



SELLING clothes at night markets was a learning experience for Quah Hui Ping, 20.

The third of four siblings has been a familiar face at the family stall since she was in kindergarten.

She learnt to communicate with customers and to count at a young age. These lessons helped her gain life skills, says the second year chemical engineering student, who was a Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman scholarship recipient last year.

Though helping can become “a burden especially as you get older”, her parents have been understanding. She doesn’t have to work during exams or when she has “stuff to do”, so there was never any great resentment.

“I wasn’t forced. I saw my brothers doing their part so I wanted to contribute too.”

Senior procurement executive Patty Pang, 33, recalls having to juggle school, sports and being at her parent’s coffeeshop.

“It was tiring. My younger sister started helping when she was in primary school. Her math was good so she would man the cash register. I made the drinks,” the eldest of four sisters says.

The siblings served and cleaned the shop, which is something that is expected of children in families with their own businesses, even today, says Pang.

“I go to a chicken rice shop where the food is served by a primary school boy. His mother doesn’t let him serve the hot soup, so it’s okay.”

She sees nothing wrong with children earning their keep so long as they are in school and not abused.

“I’d make my kids help too. Otherwise what’s the point of having them around?” she says, tongue-in-cheek.

A school principal in the Klang Valley disagrees, though. The 59-year-old who only wanted to be known as Ruth says worrying about money should not be a child’s responsibility. Parents, she feels, should plan better if they want kids. Children should focus on education because it’s the only way to break the poverty cycle.

“I always tell them: ‘Don’t make your children work the way you’ve been made to. You must do well in your studies’. We can advise them until the cows come home but they’ll still choose work over education,” she sighs.

Having spent more than three decades as an educator, she has seen many students’ work suffer because they could not concentrate in school. This is a problem in many schools and it cuts across all races.

She has also observed that students who work as servers in particular are treated like cheap labour. They come to class tired and this affects their attention span, she says.

“Those not academically inclined struggle and their results drop further. It’s a vicious cycle. We’re very concerned but poverty exists, so we can’t tell them not to work.

that child labour cases are isolated here. He says existing laws provide adequate protection. It’s the cultural norm for Malaysians to let their kids work. It’s good training and adds to the family coffers, he says.

“Is a gardener who takes his children to the bungalow where he works to help water plants abusing his children? Salaries are low. Parents have no choice.

“My brother used to get all the relatives’ kids to help him at a clothing stall and I was so angry when a professor questioned if this was child labour. The kids were happy and they got RM50 each for a few hours’ work. Where’s the harm in that? Even Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad sold *pisang goreng* (banana fritters) when he was young.”

Hospital Penang consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist Dr Lai Fong Hwa feels that “service learning”, which can occur when children help their parents, is a good thing as it makes them feel useful, teaches them to be grateful and makes them more resilient when facing life’s challenges.

“It’s healthy for families to work together. These children will find it easier to cope when they have problems later on in life. They won’t give up so easily.”

Whether working at a young age has a negative psychological impact on a child depends on whether the child was forced into doing it, he feels. If helping the family interferes with the child’s schooling, though, it is a problem, he adds.

“Parents must have a close relationship with the teachers so that they will be aware if the child is overworked or if the marks are dropping.”

He says it’s not practical to force families that are not well off to employ workers. What’s important is that the child must not feel resentful about helping. If the child is angry, parents must talk to him or her to try and understand why, and explain the reason for asking him or her to help, Dr Lai says.

Dr Yeoh, who is an associate of the Unesco Chair in Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Relations Asia-Pacific Region and an associate editor of the *Asian Journal Of Social Sciences*, stresses that it’s an international norm that children should enjoy basic universal human rights.

“As vulnerable human beings in particular, they should be accorded protection from abuse by adults, whether those adults are their parents or not.”

Hands-on life lessons

They’ll say: ‘Okay, you feed me. You house me.’

“One father even ticked me off once for telling his son to focus on school,” she says.

The Form Three boy was failing his exams and confessed to not being able to cope because he was helping his father so much. He was to take over the business.

“I told him business is uncertain. It’s not an easy life. A solid education will see you through no matter what the economic conditions. His father confronted me, saying: ‘Don’t look down on my business. What I’m earning is probably higher than your salary’. I was so disappointed.”

Admittedly, some excel in the face of adversity because they’re so determined to succeed, she says.

Child therapist Priscilla Ho and her three siblings – a businesswoman, a doctor, and a famous chicken rice hawker – are good examples.

The ex-National Service trainer is also the co-founder of Creativity at Heart, a non-profit child guidance centre for youngsters, and president of Child Rising, a non-governmental organisation.

She started washing dishes at her mother’s chicken rice stall at age six.

Each child had a “work station” and despite the hardship, they were a close-knit family, she recalls fondly.

“We were so poor. My father did odd jobs on board a ship so he was away for long periods. Home was a small rented room, but we were happy. My mum was such a motivator. She always said: ‘Others can look down on you, but you must never look down on yourself.’

“When I started secondary school, my mother asked me to stop helping at the stall except during weekends and school holidays. She wanted me to focus on studying.”

Ho describes herself as a Form Five graduate who retired as a training manager with a multi-national corporation before becoming a certified play therapist.

“My childhood taught me resilience and it built character. I credit my upbringing for all I’ve achieved. So whenever I see children helping their parents at work, I always give them the thumbs up because it makes them feel validated,” she says.

She says working may not negatively impact a child if family bonds are strong. But if a child is unhappy or ashamed, it’s an issue. This has to be addressed, she says.

Lamenting how children from low-income families who work sometimes get bullied and teased at school, she says parents and teachers must step in. But being overprotective isn’t the answer either. Fostering a strong relationship based on trust is.

“Some parents who grew up poor want to spare their children that experience by giving the child everything. But if children don’t see how hard their parents work to provide for the family, they’ll never know life’s harsh realities are. Resilience can’t be taught. It has to be built,” she says.

Parents, however, must never compromise on a child’s education. Working late into the night, skipping classes and not getting enough rest shouldn’t be allowed. All this is a violation of the child’s rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

It’s about balance, Ho feels.

There was the case of a 14-year-old who was taken out of school by her stepmother to work in a coffeeshop. She wanted to go back to school but her stepmother felt that she was a nuisance and refused to allow it.

A report was made and the social welfare department tried to step in but couldn’t find the girl. Such cases, Ho stresses, should not be happening and is a violation of a child’s right to education.

She recalled another case where a young boy was selling cakes at night in a coffeeshop. “He looked clean and healthy. He told me his mother was waiting in the car as they had to go to a few coffeeshops. He told me the cakes were made by his mother and he was happy selling them for her. He finishes by 10pm.”

She says there’s an urgent need for a national programme that will look at how our children are being taught and nurtured to ensure they grow up with a sense of identity, self-confidence and resilience.

Public awareness is very important in helping kids who are working.

“The public shouldn’t feel sad or pity the child. Instead, they should ask the child for details or speak to the parents or care giver. If it’s a case of child labour, we can nip the problem in the bud. Don’t feel that you are being a busybody. Many cases of child abuse are not reported because too many good people do nothing!” says Ho.

There are over eight million Malaysians aged 14 and below. There are many issues. Child labour is just one of them, she says. Child abuse cases, for instance, have increased to more than 3,800 in 2012.

“Do we have the political will to make sure that children don’t fall through the cracks?” she asks.

The Child Act needs to be reviewed again and the public, especially parents and teachers, must be educated on the Convention on the Rights of Children, to which Malaysia is a signatory. Education and citizenship are fundamental rights of every child born in Malaysia. “The child’s health is the nation’s wealth – are we failing our children?”

A PERSON aged 18 and above may work full time, but there are restrictions for those who are younger.

According to family law practitioner Datuk Andy Low Hann Yong, for anyone below 18, there are different types of allowable work according to age groups.

Anyone below 15 is classified as a “child”; anyone above 15 but below 18 is a “young person”. A “child” and “young person” can be employed for light work in a family business, licenced public entertainment, work approved by governments, and apprenticeships. In addition, a “young person” can be hired as a servant; a worker in offices, shops and generally any place of business; in industrial jobs suited to his capacity; and on any vessel under the personal charge of a parent or guardian.

There’s a difference if it’s a female “young person”, however. She can only be employed in hotels, bars, restaurants, boarding houses or clubs if such places are under the management or control of a parent or guardian.

Not all work done by children should be

‘It’s not illegal’

classified as child labour that should be stopped, according to the International Labour Organisation. The following information is sourced from its website (tinyurl.com/nco7omp).

Children or adolescents participating in work that does not affect their health and personal development or interfere with their schooling is something positive.

This includes activities like helping their parents around the home or in a family business, or earning pocket money outside school hours and during school holidays.

“Child labour” is specifically work that deprives children of their childhood, potential and dignity, and is harmful to physical and mental development.

It refers to work that is:

- > mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and
- > interferes with their schooling by depriving them of the opportunity to attend

school; obliging them to leave school prematurely; or requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work.

Last year, a watermelon farm operator in Sungai Petani, Kedah, was charged under the Children and Young Persons (Employment) Act 1966 for child labour. He was fined RM6,000, reveals Datuk Mohd Jeffrey Joakim, director-general of the Peninsular Malaysia Labour Department.

He says the employment of a child or young person becomes illegal if it breaches the conditions spelled out in the Act.

For instance, a child or young person cannot, he says, work underground or do any job that is contrary to the Occupational Safety and Health Act 1994, Factory and Machinery Act 1967 or Electricity Supply Act 1990.

“They also cannot work more than six days a week,” he says, stressing that children helping at their parents stalls, are not subject to the Children and Young Persons (Employment) Act 1966.