Facilitating the development of the under threes: Observations from Hong Kong

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The Hong Kong government has always maintained that the primary responsibility for young children rests with the family and has a number of policies in place to support the development of young children. Hong Kong boasts of one of the lowest infant- and under-five mortality rates in the world and does well on other health indices. However, the territory is not without problems. For example, the high geni co-efficient signals inequality. Children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds have less stimulating home environments and less access to opportunities which promote early development. On the other hand, Chinese cultural values including the emphasis placed on education and the increasingly competitive world is associated with middle- and upper-middle class families “overscheduling” their young children and sending them to “stimulating” programmes by the time they are three years. The concern in this case is not whether children are “ready” for (pre) school but whether they are playing enough and not being pushed too hard.

Against the background of Chinese cultural values and Hong Kong’s unique context, this paper introduces the Hong Kong context and critically evaluates the territory’s status and challenges in terms of maternal health; child health; parenting programmes; early childhood programmes for the under-threes; equity; legal protection; and political commitment for the under-threes.