she says.

Puveshini suggests on building students' strengths instead of excessively focusing on improving their weakness.

"Besides academic evaluations, other evaluations should focus on helping children learn from their mistakes. They must understand that encountering difficulties are all part of the learning process.

"They need an education culture where challenges are set to push students out of their comfort zone, to aim for attainable goals, increase confidence and build grit," she says.

She stresses that school serves as a rehearsal ground of sorts for the life that awaits outside of that environment, and the more school experiences prepare them for it, the



Planting tree saplings is a task that teaches children about their commitment to a green cause. – File photo

more effective they become.

"This is not limited to educational achievement but values, and principles, coping strategies, life skills and of course traits such as grit, resilience, self control and self-management, among others that seem to be more crucial for post-school life," adds Puveshini.

The race for the most number of As undermine the effort that students put in to understand course materials while glorifying the ability to memorise and regurgitate, she adds.

Dr Tee says lower levels of grit might be one of the factors leading to students giving up on studies, and suggests for students' to be developed in a holistic manner, according to their character and psychological strengths – on top of their academic capabilities.

Ho says grit is not something that can be learnt from schools just by showing talent and good grades.

She suggests placing children in social situations and giving them challenges to build grit.

"Let them learn about social work for the community, volunteer in children homes, and do chores," she says.

Dr Mariani agrees, saying grit allows a person to maintain discipline and optimism to persevere in goals even in the face of discomfort, rejection, and a lack of visible progress for years.

"There must be a balance in building up their personality and enabling them to acquire important soft skills needed to face the challenging world," she says.

Students, she adds need to be independent thinkers to make decisions themselves.

Puveshini suggests they can build their grit simply by aiming to stick through a project till the end.

Being resourceful and finding solutions independently before going to parents for help, is one of the methods to be gritty, she says,

as well as to build grit.

"The implicit values of education should be extended to acknowledging and developing each student's unique capabilities and talents," says Ng.

## Challenging situations

Concerns that the millennial generation is becoming soft and lacking grit have been raised, with many saying it is caused by over-protective parents and lack of communication.

Ho says grit is not something that can be learnt from schools just by showing talent and good grades.

She suggests placing children in social situations and giving them challenges to build grit.

"Let them learn about social work for the community, volunteer in children homes, and do chores," she says.

Dr Mariani agrees, saying grit allows a person to maintain discipline and optimism to persevere in goals even in the face of discomfort, rejection, and a lack of visible progress for years.

"There must be a balance in building up their personality and enabling them to acquire important soft skills needed to face the challenging world," she says.

Students, she adds need to be independent thinkers to make decisions themselves.

Puveshini suggests they can build their grit simply by aiming to stick through a project till the end.

Being resourceful and finding solutions independently before going to parents for help, is one of the methods to be gritty, she says,

as well as to build grit.



Parents must be able to connect with their children and pass on good values.



Puveshini believes children should be encouraged to work through problems on their own.



Dr Tee says that parents should tell their children that mistakes are part of the learning experience.



Dr Mariani is of the view that parents and teachers should not solely focus on academic achievements.



Allowing children to pursue a challenging task enables them to develop confidence, says Ng.



Ho says without grit, there is no purpose in life and goals are not achieved.

"Children should be supportive towards each other. By doing so, they create a strong network of friends who are mutually encouraging," adds Puveshini.

She notes that a growth mindset among children should be encouraged, where they tell themselves to try everything once.

"Everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses. Focus on your strengths. This will create confidence that you can use to work on your weaknesses," she explains.

Dr Tee believes a safe environment for exploration of interests, helps develop grit in children.

He says the environment should be one that allows children to make mistakes and see it as a learning process.

"Children should further explore their interests alongside the development of their identities as they mature, to ensure interests and passions align with the person they are," says Dr Tee.

Ng adds that allowing children to pursue challenging tasks enables confidence and the ability to overcome something difficult.

"When parents and educators communicate realistic expectations and create a structure in a safe environment, pushing boundaries and barriers would be more comfortable for children," she notes.

## Parenting skills

According to Mahatma Gandhi, if you want to change the world, you need to start with yourself. For parents who want grittier chil-

dren, they themselves should reflect on how they raise their young, as protecting them from failure, is not a good move.

Puveshini says it is necessary to let children fail so that parents can then talk about the meaning of failure and how to overcome it.

"Encourage children to reflect on their mistakes and come up with an improvised plan."

She also advises parents to work on their own needs and insecurities, by being mindful that perfection is not the goal.

"Constantly expecting perfection from children can lead them to being critical of themselves and giving up.

"Parents sometimes make the mistake of living vicariously through their children. Their achievements and losses are taken personally, creating dissatisfaction and frustrations all around-which isn't healthy," says Puveshini.

She also says that children should be encouraged to work through problems on their own, providing them with age-appropriate challenges, and building resilience.

Sharing her sentiments, Ng suggests that parents should themselves have determination and drive – qualities which they can pass on to their children.

At the same time, parents must tap their interests to help the young ones find their passion.

"Allowing children to express their frustration or their failure can be a lesson in itself on perseverance," she says.

Dr Tee says parents can set an example of themselves first.

"Parents could think of exemplifying certain interests, or life purposes that are meaningful to their children, and then convey to them why these pursuits are important and central to their identities.

"Build psychological scaffolding (or support) to encourage children and tell them that mistakes are part of the learning and improvement experience," he says.

Chiding or reprimanding children for mistakes in learning is likely to diminish perseverance and lower their motivation to try again," says Dr Tee.

To prepare children for the real world, Dr Mariani says parents should themselves develop a positive mindset and convey that failure is not the end of the world.

"Also allow the young to engage in activities with peers to develop teamwork, patience and other soft skills.

She adds that children must receive support from teachers and parents to cultivate their confidence and optimism.

"That will allow them to power through difficult moments. Children are not able to spontaneously grow up to be gritty people without support and guidance," she explains.

Ho notes parents play an important role in instilling grit in children, especially during their early development stages, and opines that they lack the human touch that previous generations of children used to receive.

"Communication, care and compassion are no longer there.

"Parents need to help develop their interest in what they are doing, nurture them and be hopeful of the results," she says.

## Striking a balance

Too much of anything is just as bad as having too little.

Dr Tee says one might devote excessive time, effort and resources, taking away the ability and opportunity to do other things in life.

Puveshini also notes that while grit is an important concept to cultivate, moderation and continual assessment of life and circumstances should be taken into account as well.

"Sometimes you stop pursuing something not due to the lack of grit, but because it may not be what is best for you at that time," she says.

However, if a person has a mindset of completing what is started and not giving up, there are higher chances of grit being extended to any challenge, adds Puveshini.

Dr Mariani notes there must be a balance. While academic skills are necessary, acquiring soft skills to face the challenging world, is equally important.

Meanwhile, Ho believes that it is always good to challenge our own limits.

She also notes grittiness may vary, depending on the strength or interest a child has towards certain subjects or tasks.

"Children are creative by nature and like to explore. It is important that adults don't kill their creativity and drive to learn," adds Ho.