

To motivate kids, know what makes them tick, say experts

BREAK up schoolwork into bite-size chunks, set short-term and personal best goals and allow boys who have naturally shorter attention spans to take breaks.

While girls may do better in school, they are also more prone to anxiety about their grades and may not bounce back from academic setbacks as easily as boys.

Education experts shared these and more tips and insights with parents at yesterday's inaugural Straits Times Education Forum, sponsored by POSB.

Held at venue partner Singapore Management University, 300 people – many with children in primary and secondary school – showed up to learn about topics such as saving for their children's education and how to boost the little ones' confidence in school.

They also got to share their stories, air concerns and seek help from experts in a Q&A session.

Child motivation expert Andrew Martin, from the University of New South Wales in Australia, broke down the psychology and habits of students who do well into "the 5 Cs of academic buoyan-

cy". These are: confidence in themselves, believing they have control over their grades rather than blaming "tough marking" or other factors, commitment or persistence, coordination or planning ahead, and composure or the ability to manage stress.

Parents can help their children to overcome fears or obstacles only if they know what makes up the child's motivation or lack thereof, said Professor Martin.

"Students don't wake up one morning feeling disengaged," he said. "We need to look at the factors leading to them giving up and address those factors."

Children who fear failure, for example, may disguise this by procrastinating or not trying at all, "which is better for their self-esteem".

Ms Genevieve Chye, principal of the all-boys Montfort Junior School, spoke about ways to motivate boys, in response to a question. Boys are competitive, she said. "We use competition positively, for example by dividing them into groups and awarding them points," she added.

She also noted that "the attention span of a boy in primary school is all of seven minutes", adding: "If you're wondering why your boy starts fidgeting after 10 minutes and needs to walk around, he doesn't have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. He just needs to move around."

To parents' concerns that their children were spending too much time on gadgets such as their phones or computers, Ms Chye quipped that "the very quick answer is to take it away", drawing laughs from the parents.

On a more serious note, she said: "You really have to have limits and draw boundaries. It's not about being authoritarian, it's about being authoritative. There is also the issue of role-modelling. How many of us as adults are always on our phones?"

Mr David Hoe, 26, a former Normal (Technical) student who overcame major odds to attain his current undergraduate place at the National University of Singapore, said a group of Christian friends set him on the right path.

"Parents will want to know who their child is hanging out with, and I encourage that. But they have to do it in a way that's casual, like encouraging their kids to invite friends home.

"If they intrude into their children's lives, this may risk turning the kids against them," he said.

POSB expert Stanz Tan, who is vice-president of Bancassurance, outlined several ways parents could save for their children's education and urged them to consider factors such as how many years they have before their children apply to universities.

He highlighted a survey by insurer Aviva: "It found that 93 per cent of parents said tertiary education is very important, but one in four said they had not saved enough for their children's education, particularly for university."

Prof Martin said parents should also set aside time for themselves. In a 2010 survey, more than eight in 10 children said their parents' stress bothered them.

"So you should exercise, spend time on your hobbies and with your partner and connect with friends," he said.

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