Executive Summary

Objectives of the study

For better protection of children from being neglected, and improved service and policy responses to neglectful families in Hong Kong, the Central Policy Unit of the Hong Kong SAR Government commissioned this consultancy study to the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in June 2010 with the following objectives:

1. to identify the views of parents on the basic needs of children in Hong Kong;
2. to study the views of parents on what constitutes a child neglect case in Hong Kong;
3. to study the views of child protection professionals on the needs of the neglectful families and the thresholds for intervening in the neglectful families;
4. to explore the experiences and realities of neglectful families in Hong Kong, with particular reference to the antecedents of the child neglect problem that appeared in the family;
5. to identify in what ways and under what circumstances families can play a role in solving the child neglect problem, both at the prevention and intervention levels;
6. to make recommendations at service and policy levels on the management and prevention of the child neglect problem in Hong Kong.

Methods of the Study

This study has revealed some of the major literature on child neglect for the purpose of this study (Chapter 2). Besides, it has conducted a desktop survey on 7 countries/places to examine their responses to child neglect, including the United States, England and Wales, New South Wales of Australian, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong (Chapter 3).

In addition, a telephone survey was conducted between 18th August, 2010 and 30th October
2010 to examine the views of Hong Kong parents on the needs of children, child neglect, and intervention in child neglect. Totally, 1,046 parents with at least one child under 16 were interviewed on the telephone.

Besides, indepth interviews were conducted with 10 neglectful parents, 17 non-neglectful parents, and 13 social workers between November 2010 and February 2011 to explore in greater details about their views on the child neglect problem and intervention that is needed for families of child neglect.

Finding of the study

Desktop survey (Chapter 3)

A number of responses to child neglect are identified, for instance, mandatory report of child neglect, family support, parent responsibility contract, statutory care and protection of the children, punitive measures on offending parents and caregivers, and mandatory parent education. These measures are worthy of further examination with respect to their relevance to helping neglectful parents and families in Hong Kong.

Telephone interview (Chapter 4)

The findings of the telephone suggest that child neglect is a rather common problem in Hong Kong because 10.4% the parent respondents reported that they or their spouse have neglected their children (last paragraph of Section 3.4.1).

Parents have a general expectation that children’s basic needs are to be adequately met by parents in the family because they rated highly when they were asked to affirm the following needs of children on a 5-point scale: food and clothing (4.52), respect and recognition (4.54), care and concern (4.70), protection (4.64), education (4.59), and medical care (4.73) (Section 3.4.3.3).
Parents also generally consider that family has the prime responsibility in responding to the various needs of the children. Their average ratings of parental responsibility on a 5-point scale are over 4.5 in all areas of children’s needs covered in this study (Section 4.3.4).

Among the four types of child neglect, parents have the highest definitional tendency in physical neglect (4.21) and lowest in emotional neglect (3.09). The findings suggest that parental awareness of child neglect is highest in physical neglect and lowest in emotional neglect (Section 4.3.5).

For parents and families with difficulties in meeting these needs, they are to be adequately supported in discharging their responsibilities, including help by relatives, assistance by neighbors, and social work interventions. Social work intervention is commonly preferred (3.68), while police intervention is the least preferred form of intervention (2.88) in neglectful families according to the parent respondents (Section 4.3.6).

**Indepth Interviews (Chapter 5)**

A lot of parents admitted to have neglected their children before, but their children do not suffer significantly because these parents learn from their mistakes (Section 5.3.1). Cases of neglectful families show that the problem is multi-causal and requires collaborative efforts for its prevention (Section 5.3.1.1 to 5.3.1.8). Though their views vary, parents generally welcome assistance of the informal system in milder forms of child neglect. Where intervention of the formal systems in neglectful families is needed, parents prefer social work intervention and are hesitant of police intervention except in cases of irresponsible parents (Section 5.3.2.1 a and b).

Social workers suggested that supportive informal network be developed and strengthened as the first line of child neglect prevention (Section 5.3.3.3 a). Families with difficulties in a range of problems that can lead to child neglect should be supported with help from social services (Section 5.3.3.3 b). Families with child neglect not involving significant risk or serious harm should be closely monitored with the support of social services (Section 5.3.3.3 c), while
cases with significant risk or serious harm to child, child protection procedures should be initiated (Section 5.3.3.3 d). Social workers also considered it difficult to help neglectful parents, especially those who are irresponsible and unmotivated (Section 5.3.3.4).

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made for the consideration of the Central Policy Unit and the Family Council of the Hong Kong SAR Government:

**Pertaining to responses to the child neglect problem**

a. The needs of children in areas of food and clothing, respect and recognition, care and concern, protection, education, and proper medical care, are to be adequately met in line with the general expectations of the Hong Kong community.

b. The families should be respected as an important site in meeting children’s needs, and parents be responsible for fulfilling their children’s needs and seeing to it that the various needs of their children are being adequately fulfilled.

c. The government has the responsibility to see to it that the needs of children in these areas are adequately met, and to assist parents and families with difficulties to look after these needs of the children.

d. Public and family education be widely used as an instrument to promote positive and responsible parenting as a strategy for preventing child neglect in the general population.

e. Public and family education programs should target at raising public awareness of the non-physical forms of child neglect so that the community knows all forms of child neglect are equally injurious to children.
f. Assisting neglectful families be made a multi-party endeavor, including the collaborative efforts of the relatives, friends, neighbors, social workers, and police officers.

g. For children in need, the collaborative efforts of relatives, friends, neighbors, social workers, and police officers be focused on meeting the needs of children to child neglect.

h. The mutual help functions of the informal support networks be developed, strengthened, and publicized in the community as a strategy to combat child neglect at the prevention level.

i. The parent and family support functions of social services be strengthened to help families with problems of parenting, child care, marital conflicts, financial hardships to prevent them from developing into child neglect.

j. The parent and family support functions of social services be constantly evaluated for their effectiveness in preventing problems of parenting, childcare, marital conflicts, financial hardships from developing into child neglect.

k. The role of police intervention in child neglect cases be reviewed; in the meantime, the intervention of police in neglectful families be judiciously exercised, if not being a last resort in neglectful families.

Pertaining to families at risk of child neglect

l. Early identification of parent with difficulties and strengthening parenting competence at different stages of the family life cycle through parent/family education.

m. Problems in parenting, child care, marital problem, financial hardships should be taken as the threshold for intervention; families with these problem should be given
appropriate assistance and family support and counseling to stop the problems from developing to child neglect.

n. The presence of snap-shot non-injurious child neglect in families be taken as a second threshold; for these families, besides social service support, the families should be closely monitored to see if child protection in accordance with the Guide is needed.

o. Whether injurious or non-injurious, the presence of consistent child neglect be taken as a third threshold; for these families, child protection procedures in accordance with the Guide should be followed.

Pertaining to unresponsive but non-offending parents

p. Section 34(1)(c) of the Protection of Children and Juvenile Ordinance, Chapter 213 of the Laws of Hong Kong be more widely used by juvenile courts to deal with the irresponsible parents.

q. The Protection of Children and Juvenile Ordinance be amended to include provisions of ‘parent responsibilities contracts’ like that of the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 of New South Wales, Australia.

r. The Protection of Children and Juvenile Ordinance be amended to empower the court to order neglectful parents to receive mandatory parent education.

Pertaining to mandatory parent education for offending parents neglect

s. Where appropriate, parents be diverted from prosecution to join the police discretionary caution scheme and attend compulsory parent education; in this regard, the mandate and charter of the police discretionary caution scheme be revised to make this recommendation possible.

t. Suitable offending parents be subjected to magistrate bind-over and be required to attend parent education programs; in this connection, Section 62 of the
Magistrate Ordinance be revised for the purpose of empowering magistrates to make an order for parent education.

u. Convicted parents be subjected to a bind-over sentence and be required to attend parent education programs; in this connection, Section 36 of the of the Magistrate Ordinance and Section 107 of the Criminal Procedure Ordinance (and other related ordinances) be revised to empower the courts to make an order for parent education.

v. Existing probation services be more widely used in cases where parents are convicted of child neglect; convicted parents be required to attend parent education program through insertion of a special requirement in the probation order made under Chapter 298 of the Law of Hong Kong.

Other recommendations

w. The NGOs and the markets should play a more active role in developing different varieties of parent education programs and provide them to the parents as a form of court-ordered treatment.

x. Closer collaboration among the government departments (including the SWD and police), the NGOs, and the Judiciary be fostered in implementing court-ordered parent education in Hong Kong.