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Secondary 1

Choosing a CCA and coping with not getting your top choices

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If your child has just started Secondary 1, she may have been sharing with you details about her school orientation and the various co-curricular activities (CCAs) that caught her interest, along with the selection trials.

Unlike at the primary and post-secondary levels, where participation is strongly encouraged, all secondary school students are required to have a CCA.

CCAs complement academic curriculum by fostering essential life skills that cannot be sufficiently nurtured in classrooms, according to National Institute of Education's (NIE) Science of Learning in Education Centre's centre director David Hung and research associate Steffi Kong.

Through sports, performing arts, uniformed groups, clubs and societies, CCAs offer experiential learning under structured supervision during students' teenage years. This allows them to cultivate qualities such as leadership, teamwork, resilience, discipline, communication skills and a sense of social responsibility.

"CCAs also enable students to showcase their strengths, such as creativity and perseverance, that may not always be visible in the classroom," says Prof Hung.

In 2021, he published an article on how CCAs contribute to secondary school students' learning in SingTeach, NIE's online magazine for teachers.

Schools have varied allocation processes, but typically, students submit a ranked list of the CCAs they wish to join.

When your child is making her selection, encourage her to consider factors such as her interest, temperament, the nature of required training and time commitment, rather than prestige, peer pressure or perceived portfolio value.

"There is no one 'best' CCA," says Prof Hung. "Each CCA has different demands, which in turn help students develop varied strengths."



Festive Drums is one of the CCAs offered at Edgefield Secondary School.
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MANAGING DISAPPOINTMENT

CCAs can be emotionally demanding for students. While they foster pride, belonging and confidence, they can also bring pressure or conflict, particularly in competitive or leadership roles.

Often, feelings such as disappointment begin right when students receive their assigned CCA, as not everyone secures her preferred choice.

Prof Hung points out that schools face capacity constraints which include manpower, facilities, equipment, safety requirements and the need for viable group sizes. Hence, depending on the school's resources and popularity of CCAs, certain groups may be oversubscribed.

Not being able to secure a preferred CCA may lead to feelings of unfairness, especially if selection involved trials, and students may adopt a disengaged mindset when alternative CCAs are perceived as "leftover options".

To help manage your child's frustration, Prof Hung and Ms Kong note that you should first be mindful of your emotions regarding your child's CCA and accept the results.

Then acknowledge your child's disappointment. Help her understand that the selection outcome is

not a judgment of her ability or potential, but a necessary result of constraints and consistent selection criteria.

Use this experience to teach your child how to manage expectations, cope with rejection and adapt to alternative paths. This mirrors the competitive and demanding nature of real-world settings, such as the workplace.

Once emotions have calmed down, discuss the situation objectively, helping your child separate her feelings from the facts. Reinforce the lesson that life does not always go as planned, but she should approach the assigned CCA with an open mind.

Recount your experiences attempting unfamiliar tasks at work, including the occasional setbacks, and explain how you maintained perspective.

Offer consistent emotional support, which includes acknowledging fears, celebrating progress and reassuring your child that struggling is acceptable and that plans sometimes change.

Says Prof Hung: "Over time, these approaches will help children build confidence, adaptability and a positive attitude towards challenges, thus empowering them to face new experiences with resilience and openness."