

EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Experts in the field discuss modern issues related to schools and parenthood, writes **Chris Davis**



For all the theories, advice, books and apps dedicated to choosing the right school, it can still be one of the most anxiety-inducing, yet rewarding, aspects of being a parent.

There is the local system run by the Education Bureau, mostly leading towards the DSE, as well as more than 50 international schools offering various curricula based on what's being taught in countries such as the UK, Australia, Canada, France, Germany and the United States.

Ruth Benny founded Top Schools to guide parents through the many choices available in the city, and the practical steps involved in selecting a particular school. For example, she advises expatriates working on a contract basis to think about possible future postings or the timing of a move

back home, as these could have direct bearings on what schools will be available to them.

"If a child is at kindergarten age, we generally help parents devise a three to five-year plan based on family needs and preferences," Benny says. "We include the need for flexibility to adapt to changing situations," she adds.

Benny understands why parents may have reservations about the local education system and, as a result, are chasing places at the city's international schools. However, she also has concerns about "local" students getting an international education, but not having the all-important Chinese language skills many employers require.

Anne Sawyer, co-founder of the International Montessori School, believes that mo-

tivation and the capacity to learn are the most important factors of educational success. "At every level, the goal is to create an environment that is intrinsically motivating, but where students are happy," Sawyer says.

To achieve this, she suggests that parents of younger children should think less about university prospects and possible career paths and more about what best suits their more immediate needs. She stresses the importance of letting children overcome challenges and minor problems by themselves.

"By doing everything for them, parents are in effect saying you can't even succeed at doing basic things," explains Sawyer, who attended 13 different schools while growing up.

Natalie Chan, founder of OWN Academy, concurs. She believes children need expe-



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periences and opportunities to make decisions and form opinions. Also, activities which entail mindfulness, connected learning, social responsibility and creativity need to play a bigger role in the wide spectrum of childhood learning.

"I am on a mission to redefine the future of education in Hong Kong," says Chan, who is currently studying for a master's in education. To help seven to 12-year-olds understand 21st century skills and apply them in different contexts, OWN Academy runs workshops where kids can learn from professionals in different disciplines. Topics have included urban farming, food photography, film making, animation and graphic design.

John Jalsevac, school director at the recently opened American School Hong Kong (ASHK) in Tai Po, furthers the point that parents should not think the curriculum their three-year-old follows will determine what they eventually study at university.

"I understand that parents want to know about IB scores and at which universities students continue their studies. But research and history tells us that students entering university with a particular subject or career path in mind often graduate and do something very different," Jalsevac says. The key, therefore, is to furnish students with the skills and knowledge to be modern, global citizens capable of thriving in the 21st century.

Furthermore, Ian Clayton, head of the international section of the French International School, notes that what students can extract from their courses and put to effective use is really more important than the curriculum itself.

With education being such a priority for so many families, tensions and anxieties can easily arise. For that reason, Odette Umali, managing director at Gordon Parenting, offers classes in Parent Effectiveness Training (PET). These are designed to enhance communication and interaction with children of any age.

Umali says it is clear that many attendees are unsure about their approach and abilities. "Some are concerned about over par-



enting, doing too much for their children, while pushing them to succeed and be the smartest. Others who want their children to have stress-free lives are then worried they will fall behind at school."

Based on the parenting model created by award-winning psychologist Dr Thomas Gordon, PET emphasises the concepts of active listening and the "no-lose" method of conflict resolution. These help parents establish strong, lasting relationship with their children.

Catherine Khang Banson, a qualified PET instructor with Gordon Parenting, notes that pressure can build up when parents put too much emphasis on school results. She sees this even at the kindergarten level, with parents becoming overly anxious about their child's reluctance to read, or failure come to terms with a second language.

In the primary and middle school years, as children start to turn into independent teenagers, family strains and power struggles can often arise from disagreements about the balance between study and pursuing an active social life.

Khang Banson believes the best methods for building healthy family relationships include staying calm and keeping the lines of communication open.

"We need to realise that people are not born to be model parents, but if they listen, avoid raising their voice, speak calmly and stick to specifics, a lot of conflicts can be avoided."

Currently, more than 80 per cent of teachers at local government-run primary schools, and about 30 per cent at secondary schools are graduates of the Education University of Hong Kong (EduHK) programme in early childhood education (ECE). It places a great deal of importance on building strong relationships with the children, and being on the alert for possible problems.

"Teachers support and empower parents by helping them observe and understand their children's behaviour both at school and outside," says programme co-ordinator Dr Betty Wong Kit-mei.

She adds that advice can be something as simple as suggesting that a child should not be told to sit still if fidgeting at a public place, such as a restaurant, without any preamble or discussion. Teachers also remind parents that the typical attention span of a five-year-old is around 20 to 30 minutes.

"So, parents shouldn't be surprised if their children become distracted around the half-hour mark," Wong says. ■