

Family Therapy Package
Hei Hei's Story (Transcript)

Programme host and narrator: Dr. LEE Wai-yung

Introduction: Children's mental health is a concerning issue for everyone. According to the World Health Organization, for every ten children, two would suffer from mental health problems. The current approaches tend to focus on children's individual behaviors and emotional issues. But children are like a mirror to the family. If we try to understand children's state of mind in the context of the family we will have a very different understanding of the problem.

Host: The Story of Hei-Hei is not the story of one family. Every family with children would find themselves encountering similar challenges.

Narrator: When I first met Hei-Hei he was only eight. He was a real troublemaker. His parents did not know what to do with him. During that meeting he refused to get up from the couch.

Mother: Hei-Hei, get up. Get up.

Father: Don't be shy. Are you a little kid? Only little kids would hide. We're just chatting. We're not saying you have a problem. We plan to solve the problem as a family.

Mother: It's the whole family coming together to do this.

Father: Come on. Get up first. Be brave. Quick. Let's not talk about it yet. Just get up.

Host: The family consulted many experts but with no solutions. However, from the mother's descriptions we began to find some clues.

Mother: Hei-Hei once scolded me at school, at a parent-child school seminar. The reason was, when the host invited mothers to participate, he turned to me and said, "answer it". Unlike other parents, I didn't want to participate. He knows I wasn't going to participate. Then he got furious and couldn't take it anymore. He stood up, pointed at me and said, "You tell me to be more active, but you're not being active. You wouldn't even answer the questions. You're so bad". That's how he scolded me.

Host: The mother's account led us to believe Hei-Hei may be overly

concerned about his mother. We call these children "parent watcher". They would often observe their parents' every move. Whenever something happens between the parents, they would be the first to know. Hence, they would be particularly sensitive to the parents' emotions.

Narrator: So we invited this family to take part in an experiment, where the parents discuss their conflicts in front of the child. At the same time we will use computer equipments to measure Hei-Hei's physiological responses. Such as heart rate and skin conductance. These data are indicators of the child's inner anxiety.

Mother: I never thought I would feel so helpless. It's not like I'm ignoring them. I'm already trying my best. I feel unappreciated. Whether it's the son or you, I just feel unappreciated. It's very hard. Whenever we discuss things there's never an answer. "So what? So what?" It's very discouraging. That's why I don't want to talk to you.

Father: We have very different expectations. You just can't accept my ways and often say I'm wrong. You're in such a dilemma.

Mother: I'm not saying you're wrong. For example, when you get home from work, I say we each look after a son. Then you go and read the paper. You call this one each. When I'm studying with one the other would just walk around. You just didn't do your job. You say, "I'm already doing it. I'm looking after one." I think I have the right to say you're wrong. At least you should tell them to do the work. Reading the paper and doing your own things is not helping them. Right?

Father: You always hold on to one incident. If sitting next to them is the only way to get them to work, then what's the point? You must have your reasons. You are right and other people are wrong.

Mother: I'm talking about studying.

Host: During the parents' conversation Hei-Hei was sitting on the side, with no particular responses. But the equipments showed several emotional arousals. Especially when his parents were arguing, he displayed intense emotional arousals. The most interesting thing was after the exercise, when Hei-Hei provided feedback to his parents, what he said was completely unexpected.

- Hei-Hei: Like water mixed with oil, cannot be mixed together. One of you is very extreme.
- Father: Who's being extreme?
- Hei-Hei: Both of you are equally extreme. The two of you are very different. Both of you need to try each other's ways to get along. Like dad needs to try other ways. Try other people's ways to see the benefits.
- Father: To see the benefits.
- Mother: How about me?
- Hei-Hei: It's hard to say. Don't be so quick in speaking your mind. You need to consider other people's views.
- Father: What do you suggest?
- Hei-Hei: Talk more.
- Father: Talk more.
- Hei-Hei: Try not to talk at night. You should talk more in the mornings or weekends.
- Father: Why shouldn't we talk at night?
- Hei-Hei: Because at night...Mom once said experts found that people's memories are better in the morning. So you will remember it better. If you can do it, you will remember it forever.
- Host: In theory we know parents' conflicts have a big influence on children. But when the child directly expresses their concerns it becomes a wake-up call for parents and urges them to face their problems.
- Mother: His emotion is like a mirror. If we're happy, he will be happy. When Hei gets off school he only pays attention to my face. "How are you today?", he would ask. "How come you like to look at my facial expressions?" He'll take a look to see if I'm happy. Or he'll ask, "are you happy today? You don't look too happy today." So if we can get along then he could focus more on his school work.
- Father: Hei-Hei cares about you too much. How should I say it. Your small mood swings becomes his big mood swings. That's why we need to be more careful. I think it is the expectations you have on yourself. Your satisfaction on these expectations is directly reflected on him.
- Host: Many fathers are aware of the attachment between mother and child.

	But they often remain silent because they don't think their wives would accept their views.
Narrator:	It is very important to mobilize a father from taking an avoiding position to an active one.
Father:	Hei-Hei, you need to act like an 8-year old again. Mom and dad care about you and want you to be a child again. If an 8-year old acts a certain way, you should act like them. Don't spend so much time worrying about adults' problems or to help them find a solution. I'm afraid Hei-Hei might be scared that dad would replace him. It was you who replaced me. I just want a fair competition.
Hei-Hei:	That's not true. You couldn't do your job so I helped you. I just did too much.
Father:	So I'm reclaiming my responsibilities. I'm doing it now. You need to be prepared. You need to remember it's normal for dad to win.
Hei-Hei:	You must, or you can't be the dad.
Father:	You don't need to be easy on me. I will try my best.
Host:	But for dad to reclaim his position in the family, it takes more than communicating with the children. It is very important for him to approach his wife. He needs to understand the problem he has with his wife.
Mother:	Today he took a half-day off. He was afraid we'd run into traffic when getting here. Also he has vacation days so he took a half-day off. I was really happy so I spent the morning finishing the chores. Then I prepared a lunch as big as a dinner so we won't be hungry even with a simple dinner. Right after lunch he went to take a nap. He slept till 4 something.
Host:	So you were disappointed.
Mother:	I was a little disappointed. It made me feel he spent his day off napping. In terms of the children...it would be nice if he sees what I go through. But I need to pretend to be understanding. "Are you tired? You should take a nap". But I was furious. How dare he sleeps!
Host:	You probably wanted to take a nap too.
Mother:	He actually invited me and said, "It would be great if the four of us could take a nice nap." The kids received the invitation too. But
Man:	

I feel it's not very realistic because...

Host: Why is it not realistic?

Mother: Take a nap together?

Host: After a nap all of you will feel rested and you won't feel so resentful.

Father: I didn't nap at all. I heard a lot of noise. I heard non-stop complaining.

Host: You mean your wife?

Father: Yes about Hei-Hei again. "Hei-Hei, have you finished your homework?" Then she finds out he has a lot of homework left to do. I think she spent about 45 minutes nagging non-stop on this issue. My reasoning was she only wanted to let out steam. It's useless to stop her. But it ruined the mood.

Host: So it gives you a reason to sleep.

Father: He works like a snail. He spends so much time working on the same question. I cannot stand dealing with this stuff, because I know it's useless. But it just keeps happening.

Host: Have you noticed your husband changed a lot today?

Mother: Because he had enough sleep.

Host: I told you there's a benefit to sleeping.

Host: Planning family activities and helping children with their studies is a trigger to couple conflicts. Parents must seek compromise and not insisting on one's opinions. This logic is very simple, but many parents refuse to accept the other's opinions. This leads the parents to run their separate actions.

Father: When we plan things, there's no outcome. At least that's how I feel. She refuses to cooperate with me. Or she feels she has her plans. She has to do what she thinks is right. So she doesn't listen to my suggestions. She would say it's a waste of time and so on.

Mother: I want someone to plan for me. Whenever I turn down his suggestions I would let him know the reasons. I would give him a reason.

Host: Does he accept your reasons?

Mother: I think my reasons were good. For example...

Host: But does he accept it?

Mother: I'm not sure if he accepts it.

Host: You need to ask him.

Mother: I would say "the weather is so cold, we may catch a cold if we go to Cheung-Chau." What pressures me most is exams are approaching. There's not a lot of time left. With a lot of activities during Christmas. I want dad to take the lead and instruct the kids. That's what I really want because my voice is not loud enough.

Host: I understand and I think you know what your wife wants. I think there's something she doesn't know because you haven't told her clearly. Although she wants you to take the lead, whenever you take on that role, she cannot stop leading you. Is it like that?

Father: I don't have a strong feeling about this. But I think for the time being you're not the type who would listen to others' suggestions. You still stick to your opinions. That's the key point, regardless if the plan is good or bad, I think you're the type who likes to follow your own plans. So the issue is how we discuss this problem.

Mother: That depends on if you have any brilliant ideas.

Father: I feel a lot of the times, your thoughts and your actions are inconsistent.

Host: The reason couples often have different ways of handling things is due to their different family backgrounds and upbringings.

Mother: When I was young, the way my father helped us study was very problematic. He was extremely impatient. So it's puzzling to me. I don't know why it's like I copied him.

Host: Copied who?

Mother: Copied my father. When teaching my children homework my patience and temper is like my father's. Speaking of my dislike towards my mother's dominating ways. I don't like the way she treats her husband. But when I got married that was how I treat him. "How come you won't let me be in charge?" I'll give you face in public, when we're home I'm in charge. That side of me subconsciously surfaced.

Father: When we were young we took care of ourselves. Nobody paid us much attention.

Host: How does your experience as a child influence you as a father?

- Father: When we were young we took care of ourselves. Nobody paid us much attention. How does your experience as a child influence you as a father? I wish they would quickly develop their own personality their independent thoughts, their independence. I didn't think it thoroughly. How my methods would influence them. Are my methods the best for them?
- Mother: We are very different so when our children were born. I found it strange that he kept asking them, "What do you want? How do you feel?" They're so young. We wondered how we could make things work. Our parenting styles are so different. Sometimes I would suggest bringing them to the library. He would respond, "Every child is different, we shouldn't do what everyone says". A lot of arguments come from this area.
- Host: Some say men are from Mars, women are from Venus. No matter which planets they are from, they would still need to learn to live together on Earth. To learn to compromise and complement each other. Once parents' positions are aligned children will stop worrying about them and will naturally resume their roles as children.
- Hei-Hei: Once dad gets home, he ignores us again. He quickly goes to his room, does his own stuff, and reads the newspaper. After reading the newspaper, we have dinner. After that he tells mom to shower.
- Brother: Sometimes he reads the paper during dinner.
- Host: He reads the paper during dinner?
- Hei-Hei: Yes.
- Host: So you guys watch him while he reads.
- Hei-Hei: Yes.
- Host: The both of you would do that.
- Mother: That's not true.
- Host: Let them talk.
- Brother: Sometimes he reads the paper again right after dinner.
- Hei-Hei: After the paper he would scold us, "Take a bath. Hurry and take a bath".
- Brother: And we still need to study.
- Hei-Hei: Yes, and he would tell us, "Study! You have a quiz tomorrow".
- Host: When the children complain about their dad reading the paper mom

used to criticize the dad. Now that they are on the same line they begin to realize the children's behaviors are very normal for their age, and they don't need to be over concerned. That way, children can truly take on their roles as children.

Mother: One day the children said they were hungry. I said, "Let me buy you some fresh bread." So I went to the bakery. Then I received dad's call at around 4. "Where are you?" "I went out to get bread." "Wait at the bakery. I'm off work already. I'm coming over to discuss something with you." He got off work at 4? From my experience, something must've happened at work. Strangely, I was feeling calm at the time. I told myself, no matter what it is we can solve it. When he arrived he looked very calm. Dad said, "The company is moving to Singapore." I replied, "That's OK." Then he said, "They want me to go with them". I said, "If you want to go, then we'll go with you. If you want the severance package then we'll make other plans." Then dad said, "I don't want to be laid off." We already decided. So we discussed it with the kids. We prayed and talked about it together.

Host: Your family decided to move to Singapore.

Mother: Yes, we decided to move to Singapore.

Host: This will be a big change for your family.

Host: Due to the father's new work arrangement, Hei-Hei's family moved to Singapore. They visited us occasionally. In only a few months, Hei-Hei has become mature. He is now an adolescent.

Host: What do you think parents need to do to help their children? Or what do you think children need to grow up happily?

Hei-Hei: Frankly speaking, a family's main member is the father. He is like a motor. If he doesn't work, nothing works. If he works, everything works.

Host: What do you think of your parents now?

Hei-Hei: Like sugar and water.

Mother: Sugar and water?

Host: That's like a dessert. They stick together. What does that mean? Does that mean they're very sweet?

Hei-Hei: Yes, you can say they stick together.

Host: Do you like to see them as a dessert?

Hei-Hei: Like sweet dumpling.

Father: Dessert and sweet dumpling.

Host: When you think of dessert you think of sweet dumpling?

Hei-Hei: And sweet potato.

Mother: You're the sweet potato.

Host: Shortly after, father had suffered a stroke. So the family moved back to Hong Kong. But they are full of confidence and are ready to face the challenge together.

Host: How do you see yourself change in the past four years?

Hei-Hei: The actions are the same but the target people are different. And the methods are different. How should I say it? The motivations are the same, the methods are different, and the target people are different.

Host: Very good. How are your motivations the same?

Hei-Hei: To care for the family.

Host: And that's the same. How did the target people change?

Hei-Hei: Before I only cared about mom, now I care about dad too. I don't spend a 100% on mom anymore. There are other people for me to care about. And there are different ways to care for different people.

Host: Very good. Looks like you really matured. I'm sure mom and dad are very happy to hear this, right? What do you think of what he just said?

Mother: He really changed after the family therapy. Just now he used the term "turning point". It's like he woke up and realized what he did was wrong. He shouldn't be so focused on family matters. He shouldn't only be focused on mom. Ever since dad had a stroke his surroundings forced him to mature. He grew up in a positive way. Not negatively. He took what he learned in family therapy and applied it to the family. If we didn't have family therapy and the family problem came up we wouldn't know how to face the challenge. It really would be quite a challenge. It was like taking a preparation course. We don't worry about their studies anymore.

We can completely let go. So we can focus on rehabilitation.

Host: The moral of this story is: Caring for your children doesn't mean you need to watch them closely. If the parents' relationship is not good, children will not be happy. Many people are unaware that not only parents protect their children, children also protect their parents. For the child to grow up, the family must grow together.

Narrator: Hei-Hei is now 14-years old. His brother is already 12. As the children are entering into adolescence, this family will face new challenges. This is a process for every family.