



# Positive Parenting

Malaysia

The Official Guide Series On Maternal, Child & Family Care  
By The Malaysian Paediatric Association

Nurturing Stability:  
**Co-parenting  
After a  
Divorce**

**Vaccine  
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From the Lab to  
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## The High Cost of Building a Family

The family institution is the foundation of any society and nation. However, issues such as the rising cost of living and the declining fertility rate are growing to be concerns and challenges linked to family building, not just in Malaysia, but also worldwide. These issues need to be addressed to cultivate a sustainable environment for family building in our society.

Hence, in this issue's Feature, we invite several prominent experts in their respective fields to talk about the reasons behind the rising cost of building a family, as well as the importance of financial planning in parenting. Other key parenting topics are also explained by our line-up of experts in this issue, such as co-parenting tips for separated parents, commonly asked questions on developmental milestones, what parents can do if their teens are hiding something, and the tragic case of children left behind in vehicles.

The ultimate aim of these articles is to empower and equip you as fellow parents with important parenting knowledge, so that together we can provide the best care, upbringing, and environment to our little ones, our future leaders. Last but not least, do check out previous articles on our website ([www.mypositiveparenting.org](http://www.mypositiveparenting.org)) and follow us on Facebook (@positiveparentingmalaysia), Instagram (@mypositiveparenting), YouTube (ParentFlix) and Spotify (ParentFlix) too!

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With **Datuk Dr Zulkifli Ismail**, Chairman, Positive Parenting Programme

**Dr Serena In**, Clinical Psychologist and Committee Member, Malaysian Society of Clinical Psychology (MSCP),

**Dr Tey Nai Peng**, Specialist, Faculty of Business & Economics, University of Malaya; Board Member, National Population and Family Development Board Malaysia (LPPKN); and Member, National Council on Women & Family

# The Economics of Parenting

*Parenthood brings immense joy, but it also brings the sobering reality of added expenses and a significant financial commitment. In addressing the rising cost of living and the declining fertility rate in Malaysia, parents must adequately prepare to meet the financial demands associated with raising a child. From essentials like education and medical costs to countless everyday necessities, your expenses can add up quickly, making financial planning an essential aspect of parenting.*

## Declining fertility, rising cost of living: a cause for concern

Fertility rates are plummeting worldwide, with many nations experiencing levels below replacement. East and Southeast Asia face a significant demographic crisis, with countries like South Korea, China, Japan, Thailand, and Singapore recording total fertility rates (TFR) of 1.3 or lower. Singapore's TFR reached a historic low of 0.97 in 2023. Malaysia's TFR steeply declined from 2.2 in 2011 to 1.6 in 2022.

While the fertility rates among the Malay and other Bumiputera populations remained at around replacement levels, the Chinese and Indian communities have experienced a drastic drop, with rates as low as 0.8 and 1.1 respectively, placing them among the lowest globally.

The birth decline is evident, with the national numbers dwindling from 511,527 in 1991 to 444,279 in 2023. Chinese births saw the most dramatic decrease, plummeting from 102,732 to 40,249 over 32 years, while Bumiputera births also declined from 399,276 in 2015 to 344,281 in 2023.

The rising cost of living further exacerbates the situation, making it imperative that we address this issue before the fertility rates plummet further, potentially leading to severe economic ramifications. Malaysia already depends heavily on foreign labour to fill the labour shortage, and this situation is expected to continue.

**Dr Tey Nai Peng**, Specialist at the Faculty of Business & Economics, University of Malaya, highlights the multifaceted challenges contributing to the declining birth rates. "Rising living expenses, coupled with uncertainties in job markets and businesses, stagnant incomes, and mounting debts for some, place significant strain on young couples. As a result, many feel compelled to limit their family size, perpetuating the downward trend in birth rates. Moreover, the cost of raising children escalates alongside the overall cost of living. Factors such as geographical location, childcare preferences, and desired educational trajectory for the child all play pivotal roles in determining the financial burden of parenthood," he says.

## The cost of parenthood

According to EPF's Belanjawanku, the funds necessary to maintain a respectable quality of life fluctuate across Malaysia's regions. For a married couple, sustaining this standard requires a monthly budget ranging from RM3,680 in Alor Setar to RM4,630 in the Klang Valley. However, once they have a child, expenses escalate to RM4,760 and RM5,980 in these areas.

Families with two children face even greater financial demands, with estimated budgets of RM5,430 and RM6,890 in Alor Setar and

the Klang Valley respectively. The 2022 median household income was approximately RM6,338 (RM7,243 in urban areas and RM4,094 in rural areas), with an average household size of 3.8. These statistics suggest that nearly half of households lived below the threshold of a decent livelihood.

Additionally, an online report calculated that the cost of raising a child from pregnancy through to university education ranges from RM400,000 to RM1.1mil, with the largest portion of that cost going towards private tertiary education.



## Estimated cost of raising a child

Stage	Pregnancy & maternity	Newborn - 4 yrs	7 - 12 yrs	13 - 17 yrs	Pre-U/ University
<b>Approximate annual cost</b>	RM5,000- RM10,000	RM37,300- RM48,000	RM8,400- RM35,000	RM13,200- RM46,000	Up to RM160,000
<b>Examples of expenditure</b>	Prenatal visits, hospital charges (varies if private or government), post-natal visits, and supplements	Childcare, immunisations and check-ups, formula and food, diapers, clothing and other essentials like stroller, car seat, etc.	Uniform and books, school fees, transportation fees, food expenses, tuition, clothes, books and toys, healthcare	Uniform and books, school fees, transportation fees, food expenses, tuition, clothes, books and toys, entertainment, healthcare	Books, food, transport, accommodation, healthcare, university fees (varies if private, government, local or overseas), entertainment

\*Figures compiled from <https://www.akpk.org.my/estimated-cost-raising-child> and <https://www.aia.com.my/en/knowledge-hub/plan-well/cost-of-raising-a-child-in-malaysia.html>

### Why are costs escalating?

Dr Tey identifies some of the reasons why the cost of raising a child keeps escalating.

#### Education expenses:

Education costs such as tuition fees, school supplies, extracurricular activities, and private tuitions are escalating. Parents grapple with mounting bills from preschool through higher education to secure a quality education for their children.



#### Healthcare costs:

The expenses of children's healthcare, including doctor's visits, vaccinations, medications, and medical insurance premiums, continue to surge. Advances in medical technology and healthcare services intensify the financial burden of ensuring a child's well-being for many families.



#### Housing and home resources:

Ensuring children's safe and comfortable living

space entails higher rent or housing loan payments. Additionally, escalating costs of utilities, maintenance, and fuel contribute to families' overall housing expenses. Studies have shown that students from homes with more educational resources, such as having their room, books, and internet access, tend to perform better academically.



#### Childcare and babysitting:

The growing demand for childcare, driven by more workforce parents, escalates costs. Whether through daycare, childminders, or after-school programmes, childcare expenses pose a significant financial challenge, particularly in urban centres like Kuala Lumpur.



#### Technology and

**entertainment:** In today's digital era, children's exposure to technological gadgets and entertainment options expands rapidly. From smartphones and tablets to video games and



streaming services, staying abreast of tech trends entails considerable costs.

#### Inflation and economic

**factors:** Inflation and the slow economic recovery post-COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impact the rising costs of child-rearing. Price hikes in goods and services as well as unfavourable employment opportunities and wages strain parents' financial stability in meeting growing family expenses.



#### Changing family dynamics:

Evolving family structures and dynamics, such as breakdown of the extended family, rise in single-parent households and dual-income families, influence child-rearing costs. Single parents face heightened financial strain, while dual-income households encounter increased childcare expenses due to both parents working outside the home without the support of the extended family.

## Emergence of dual-income families

The rise of dual-income families has introduced a unique set of challenges, particularly for working women juggling multiple roles in the workplace and the family sphere. As female labour force participation increases, many face the dilemma of prioritising career advancement over family formation and child-rearing responsibilities.

To address this issue, Dr Tey suggests implementing more flexible work arrangements to foster a healthier work-life balance. "Such measures can alleviate the pressure on working women, allowing them to navigate their professional commitments



better while fulfilling their familial duties. By offering flexibility in scheduling, remote work options, and supportive policies like parental leave and childcare assistance, organisations can empower working women to pursue their career aspirations and desire for family life. This arrangement benefits individual employees and contributes to a more inclusive and productive workforce," he says.

## What are the costs to prepare for?

However, there's no need to fret. Raising a child from birth until tertiary education involves a range of staple costs that you can easily plan for, says **Datuk Dr Zulkifli Ismail**, Chairman of Positive Parenting Programme. These include prenatal and postnatal care, childcare and early education, basic needs, medical care and insurance, education and savings.

Dr Zulkifli says, "Prenatal care includes expenses such as doctor visits, ultrasounds, vitamins and childbirth classes. Postnatal expenses may include hospital bills, paediatrician visits, vaccinations, and newborn essentials like diapers, formula (if not breastfeeding), baby clothing and equipment (cots, carseat, stroller). For parents who have to return to work, childcare costs can be significant. This includes

expenses for daycare, child minding services, or babysitters. Then of course there are ongoing expenses of food, clothing and personal care items for the child."

In addition to that, regular medical and dental check-ups, as well as unexpected medical expenses should be factored into your budget, he says, along with insurance premiums. Parents also need to plan for the costs associated with primary and secondary schooling, including school fees, uniforms, textbooks, school supplies, transport to school and extracurricular activities. As your child approaches tertiary education, expenses may include college or university tuition, accommodation, books and other related costs. To plan financially for your child's university education, you can start as early as when they are born and contribute regularly to a dedicated education or endowment fund.

Indeed, setting aside funds for your child's future, such as college savings accounts or investment accounts, is essential for long-term financial planning. This may also include saving for other milestones, such as buying a car or helping with a down payment on a home. Dr Zulkifli says it's also important for parents to have an emergency fund to cover unexpected expenses, such as medical emergencies, home repairs, or job loss, ensuring financial stability during challenging times. "The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic serves as a classic example of how unexpected circumstances can cause a major roadblock in life, further highlighting the necessity of maintaining an emergency fund to safeguard against unforeseen financial challenges. By considering and budgeting for these staple costs, parents can better prepare for the financial responsibilities of raising a child from birth through tertiary education."

## Are you ready to be a parent?

According to **Dr Serena In**, Clinical Psychologist and Committee Member of Malaysian Society of Clinical Psychology (MSCP), some couples may look for a sign that they are “ready” to become parents but entering the journey of parenthood is a conscious choice that they need to make on their own.

“An individual should not have a child just because they feel pressured to do so by their partner, family or others. Sometimes people are afraid to become parents because they worry that they are not good enough or worry about the immense burden that comes with it; this may cause them to avoid parenthood entirely. However, those who have courageously become parents often describe that this life choice comes with incredible rewards that far outweigh the costs. Many boldly declare that becoming a parent was the best decision they made of their lives, in hindsight, even if the early days were fraught with doubts and fears,” she says.

She shares some emotional cues indicating that you are ready to become a parent: “You have a wonderful



marriage but as a couple, you are starting to feel slightly understimulated or itching for more, may be wanting a little bit more company at home. You may have tried caring for your relative’s or friend’s child and have thoroughly enjoyed it, wanting or craving for a similar bond for yourself. You are also willing to make adjustments to your lifestyle in terms of finance, career, time, and energy, and make space for changes and allocations to raise a child. Last but not least, you are willing to make sacrifices for your loved ones, which will help in being prepared for the parenting journey ahead.”

“Sometimes though,” Dr Serena adds, “it starts with making a choice that you want this and then you will make the necessary adjustments as you go along. The key is to genuinely be willing to make these changes because of your goal to become a parent. That helps you to always reprioritise effectively as you go along.”

Meanwhile, Dr Tey calls for a comprehensive assessment to gauge financial readiness for parenthood by examining

current income and expenses to ensure young parents can cover the additional costs of raising a child. “Young couples must establish a budget and savings plan tailored to these new financial needs. Furthermore, evaluating employment situations is critical to securing adequate parental leave and medical coverage. Finally, it is crucial to discuss one’s financial priorities with one’s partner and develop a long-term plan,” he states.

Dr Tey also underscores that preparing for parenthood as a couple can present challenges, particularly when partners have differing attitudes toward money, spending habits, and financial priorities. He elaborates, “Addressing these disparities can help mitigate disagreements when navigating the financial landscape of raising a child. Complexities may arise when there is a significant income gap between partners, hence making it imperative to fairly distribute financial responsibilities for childcare expenses and savings for the child’s future.”



## Advice for future parents

Dr Serena provides some advices to couples who are planning to have a child, “Start budgeting early even before pregnancy, for example by setting aside extra savings each month for additional maternity-and-child expenses. You should also speak with supportive family members or friends who are parents and ask them to share their parenting journey and any helpful tips. Identify your main support system whom you can depend on when you need help. Attending parenting talks and reading parenting books can help you prepare mentally too. If you are still feeling unsure about having a child even after discussing with your partner, consult a professional counsellor or clinical psychologist to help you navigate conversations surrounding this major life decision-making processes.”

This financial pressure of preparing for a child, coupled with the emotional stress of anticipating parenthood, can certainly put a strain on the relationship according to Dr Serena. “Despite these challenges, however, if you are able to work together as



a team by communicating openly about financial goals and concerns, seeking professional advice when needed, and being flexible in adapting to changing circumstances, you can certainly overcome these obstacles and successfully prepare for the financial responsibilities of parenthood. Couples become stronger as a unit when they work together to navigate the constant changes in the journey ahead.”

In conclusion, parenting is for the long haul and not a short-term decision. Hence, both partners have to wholeheartedly agree with the decision and are ready to work together, no matter what comes their way. Moreover, the financial implications of parenthood are vast and require careful consideration

and planning. As highlighted by experts in various fields, the rising costs associated with raising a child underscore the importance of financial preparedness for prospective parents. With careful planning, determination and support, parents can confidently embrace the joys and responsibilities of raising a child. Ultimately, with a sustainable ecosystem for family building and child rearing, it is hoped that the fertility crisis can be mitigated and the nation can move forward together towards a better future. PP



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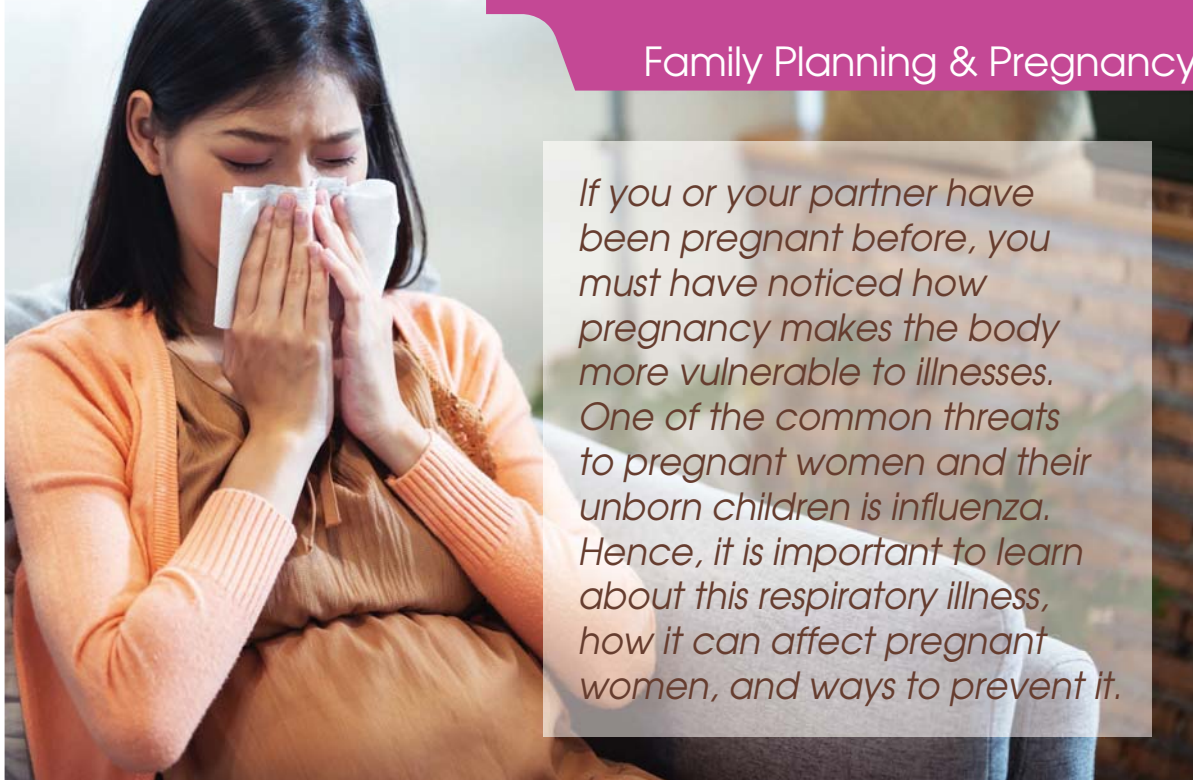


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*If you or your partner have been pregnant before, you must have noticed how pregnancy makes the body more vulnerable to illnesses. One of the common threats to pregnant women and their unborn children is influenza. Hence, it is important to learn about this respiratory illness, how it can affect pregnant women, and ways to prevent it.*

# The Dangers of Influenza During Pregnancy

By **Dr Hoo Mei Lin**, Consultant Obstetrician & Gynaecologist

## The perils of pregnancy

Pregnant women are at higher risk of getting sick than non-pregnant women of the same age. This is because the immune system is naturally suppressed during pregnancy, thus increasing our risk of infections, including influenza. Pregnant women are also more vulnerable to severe influenza due to changes in the immune system, heart, and lungs during pregnancy. On top of that, influenza also poses hazards to the developing baby in the womb.

## Symptoms

Here are some common symptoms of influenza in pregnant women:

- Sudden onset of moderate to high fever
- Chills
- Dry cough
- Runny nose
- Nasal congestion
- Sore throat
- Headache
- Muscle aches
- Loss of appetite
- Fatigue

Get emergency medical attention if you experience any of these severe symptoms:

- Fever or cough that comes and goes, or gets worse
- High fever that doesn't change after taking paracetamol
- Decreased or no movement of your baby
- Dizziness, confusion, or the inability to wake up
- Extreme weakness or unsteadiness
- Trouble breathing or shortness of breath
- Severe muscle pain
- Ongoing pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Seizures
- No urine for an extended period

## Complications

Most pregnant women will recover from influenza with no issue if they receive early diagnosis and treatment. Still, the risk of getting serious complications from influenza is higher during pregnancy. Here are some potential complications due to influenza during pregnancy:

- Admission to hospital or intensive care unit (ICU)
- Pneumonia
- Low birth weight
- Premature birth
- Developmental issues in the baby (e.g. neural tube defects)
- Miscarriage
- Death (mother or baby)

## Treating and managing influenza

You may be prescribed with an antiviral if you are diagnosed early. Usually doctors will suggest the oral antiviral oseltamivir to pregnant women since many studies have verified its safety. Antivirals won't cure influenza at once, but they can prevent symptoms from becoming more severe.

Doctors may also prescribe other medications to treat specific symptoms, e.g. paracetamol to reduce fever, cough drops to relieve respiratory symptoms, etc. Make sure that doctors are aware of your pregnancy to ensure that you are prescribed with medications that are safe for pregnancy. Always follow the instructions on all medications.

You may experience symptoms for a week or more. During the period, get sufficient rest and drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration. And take steps to avoid spreading the infection to other people around you, for example by limiting close contact with others, wearing a face mask, washing hands regularly, and covering your mouth and nose when sneezing or coughing.

## Influenza vaccination for pregnant women



Influenza vaccination is an essential aspect of health care before, during and after pregnancy. Getting the influenza vaccine is the best way to protect pregnant women against severe influenza. **All pregnant women are recommended to get the inactivated or recombinant influenza vaccine at any stage of pregnancy.**

Even if you have received an influenza vaccine during a previous pregnancy, you should still get vaccinated for the current pregnancy.

Influenza vaccination is recommended annually for all adults, including pregnant women, since circulating influenza strains vary from season to season and immunity tends to wane over time.

The safety of influenza vaccine during pregnancy has been proven by numerous studies and millions of people have been vaccinated over the years. It is also safe and effective to get the influenza shot together with other vaccines recommended in pregnancy, e.g. Tdap (tetanus-diphtheria-pertussis) vaccine, COVID-19 vaccine.

Additionally, influenza vaccination during pregnancy can also help protect newborns against influenza. After receiving the vaccine, antibodies produced by the mother is passed to the baby

during pregnancy through the placenta. Vaccinated mothers can also pass the antibodies to their baby after birth through breastfeeding. This passive immunity is vital during the first few months of life because babies can only get an influenza shot once they turn 6 months old.

The 40-weeks of pregnancy is a challenging yet beautiful journey in a woman's life as she strives to bring a new life into the world. And it is important for mothers-to-be to take the necessary precautions to ensure that they and their babies are healthy and protected against illnesses such as influenza. Thus, getting the influenza vaccine is one of the crucial steps to include in your pregnancy to-do list. PP

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# Nurturing Stability: Co-parenting After a Divorce

By **Dr Serena In**, Clinical Psychologist and Committee Member, Malaysian Society of Clinical Psychology (MSCP)

*Divorce is a challenging journey, especially when children are involved. However, it does not have to be a road riddled with problems. While it may not always be a smooth ride, with mindful co-parenting strategies, parents can still foster a stable and nurturing environment for their children post-divorce.*



## Impact on children

Divorce can profoundly affect children physically, emotionally, psychologically and academically. In the initial stages, finding out about what happened could have an effect on children's appetite and may even disrupt usual sleep patterns. Children may also experience feelings of loss, confusion, and insecurity during and after a divorce. This emotional turmoil can manifest in various ways, including behavioural issues, academic struggles, and difficulty forming trusting relationships with others.

The behavioural issues that children may experience in the aftermath of a divorce can vary widely depending on factors such as the child's age and temperament, as well as the level of conflict during the divorce process. Some common issues that children with divorced parents might exhibit include acting out,



withdrawal, emotional instability and risk-taking behaviours such as experimenting with drugs or alcohol, engaging in promiscuous behaviour, or breaking rules at home and school.

Research also suggests that the effects of divorce on children can extend into adulthood. While some children may demonstrate resilience and adaptability over time, others may continue to struggle with emotional and interpersonal difficulties. It is important for parents to recognise the potential long-term impact of divorce on their children and provide ongoing support and guidance as and when necessary. Occasionally, reaching out for professional help from credible mental health experts (e.g. counsellors, clinical psychologists, marriage and family therapists) would be beneficial to help them navigate these challenges.

## Mitigating negative effects

While divorce inevitably brings changes, parents can take proactive steps to reduce its negative impact on their children. Primarily, parents should prioritise the well-being of their children above all else. Encourage open communication, validate their feelings, and reassure them that they are loved and supported by both parents even though there are changes in the family structure. Work together with each other to be consistent in discipline, rules and expectations between households as this can provide a sense of stability. This is where seeking support from family therapists or support groups specialising in co-parenting dynamics would come in handy. Research has shown that children are less

negatively affected by a divorce when both parents actively engage in their upbringing and demonstrate a united front in co-parenting.



## Managing co-parenting

Effective and frequent communication between the mother and the father is paramount.

Both parents should prioritise open, respectful dialogues regarding their children's needs, schedules and concerns. Welcoming questions asked by your little ones makes them feel heard and understood and helps to avoid any confusion. Establishing a consistent routine helps children feel secure and in control amidst the many ongoing changes. Utilise tools like shared calendars or co-parenting apps to coordinate schedules efficiently. According to research, maintaining a cooperative co-parenting relationship results in better adjustment outcomes for children post-divorce – they become more well-adjusted to the transitions overall and may even be able to thrive as they grow older.



By embracing cooperation, communication, and compassion, parents can navigate the complexities of co-parenting after divorce while safeguarding their children's emotional well-being. Remember, while divorce may mark the end of a marriage, it does not have to signify the end of effective parenting. Together, both parents can forge a new path filled with love, understanding and resilience. PP

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# Vaccine Development: From the Lab to the People

By **Dato' Dr Musa Mohd Nordin**, Consultant Paediatrician & Neonatologist and **Dr Husna Musa**, Paediatrician

*Everyone knows that vaccines are good, but did you know how they are made? What are the processes that a vaccine has to go through before it can be distributed to the public? And how are we able to develop a range of vaccines against COVID-19 in a relatively short time compared to a typical vaccine development?*

Since the first vaccine was created in 1796, vaccines have been very successful at protecting people against infectious diseases. We have come a long way since then, equipped with more advanced technologies and methods, as well as extensive testing and regulation to ensure the creation of vaccines that are safer and more effective. Vaccine development starts in the lab and goes through several stages before a vaccine can be introduced to the population.

## Identifying the pathogen

To create a vaccine against a particular disease, the pathogen (bacteria, virus, fungi, parasite) that is causing the disease has to be identified first. Then, the pathogen will be studied in a laboratory to better understand its infection mechanism. A suitable antigen (part of the pathogen that induces an immune response) will be selected to develop the vaccine. The antigen may be a small component of the pathogen, like a surface protein, or the whole organism in a weakened or inactivated form.

## Preclinical phase

Before a vaccine can be tested on people, it is first tested using lab-grown cells and animals to assess its safety and efficacy in preventing disease. This is done to evaluate the vaccine's ability to induce an immune response and to figure out the safe and appropriate amount to start testing on people. Researchers may make adjustments to the vaccine at this stage to improve its safety and efficacy.

## Clinical trials

After the vaccine has been proven to trigger a sufficient immune response and received the necessary approval, it can then be tested on humans in three phases of clinical trials.

**Phase I:** A small group of 20-100 young, healthy adults are recruited to receive the trial vaccine. The aim is to observe the vaccine's immune response in humans, determine the right dosage, assess its safety, and identify any side effects. Typically, it takes at least one year to complete Phase I.

**Phase II:** The next phase involves several hundred participants, including those with similar characteristics (e.g. age, sex, health status) as the intended recipients of the vaccine. It aims to obtain more data on the safety and immunogenicity of the vaccine in people from more diverse backgrounds. Phase II usually takes a longer time to complete than Phase I and not all trial vaccines will proceed to the next phase.

**Phase III:** The final phase of clinical trials involves thousands of people and is usually conducted at multiple sites around the world to ensure that the findings apply to different populations. One of the main goals of this phase is to detect any rare side effects of the vaccine – this is why more participants are required. At this phase, researchers confirm the safety and efficacy of the vaccine to support mass distribution to the larger public. Phase III may take a few years to complete.

## Approval, manufacturing & distribution

Following a positive result of the clinical trials, the vaccine then will be reviewed through a series of steps by relevant local and international regulatory bodies to ensure compliance with quality, safety and efficacy criteria before it can be approved and licensed for public use.

The whole vaccine development process starting from research until approval typically takes around 10-15 years. In Malaysia, the authority responsible for approving any vaccine or medication is the **National Pharmaceutical Regulatory Agency (NPRA)**.

Once the vaccine has been approved, the vaccine manufacturer can begin to make larger batches of vaccine for distribution to the public. Vaccines are usually bottled in glass vials and then carefully packaged for safe cold storage and transport. It is important to store and transport vaccines at the right temperature and with the proper procedure to safeguard the integrity of the product.

## Monitoring

Even after the vaccine has been approved for the general population, regulatory bodies will continue to monitor the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine. Every country has their own system to detect and report adverse events linked to vaccination. Another part of the monitoring process is **Phase IV** study, an ongoing study to evaluate the effect of the vaccine as it is used in the wider population over a longer period of time. The data will help scientists and policymakers to fine-tune the policies of vaccine use and optimise the impact of the vaccine.

## COVID-19 vaccine development

As seen during the pandemic, the COVID-19 vaccine development was accelerated due to the urgent need for a safe and effective vaccine to control the disease. Several factors contributed to the successful effort:

- 1) **Prior research on SARS-CoV-1 and MERS-CoV vaccines** has helped reduce time spent on investigating the target antigen in SARS-CoV-2, the pathogen responsible for COVID-19.
- 2) Researchers sped up their processes by **combining and overlapping different phases of vaccine clinical trials**, e.g. Phase II may begin even before Phase I ended or Phase II and III may be combined. Nevertheless, scientific designs and safety standards of the trials were maintained and not compromised.
- 3) **International collaborative efforts** between different nations, international health organisations, and vaccine makers, who contributed financially, politically and strategically to enable the accelerated vaccine development pathway.

In Malaysia, NPRA granted conditional approval to COVID-19 vaccines when they were first rolled out. The evaluation period was shortened from the standard 245 days to less than a month to speed up the distribution of the vaccines to the public. COVID-19 boosters are still currently available at selected healthcare facilities – the list of clinics can be viewed on the MySejahtera app. You can also book for an appointment to receive the vaccine through the app. PP

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# Preventing Tooth Decay & Gingivitis in Children

By **Dr Nabihah Dzaruddin**, Paediatric Dental Specialist, Faculty of Dentistry, Universiti Malaya and Secretary, Malaysian Association of Paediatric Dentistry (MAPD)



*A child's smile is a precious feature that reflects his happiness and well-being. As parents, safeguarding that smile involves more than just regular brushing. Understanding the common dental issues that affect children, such as tooth decay and gingivitis, and knowing how to prevent and treat these problems, is crucial for maintaining your child's oral health.*

## Common dental issues

**Tooth decay**, also known as dental caries or cavities, occurs when bacteria in the mouth produce acids that erode the enamel after prolonged exposure to excessive sugary foods and drinks. **Gingivitis**, the early stage of gum disease, involves inflammation and bleeding of the gums due to plaque buildup. Both conditions are primarily caused by poor oral hygiene.



Tooth decay



Gingivitis



Periodontitis

If tooth decay and gingivitis are not addressed promptly, they can lead to severe complications. Left untreated, decayed teeth can cause pain and make it difficult to chew and eat. Untreated tooth decay can also lead to infections, abscesses, and tooth extraction. Gingivitis, if ignored, can progress to **periodontitis**, a more serious form of gum disease that can damage the soft tissue and bone supporting the teeth, possibly leading to tooth loss.

## Treatment and prevention

Dental visits are daunting for many children, especially those with anxiety. A painful or bad experience in the past may cause them to be nervous. Parents play a crucial role in shaping their child's attitude towards dental visits. Children often pick up on how adults feel, so staying calm and talking positively about going to the dentist can help create a reassuring environment. For parents looking for special dental care for their children, paediatric dentists are a great option. These experts focus on treating kids and making sure they get the right care, both physically and emotionally. Paediatric dentists understand the unique challenges and fears that children might have and create a comforting and kid-friendly environment for their young patients.



For more anxious patients, options such as sedation and general anaesthesia can make treatments more comfortable and stress-free. These methods ensure that necessary dental care is administered without causing undue distress to the child.

Prevention, however, is the best strategy for maintaining your child's oral health. Here are some important tips for inculcating good oral habits:

### 1. **Establish a routine:**

Parents should brush their child's teeth as soon as they erupt, using only a smear of fluoridated toothpaste. Once your child reaches 3 years old, use a pea-sized amount of toothpaste. Teach your child to brush their teeth twice daily for at least 2 minutes, making sure to cover all surfaces. Encourage them to spit out the toothpaste after brushing, instead of rinsing with water, to keep the fluoride working on their teeth. Set a timer, and for young children, make it fun!



3. **Healthy diet:** Limit amount and frequency of high sugary snacks and drinks. Encourage a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables and dairy products that provide essential nutrients for strong teeth and gums.

4. **Regular dental visits:** Schedule your child's first dental visit by their first birthday to familiarise them with the dental environment and make them comfortable. Make sure to schedule dental check-ups every six months. Regular visits allow the dentist to monitor your child's oral health, perform professional cleaning, and identify problems early.



2. **Fluoride use:** Ensure your child uses toothpaste containing at least 1000 ppm fluoride, as the correct fluoride concentration strengthens enamel and helps prevent decay.

By encouraging good dental habits early on, you can help ensure that your child's teeth remain strong and healthy, allowing them to smile confidently throughout their lives. Early intervention and consistent preventive care are also key to maintaining a lifetime of healthy teeth and gums. For tailored advice and care, always consult with your dentist to address your child's unique dental needs. PP

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# Let's Prevent "Forgotten Baby Syndrome"!

By **Datuk Dr Zulkifli Ismail**, Consultant Paediatric & Paediatric Cardiologist

*Every once in a while, another report of a child's death after being left behind in a car may appear in the news. This tragic incidence has been referred to as the Forgotten Baby Syndrome.*



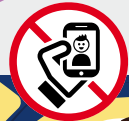
## How can we prevent this?

**Forgotten Baby Syndrome** is defined as the phenomenon of forgetting and leaving a child in a parked vehicle. If the child is left behind in the vehicle for a long duration, especially under hot weather, it could possibly lead to heat stroke and even death.

Some people may wrongly assume that these cases only happen to bad or negligent parents. The fact is this incident could happen to anyone regardless of background, including you. Forgotten Baby Syndrome is usually not a case of negligence but a memory issue due to distraction.

It is typically caused by **stress, sleep deprivation, change in routine, or preoccupation** with other issues. For example, if a parent who is not usually responsible for dropping off a child at the daycare has to do the task one day, he/she may not remember about the child in the back seat because it is not part of his/her routine to do the task.

If you are a parent of a young child, let's practice these tips as a precaution:



### ✔ **Minimise distractions while driving.**

This may be obvious but don't text or take calls while driving! Apart from being illegal, this can also divert your attention from your child.



### ✔ **Place a visual cue in the front.**

One way is by placing a toy on the dashboard when your baby is in the car, and in the child car seat when he/she is not in the car. You can also put a reminder sticker on the windshield or driver's side window.



✔ **Put your belongings in the back.** You can place your bag, purse, or laptop in the back seat to prompt you to check the car before leaving.

✔ **Look before you lock.** Make it a habit to check the back seat before locking the car even when the child is not with you.



✔ **Position the child car seat in the centre/left.** This ensures better visibility of the child through the rear-view mirror.

✔ **Use devices, apps and technologies.** Many devices and techs such as seat sensors, alarms, cameras, or GPS trackers are now available to help alert you of your child's presence in the vehicle.

✔ **Remind each other.** Always check with your spouse to make sure that they have dropped off the child at the destination. Ask daycare/kindergarten operators to notify you if the child does not arrive on time, and in turn, you should always notify them if the child will be late or absent. PP

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# More Veggies for Your Kids



By **Mr Mohd Shah Kamarudin**, Senior Assistant Director of Nutrition Division, Ministry of Health & Council Member, Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM)

*Does your child cry or clench her mouth at the sight of vegetables? Rest assured, you're not alone. Many parents face the challenge of getting their children to eat their greens. Even if some children have a dislike for vegetables, employing simple and practical tips can guide them toward healthier eating habits and set them on a positive trajectory.*

It's essential to understand why some children are hesitant to eat vegetables. Taste preferences, texture aversion, and even genetics play a role in shaping children's food choices. Did you know that children have taste buds that are more sensitive to bitter flavours, which are often found in vegetables like broccoli and Brussels sprouts? This sensitivity can lead to an aversion to these foods, as children may perceive them as unpleasant or unpalatable.

What's more is that children are naturally drawn to sweeter flavours, which are less common in many vegetables. Additionally, children may develop a dislike for vegetables if they've had negative experiences with them in the past, such as being forced to eat them

or associating them with punishment.

## Why children need vegetables in their diet

Despite their reluctance, it's crucial to emphasise the importance of including vegetables in a child's diet. Vegetables are nutrient powerhouses, packed with essential vitamins, minerals, dietary fibre and phytonutrients. These nutrients are vital for a child's growth, development and overall well-being.

Certain nutrients found in vegetables, such as folate and antioxidants, for instance, play key roles in brain development and cognitive function. Adequate intake of these

nutrients during childhood is essential for supporting learning, memory and overall cognitive development. By including a variety of vegetables in their diet, parents can help support their children's cognitive health and academic performance.

Childhood is also a critical period for establishing lifelong eating habits. Introducing children to a wide variety of vegetables from a young age can help them develop a taste for these foods and foster a preference for healthy, nutrient-rich foods later in life. By making vegetables a regular part of meals and snacks, parents can help instil healthy eating habits that can last a lifetime. Regular consumption of vegetables will help prevent chronic diseases later in life.

## Encouraging veggie intake

Incorporating vegetables into your child's diet doesn't have to be a battle. Start early by introducing vegetables during their complementary feeding. Add veggies into familiar dishes, such as adding grated carrots to spaghetti sauce or blending spinach into smoothies. Serve vegetables with their favourite foods, like adding sliced cucumber to sandwiches, or adding very finely chopped vegetables into burgers or meatballs. Gradually expose them to different vegetables and cooking methods to expand their palate.

## A healthy variety

Parents can also encourage their little ones by offering a diverse array of vegetable options. From nutrient-packed green leafy veggies like spinach and kai lan to the earthy goodness of root vegetables such as carrots and sweet potatoes, the vegetable kingdom offers a wide spectrum of flavours and textures to explore. Additionally, introducing children to vibrant and sweet fruit veggies like bell peppers or cherry tomatoes can be a delightful way to pique their interest.

If your child isn't fond of one type, don't give up! Experiment with different varieties and cooking methods to discover what appeals to their taste buds. By embracing a wide range of vegetable groups,



parents can ensure that their children receive all the essential nutrients.

## Creating interest

Getting kids involved in food preparation is another way to make them more receptive to trying new foods. Take them grocery shopping and let them pick out their veggies. Give them some easy tasks such as washing vegetables or using cute vegetable cutters to make mealtime fun. Go the extra mile and turn mealtime into an art project with veggie

artwork using colourful vegetables and edible decorations.

Additionally, consider starting a small vegetable garden at home. Children who participate in growing their food are more likely to develop a positive attitude towards vegetables. Get hands-on by growing veggies together in a garden and taste-testing the harvest. Build custom veggie pizzas with a variety of toppings or blend up tasty smoothies packed with fruits and veggies.

Encouraging your child to eat vegetables is a journey that requires patience and persistence. While it may take time for them to develop a liking for veggies, the long-term benefits are worth the effort. Remember to create a positive food environment by avoiding power struggles and offering praise for trying new foods. By involving

children in the process and making veggies fun, parents can help set them on the path to a lifetime of healthy eating habits. PP

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Nutrition Society of Malaysia

# Common Questions on Developmental Milestones

By **Dr Norazlin Kamal Nor**, Consultant Developmental Paediatrician



*Witnessing your child's first smile or step is always a memorable experience for parents. Keeping watch on your child's developmental milestones early in their life is crucial to identifying when intervention is needed but being overly anxious about them often leads to unnecessary worries.*

Parents may have questions like, at what age should my child start talking? Which of these milestones should appear first? And why do other children start walking earlier than my child? Acknowledging that each child is unique is important in answering these questions, while understanding the topic deeper will give parents the much-needed peace of mind.

## Why do we need to keep track?

Developmental milestones provide clues to your child's developmental health. When their milestones are reached within the timeframes, it means your child is developing as expected. Parents are advised to start milestone tracking from 2 months until 5 years of age, and several tools like manual checklists or mobile apps can be used to ease the task. These records can be shared with the healthcare providers during your child's medical assessment for progress updates.



## Do they walk or talk first?

It depends. The majority of children will start walking before forming simple words by their

first birthdays. Variations in developmental milestones are normal as long as progress is made in time. Parents need to pay attention to the foundational attainments that lead to the final milestones, like sitting and standing prior to walking, or babbling and responding to sounds prior to talking, to identify if there is a delay. There is no robust scientific proof to the claim that early talkers will become late walkers. In addition, these skills develop in different parts of the brain.



## What if it's too late?

Many children who miss their milestones will catch up to them later in their lives. Even so, when it comes to your child's development, acting early is important to enable intervention to be started as promptly as possible. Delay in multiple or all milestones, as well as losing previously acquired skills, can be early signs of developmental disability. However, before coming to any conclusion, it is wise to seek medical advice for a proper diagnosis and treatment plan. This can initially be in the form of your family doctor or paediatrician. Sometimes speech, physical,

occupational or behavioural therapy is all your child needs to help them gain new skills. Commencing school and other enrichment opportunities are also reasonable avenues to consider.

## How about too early?

Parents may have this perception that if their children can walk or talk earlier than normal, they are probably gifted. Reaching milestones early is a normal variation and measuring intellect is not always straightforward. Adopting this belief might put pressure on parents to ensure top-notch performance from their child at a young age. Therefore, it is advisable to view milestones as a stepping stone for your child to acquire the next set of skills and not as a predictor of future success.

Tracking your child's developmental milestones can be nerve-racking at times. Accepting that each child's progress is not the same can be liberating for parents, allowing them to provide an unconditional nurturing environment at all times for positive child development. PP

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# Is Your Teen Hiding Something from You?

By **Dr Thiyagar Nadarajaw**, Consultant Paediatrician & Adolescent Medicine Specialist

*As a parent, it's natural to feel concerned when you suspect that your teenager is keeping secrets from you. Adolescence is a time of exploration, independence, and boundary-testing, which can sometimes lead to teens being less open with their parents.*



## What are they hiding?

Teens often want privacy as they figure out who they are and become more independent. They may fear judgement or punishment from parents, leading them to hide certain aspects of their lives. Peer pressure can also play a significant role, as teens may feel compelled to conform to social norms or conceal behaviours they believe their parents would disapprove of. Also, teenagers may be struggling with emotional or mental health issues, such as anxiety or depression, which can cause them to withdraw and avoid sharing their thoughts and feelings.

If you suspect that your teenager is hiding things from you, it's crucial to approach the situation delicately and patiently. Here are some suggestions on how you can monitor your teen's activities without intruding too much:

**Start with an open communication:** The foundation of any healthy parent-teen relationship is open communication. Create a safe and non-judgemental environment where your teen feels comfortable

sharing their thoughts and experiences. Encourage regular conversations about their day, interests, and concerns. Be an active listener to what they have to say without jumping to conclusions or passing judgement.

**Establish trust:** Trust is crucial in any relationship. Show your teen that you trust them by respecting their privacy and giving them space to make their own decisions. Avoid interrogating or constantly questioning them about their activities, as this can cause resentment.

**Set clear expectations:** While allowing your teen autonomy, it's important to set clear expectations and boundaries regarding their behaviour both online and in real life. Discuss rules around internet usage, social media, curfews, and outings with friends. Be firm but fair in enforcing these rules and explain the reasons behind them.

**Stay informed:** Stay updated on current trends and issues affecting teenagers, including social media platforms, online gaming, and online risks like cyberbullying and predatory behaviour. Understanding these aspects will enable more meaningful discussions about

internet safety with your teen. Additionally, remain engaged in your teen's offline life by participating in school events, extracurricular activities, and spending quality family time together.

**Be approachable:** Let your teen know that they can come to you with any concerns or questions without fear of judgement or punishment. Be approachable and supportive, even if they admit to making mistakes or facing challenges. Offer guidance and encouragement rather than criticism or punishment.

It's important to remember that while monitoring your teen's activities is essential for their safety and well-being, it should always be done with respect for their privacy and autonomy. Building trust, maintaining open communication, and fostering a supportive relationship are key to navigating this delicate balance successfully. If necessary, seek professional guidance to address underlying issues with empathy and understanding. PP

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**LET'S CONTINUE TO DO OUR PART AND PROTECT OURSELVES, OUR FAMILY, AND OUR COMMUNITY FROM COVID-19.**

SCAN ME



Please scan the QR code to find out if you and your family are eligible for a booster vaccine and where you can get one.

A community message by



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