

The housebound Hong Kong families cramped and cranky during the coronavirus crisis, with no end in sight for school closures

- Low-income families struggle most with confined spaces, poor internet but the breakout of household arguments during the epidemic does not discriminate
- Experts suggest ways of surviving the great coronavirus lock-in, with the schools shutdown to last beyond April 20



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The strain of living in close quarters for prolonged periods during the school closures is taking its toll on many families. Illustration: Brian Wang

The Chans share their internet connection with two other families housed together in a Hong Kong flat that is subdivided into three living spaces. During the day they all need to be online to learn because of the coronavirus crisis closing schools for an indefinite period.

“The Wi-fi has dropped out again” is the most used phrase at home right now, says Mrs Chan, who lives with her family in Sham Shui Po.

“My daughter gets mad about the internet. She told me the internet is so slow and easily cut outs so she finds it hard to complete her school work.”

‘Little, if any, possibility’ Hong Kong schools resume fully on April 20, Lam says. The mother from Guangdong province in China, who asks to remain anonymous, is among the 210,000 people living in one of the city’s thousands of subdivided flats.

As a low-income family they have been hit hard by the extension of school closures beyond April 20.

Classes have not been running since February 3, when children were supposed to return to school after the Lunar New Year break, with the city in the grip of an epidemic.

Hong Kong is facing a resurgence of imported coronavirus infections as the number of confirmed cases rose above 250 on Friday, marking the city’s biggest daily increase.

About 92 per cent of the 88 new cases in the past two weeks have links to overseas travel. Globally, the number of cases have exceeded 234,000 with more than 9,800 deaths.

Mrs Chan has two children, a 14-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son, who rely on the internet to do their schoolwork.

Their 80 sq ft unit is in an old walk-up in Sham Shui Po, the city’s poorest district that is blighted by slow internet speeds.

“She also uses her mobile phone to do online learning, but there is a lot of homework and the words are very small, which causes her eye pain, so she stops and gets angry when she feels uncomfortable,” Mrs Chan says.

Concerned about the impact on their education, the 38-year-old has been counting on her children returning to school next month.

But she also says the family could do with a break from each other as the three of them cooped up together for long periods has led to more arguments. The Chan children's online education is replicated by hundreds of millions of their peers across the world during the pandemic.

According to the United Nations, 770 million learners worldwide are being affected by school and university closures brought about by the health crisis. Hong Kong's leader Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor said on Tuesday there was now

About 900,000 kindergarten, primary and secondary students have been out of school since February 3 to reduce the spread of infection. The impact of the extended school closures has created knock-on effects for students, parents, families, teachers, and domestic helpers.

Teachers fear what the closures mean for their students.

Paul Thompson, 44, an art teacher at Sha Tin College, says: "I think we are all worried if it goes on past April what the impact will be on the exams. "Mainly it's the Year 12 and Year 10 students who are missing out on teaching, and obviously the lower school students ... as they are the ones who might find it a struggle next year and more stressful to catch up on the curriculum," he says.

Many community centres and non-governmental organisations are not running their usual services, such as providing rooms for counselling due to social distancing requirements.



Pupils in Hong Kong have not been to school since January because of the coronavirus pandemic. Photo: AFP

Isaac Yeung Chi-hin, a social worker at The Hub, a community centre supporting low-income families in Sham Shui Po says they are instead offering counselling over the phone.

“Every week we have five to 10 calls from families saying they are very frustrated or having some depressive moods,” says Mr Yeung.

“The situation is better in public housing, because there is more space to cool down. But for those living in subdivided flats that is a big problem, because if they get angry there is no place to hide.”

Dr Andrew Stock, a lead clinical psychologist at ClinPsych Services, has spoken with a number of families on the issues of social isolation, limited resources and space, and other stresses relating to Covid-19.

He says families in tight living spaces where they may not have enough material resources or emotional support can have a negative impact on the environment and relationships.

“Those families are doubly challenged because they might not be able to get support from external services, be that a tutor or a psychologist, as they are probably financially restrained in that regard,” says Dr Stock.

On the other end of the scale, some families endowed with living space and household equipment have benefited from spending more time together during online learning, he says.

The clinic psychologist says that is “something I am always encouraging parents to do, during their busy schedules in Hong Kong”.



Marina Rai says working at home with two children aged under 5 has been challenging. Photo: Handout

For Marina Rai, who works for an NGO while also studying part time for her Masters in social work at the University of Hong Kong, and has a 2-year-old daughter and 4-year-old son, she says flexibility has been key to juggling working from home alongside keeping her children entertained, especially as they are not going outside as often as they would before the outbreak.

“They love to see their mum 24/7 in front of them. Whether I am working, talking on the phone or replying to an email, they love to be with me,” says the 36-year-old, who has lived in Hong Kong for the past eight years.

Rai says afternoons are usually spent doing arts and crafts with them, but it has been challenging at times.

“I’ve found the toilet is the safest hideout for when I need to take an urgent call from my boss,” says Rai. “But I get very good support from my helper, so it’s pretty OK.”

With families increasingly spending more time indoors, the impact on migrant domestic workers has been profound.

A recent online survey of 1,127 domestic workers found more than half claimed they worked more in the past month than at any other time.

Forty per cent of the helpers surveyed said they had not left their residence at all over that period.

The poll was conducted online by the Asian Migrants Coordinating Body with the support of the Mission for Migrant Workers and the Asia-Pacific Mission for Migrants from March 8 to 10.

Shiela Tebia-Bonifacio, the chairwoman of Gabriela Hong Kong, an organisation that supports Filipinos in Hong Kong, says since the school closures, and with many parents working from home, the workload for domestic workers has tripled.

“They are assisting the kids in their needs and doing a lot more cleaning during the day,” she says.

“With everyone at home, there is no room for them to rest, because there are some cases of migrant domestic workers who don’t have their own room.

“They are sharing with the kids or they are staying in the living room. So it also puts them at risk of overwork or exhaustion.”

Tebia-Bonifacio says some domestic workers have told her they have not been provided with masks by their employers and have to pay for them out of their own pockets.

“They buy their own preventive materials so they will not get infected, because we are here to work so if we get infected we cannot work and our family back home is also affected,” she adds.

Authorities recommend social distancing as one of the biggest precautions people should take to limit the spread of the coronavirus. However, teachers say this is having an impact beyond learning.

“Schools are not just places for exams or grade factories. I think one of the things the students have mentioned they miss the most is actually being in school with their friends and teachers, and so this aspect of being isolated, some students are not leaving the house. I think this is going to have a bigger long-term impact,” Mr Thompson added.

Mrs Chan’s daughter keeps in contact with her friends through WhatsApp and the family often play card games together in the evenings. Her son also likes to exercise to YouTube videos most days.

Dr Stock says connecting as a family and doing activities like these are vital, especially in the current situation.

He also recommends setting a list of tasks that children can tick off once completed.

Stock stresses the importance of breaks and going outside, if it is safe to do so, because the sun and exercise strengthens the immune system.

Acknowledging it is a challenging time for families, he says when there is conflict it is important to respond mindfully and with compassion.

Rather than relying on punitive measures, he recommends adults try to interact on the same level as the child or young person.

He says: “Remind them that you get it, it’s hard and then pivot around together to say: how can we help you in these situations where you find yourselves getting distracted or going off-task?”

“How can we work together to make sure that this doesn’t happen too much?”