

Abstract

Dynamics in families do change when foreign domestic helpers step in, as they become the major caretaker of the household thereon. As such, the existence of foreign domestic helpers' affect families and the relationships within, and in turn have great influence on the development of children in the family. Some research on family structure revealed that a family is built upon a number of different sub-systems (e.g. spouse sub-system, parent-child sub-system). These sub-systems are interconnected. Therefore, the involvement of foreign domestic helpers in child rearing will bring about changes in the family system. At the same time, interactions among foreign domestic helpers and the adult family members alter the traditional parenting responsibilities, which subsequently affect the development of the children. Unfortunately, there are few research studying the influence of foreign domestic helpers on their employers' family relationship.

The present study aims at understanding the difference between families which employ foreign domestic helpers and families which do not. The comparison between the two will be brought out in two different areas, namely, (1) interactions within a family and (2) the social performance of children. Furthermore, we intend to explore the relationship between the foreign domestic helpers and family members, and the overall mental health of family members. The research teams have designed four sets of questionnaires for fathers, mothers, children and foreign domestic workers.

A total of 507 families were invited to join the study. While 224 families have employed foreign domestic workers, 283 have not. During the study, 215 questionnaires were collected from children, 195 from fathers, 212 from mothers and another 180 from domestic helpers. For families without domestic helpers, questionnaires collected from children; fathers and mothers were 279, 251, and 274 respectively.

Research findings revealed that ratings on trust towards parents, parent-child communication and family relationships were all higher in families with helpers than in families without helpers. Fathers in families with helpers generally adopted a more lenient and caring approach in parenting. Ratings on children's sense of responsibility and communication are lower in families with domestic helpers, where this group of children was

found to be more assertive and extroverted. Nevertheless, children in families with helpers rate themselves better in terms of responsibility and communication, than children in families without helpers.

Incidentally, relationships between domestic helpers and their employers were found to have impact on family dynamics. Employers who regard domestic helpers as their “family members” will adopt a friendly parenting style and use less controlling means to discipline their children, in which children are more attached to the family. Parents with domestic helpers are shown to have more trust and better communication with their children. Parents of families with domestic helpers were demonstrated to feel less isolated, less anxious, and less depressed. Children who viewed domestic helpers as family members have better relationship with parents. They regarded themselves to have better communication skills, were more empathetic and have less problematic behaviour.

Domestic helpers who perceived their employers regard them as family members tended to have better relationships with the children, and adopt a warmer parental style with less parental control in nurturing their children. They are less anxious and depressed.

The findings demonstrated well that having positive relationships with domestic helpers would have a positive impact on parent-child relationship. We recommend parents to respect their domestic workers and have better communication with family members. Parents are also recommended to ensure a consistent approach be adopted in child rearing, among themselves and the foreign domestic helper, as that would minimize their children being rebellious or at a loss as to what to do. We also advise the government to establish the standard working hours, allowing parents to have more time in taking care of their children, not just leaving the responsibility of child rearing to the foreign domestic workers.

At present, we have more than 300,000 foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong. A great majority of them have been taking care of children in different households. Apart from adjusting to the local working environment, the domestic workers have to adjust to the expectations of their employers. We therefore urge the social service organizations to provide adequate support to these domestic workers, so as to help them to build up a support network in the local community.