

Child Development in Households Employing Migrant Domestic Workers: What does the Evidence Show?



KEY POINTS:

- **Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs):** In Singapore, there are 316,900 MDWs in 2025¹, and more than one-third of children under the age of six live in households employing one. Despite their growing role in childcare, Singapore has no mandatory childcare training programmes for MDWs – a policy and practice gap.
- **Influence of MDWs on Child Development:** The available evidence – though limited in scope and primarily from Hong Kong – suggests MDWs can influence children's development across language, social, and emotional domains, though findings are mixed and their applicability to Singapore's distinct linguistic and cultural context is unclear. Crucially, evidence indicates that the quality of the MDW-child relationship matters.

- **Research Gaps and Needs:** Most existing research was conducted in Hong Kong using cross-sectional surveys and focuses narrowly on children's academic outcomes. Singapore-specific, longitudinal research that also considers children's social, emotional, and behavioural development is needed, including research centred around the perspectives of MDWs and family members.
- **Implications and Recommendations:** Singapore-specific research on MDWs' caregiving roles and their impact on children's development should be prioritised. At the same time, there is a case for developing accessible and contextually relevant training supports in evidence-based caregiving practices for MDWs – equipping them with skills to support children's cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioural development alongside other co-caregivers.

Introduction

Globally, an increasing number of households where both parents are working outside the home has led to greater reliance on live-in domestic workers to provide childcare support^{2,3}. Migrant domestic workers (MDWs) are individuals who migrate to work in private households and improve material or social conditions for themselves and/or their families⁴. These MDWs – predominantly women – typically live in their employers' homes and take on various household tasks, including cooking and cleaning and direct childcare such as feeding, bathing and daily routines³. As MDWs may come to serve as important attachment figures for the children they care for⁵, it is crucial to understand, and support, their contribution to children's development.

The growing role of MDWs in Singapore's caregiving landscape

The presence of MDWs in family homes has grown across Asia. The International Labour Organization (ILO)³ estimates that there are approximately 11.5 million MDWs globally, representing 7.7% of the total migrant workers (150 million)¹. Specific regions in Asia, such as Singapore and Hong Kong, are witnessing a significant increase in the involvement of MDWs in childcare. In Hong Kong, the rate of employing MDWs by families with children aged 12 years and below increased from 17.7 % in 2000 to 31.9 % in 2020⁶. In Singapore, data from the Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG LEADS) indicates that over one third of children under six

reside in households with an MDW⁷. In recognition of this caregiving role, families with eligible children under 16 years old receive a concessional levy when employing an MDW⁸.

Despite this scale, Singapore's policy framework does not yet cover the childcare dimensions of MDWs' role. While Singapore has policies in place to govern the employment and working conditions of MDWs – including the mandatory Settling-In Programme⁹, a one-day orientation for first-time MDWs conducted before employment that covers worker rights, employment conditions, cultural and social norms, and the safe performance of common household tasks (e.g. cleaning at height) – these do not extend to childcare practices. There are no mandatory childcare-focused programmes or minimum standards of care. This means that MDWs who take on substantial caregiving responsibilities may be expected to do so without any formalised preparation in evidence-based practices, such as responsive caregiving or feeding – a policy and practice gap.



*Based on global data from 2015; latest report by ILO in 2024 provides estimates for the general migrant worker population instead of MDW-specific data.

The diversity of MDWs working in Singapore adds another layer of complexity to this landscape. Most MDWs in Singapore are from the Philippines, Indonesia, and Myanmar, bringing with them varying language, cultural backgrounds and norms, and prior experience with childrearing and childcare¹⁰. Importantly, MDWs do not provide childcare in isolation; they work alongside parents – who are also their employers – grandparents and other family members, each bringing different caregiving beliefs, roles, and expectations. These dynamics will shape caregiving practices in meaningful ways, and underscore the need for any future training provisions to be responsive to the diverse backgrounds and needs of MDWs and the families and children they support.

The developmental significance of the early years makes the presence of MDWs in Singapore's families an important area of focus for research, policy and practice. Children's development is shaped by interactions within their immediate environments¹¹, and MDWs are often present during children's formative early years, engaging in sustained daily interactions through feeding, playing, communicating and supporting daily routines. This positions MDWs as potentially influential figures in children's behavioural, social, emotional, and cognitive development, as well as broader family dynamics. As more households rely on MDWs for childcare support², understanding the nature and quality of that influence becomes essential.

What do we know about MDWs and their role in early child development?

There is limited research evidence exploring the role of MDWs in families and their influence on child outcomes. In the sections below, we present the findings from 24 research papers investigating the role of MDWs providing childcare and their impact on aspects of child development.

1) Most studies focus on MDWs' impact on children's academic achievement, particularly language development.

Of the 24 published studies investigating MDWs and child outcomes, 15 examined the relationship between the presence of an

MDW in the home and children's academic outcomes. These outcomes included language skills (English, Chinese), mathematics, overall academic achievement, and working memory.

The most studied outcome in the literature is children's language development, particularly English language. Of the 12 studies that looked at English language skills, eight found a positive relationship between the presence of an MDW in the home and a child's English proficiency¹²⁻¹⁴, including vocabulary¹⁵⁻¹⁷, spoken English^{12,18}, reading accuracy and fluency^{18,19}. By contrast, MDWs were found to have no significant effect on Chinese scores^{12,13}, Cantonese vocabulary and word reading ability¹⁷, or a negative effect on Chinese character recognition¹⁶ and Cantonese vocabulary¹⁵. However, it is important to note that all of this evidence comes from Hong Kong and its applicability to Singapore's distinct linguistic and cultural context requires careful consideration.

Beyond language, studies reported that MDWs had a null effect on other academic outcomes, such as mathematics scores¹², overall academic achievement^{13,20}, and working memory capacity¹⁷. However, this research base is also limited in scope.

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Five quantitative studies explored the impact of MDWs on children's social, emotional, and behavioural (SEB) outcomes^{7,21-24}, with mixed findings. Two studies reported null or negative associations between MDWs and children's SEB outcomes^{21,22}. In contrast, three studies reported positive associations, with the presence of a live-in MDW, stronger child-MDW relationships, and MDWs' warmth positively associated with lower child internalising problems⁷, reduced externalising behaviours²³, and more positive social behaviours respectively²⁴. Five qualitative studies reported on children's social relationships with MDWs and the impact of MDWs on family dynamics^{5,25-28}, highlighting that children often viewed MDWs as important supportive figures who contributed to their emotional growth, while MDWs expressed pride and attachment toward the children they cared for. At the same time, MDWs' involvement was reported to influence family dynamics by challenging parental authority, affecting parent-child bonding, and sometimes creating tension between mothers and MDWs due to differences in childcare beliefs and practices^{5,25-27}. Taken together, these findings suggest that it is not simply the presence of MDW in the home that is likely to influence child social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes, but the quality of the relationship formed with the children in their care and broader family dynamics created by multiple caregivers with different roles, perspectives, and levels of authority.



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2) Most studies are cross-sectional using surveys, rather than longitudinal studies.

Among the 24 studies, 20 analysed cross-sectional data, using surveys to examine phenomena. This makes it challenging to discern how MDWs may influence children's developmental outcomes, and if these effects vary over time. However, four studies did examine change over time. One study conducted in Singapore²² used data from the Growing Up in Singapore Towards Healthier Outcomes Study (GUSTO) and found that, compared to households without MDWs, children living in households with MDWs at 6 years old reported feeling less adequate in school performance, had more interpersonal problems, and reported worse depressive symptoms at 10 years old. In contrast, another Singapore study⁷ that used data from the Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG LEADS) found that the presence of a live-in MDW - alongside other factors such as parent education and household income - predicted fewer internalising problems over time in young children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another study conducted in Hong Kong²⁹ examined the relationship between childcare

by MDWs and specific language impairment (i.e. language and developmental difficulties), finding that MDW-provided childcare was associated with an increased risk of such difficulties among children. An additional study based in Hong Kong¹⁶ used longitudinal data over a 10-year period and found that the presence of an English-speaking MDW had a positive effect on children's English vocabulary.

These longitudinal findings, while few in number, suggest that the relationship between MDW caregiving and children's outcomes may evolve over time. As with the broader evidence base, however, these associations are observational rather than causal, and likely reflect the complexity of multi-caregiver households rather than the influence of MDWs alone.

3) Most research about MDW has been conducted in Hong Kong.

Except for four studies, all published research on MDWs and young children was conducted in Hong Kong. The four exceptions are one study conducted in Greece²⁸ and three studies conducted in Singapore^{7,20,22}. This geographical concentration is a significant limitation of the evidence base and raises important questions about how far the existing findings can be applied to other contexts, including Singapore.

While Singapore and Hong Kong share some similarities as international metropolises with high rates of MDW employment, there are some meaningful differences that affect

how the evidence should be interpreted. Notably, the two contexts differ in terms of their language environments. Hong Kong is a primarily monolingual (Cantonese-speaking) region, whereas Singapore is multilingual, with English widely spoken as the first language in many families. This language difference might influence the extent to which MDWs influence children's language learning outcomes in Singapore. This is particularly relevant for the English language findings: the MDWs involved in the studies were predominately from the Philippines and often a key source of children's English language exposure in the Hong Kong-based homes they worked in. However, this dynamic is unlikely to apply in the same way in Singapore where many families already use English at home. The apparent English language benefits associated with the presence of MDWs may reflect a feature of that specific linguistic context rather than a generalisable effect.



IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Across all three findings, the evidence highlights that what is currently known is too limited to draw firm conclusions on the impact of MDWs on varied aspects of child development. Singapore's multicultural society, bilingual education policy, and diverse national backgrounds of MDWs working here – including from Indonesia and Myanmar – add further complexity to the relevance of the narrow evidence base. Locally conducted research into MDWs' role and influence within Singapore's unique social and cultural context is therefore crucial to build on this and inform evidence-based policy and practice.

Future research should:

- Map the diversity of co-caregiving arrangements and expectations that exist in households employing MDWs, from the perspectives of both family members and MDWs;

- Identify the unique challenges faced by MDWs in Singaporean families and supports required to enhance caregiving quality;
- Examine children's emotional, social, and psychological development and outcomes, in addition to academic outcomes in the context of co-caregiving arrangements with MDWs;
- Move beyond cross-sectional studies to include longitudinal and mixed-methods research, and randomised or controlled studies, where appropriate.

The evidence base, while currently limited, does highlight that MDWs are present in many children's lives from young, often in caregiving roles, and there are no mandatory training provisions to promote evidence-based childcare practices tailored for this group. While research is underway, Singapore should move towards developing standardised, accessible, and culturally relevant training provisions for MDWs in childcare roles to strengthen overall caregiving environments and support both families and workers. Where feasible, involving MDWs and family members in research and program design will help surface their lived experiences and practical considerations, leading to more contextually appropriate and inclusive policies and interventions for Singapore's evolving caregiving landscape.

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