

The care needs we all bear will only increase over time, says the writer. By making it more common and socially acceptable for both men and women to take time off from work for infant-related reasons, colleagues who may face family obligations to elderly relatives one day are better protected from stigma.
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Work cannot come at the cost of family

The huge support offered to parents in the Budget is welcome if the overall intent is to help Singaporeans find more time to care for families

Tan Poh Lin

Most parents remember the moment their child enters the world. It is a time of joy mixed with anxiety and exhaustion as they deal with the new addition to the family.

Typically, mother and child would remain in the hospital for at least two days after childbirth. A grandparent or a confinement nanny might be enlisted in the first month or so but mums typically take on the heavy lifting thereafter.

Fathers may be doing their best to support their wives through the night feeds, the diaper-changing and baths. But with only two weeks under the Government-paid Paternity Leave scheme, most would choose to spread out their entitlement and take only a couple of days at the start.

In practice, what this means is that after the initial flurry of activities, there is little time or bandwidth for families to adjust to changes effected by the arrival

of a newborn, which can be especially hard for first-timers.

It's a pity when those early months of childhood are some of the most precious time most people say they miss, long after their children have flown the nest. But it's hard to appreciate the beauty of a child's laughter or the smirk kiddo gives in the overwhelming chaos when you had little sleep, are constantly covered in junior's bodily fluids and are bogged down by chores, finances and worries about returning to work.

GREATER SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES

There is some relief on this to come: Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong announced in his Budget speech last Tuesday that government-paid paternity leave for dads will be increased to four weeks from January 2024, and infant care for each parent extended from six to 12 days annually.

A range of family-friendly measures was also introduced to help couples set up home and kick-start parenthood. This includes generous increases to the Baby Bonus, which will go up by another \$3,000, more help with housing grants, and in time to come, more formalised flexible working arrangements.

The option for dads to take a longer time away from work after the birth of a child will improve child outcomes and the couple's overall well-being, seeing how the neonatal period is a crucial

time to build lifelong parent-child trust and attachment.

According to local research, paternity leave entitlements are also linked to higher marital satisfaction, and happier, more stable families, with kids the biggest beneficiary from growing up in a nurturing, loving and well-knitted home.

HELPING YOUNG PARENTS HAVE KIDS

Overall, Budget 2023's changes to support parenthood in Singapore might not seem like game changers but could support those who need help most while subtly effecting shifts in some people's decision-making.

In particular, larger housing grants provided to couples buying smaller flats, and changing the Working Mothers' Tax Relief from a percentage of earned income to a lump sum will skew benefits to lower-income groups, which is a welcome move.

Since such couples are more likely to bump up against financial constraints, these benefits will go some way to alleviate the strain and build stronger homes for those who have children.

Skewing benefits towards those who earn less income also benefits younger couples at a time when we want to encourage Singaporeans to start families when they are young. Many young Singaporeans say it is too costly to have children, and the friction of finding a nice home

can be off-putting.

Now, if we could remove those roadblocks as a nation keen to remain a place where people's aspirations can be fulfilled, why not? If we can tweak the system to help more Singaporeans have children, we would go all in.

Indeed, rather than allow the median age of first-time parents to tick upwards where age-related fertility issues might kick in, removing obstacles to having kids for Singaporeans in their 20s is the way to go.

In this there is no free lunch and people generally understand the need for less relevant schemes to be "grandfathered". But this should not blind us to erring on the side of generosity if getting those total fertility rates up is a national priority.

Although there is much to celebrate in the enhanced support measures for new parents, families can benefit even more from a broader strategy where enhancements apply to more stages of parenthood. In fact, parents of young children will receive a one-time Child Development Account top-up of \$400 per child, but may be disappointed by the phasing out of the Foreign Domestic Worker Levy Tax Relief.

GETTING WORKPLACES ON BOARD

We need everyone to buy into this vision. But all these family-friendly measures would be for nothing if employers do not come on board on the notion

of putting family first.

Were it not for government funding, companies may find these new entitlements for workers costly to accommodate, particularly small businesses with limited manpower. This is probably why the longer paternity leave may have been rolled out on a voluntary basis at first, so that further tweaks can be made and support given for the four weeks off to be mandatory.

Beyond businesses' balance sheets, co-workers may question the fairness of parents' ever-increasing leave entitlements, especially if this causes disruptions or they are left to pick up the slack, potentially creating rifts and hostilities at work.

INTEGRATING FAMILY LIFE AND WORK AS A WHOLE

Work-life integration has been a governing ethos for most managers, yet most forget it is a two-way street. This conversation may have been sparked by Budget 2023's move on parental leave, but everyone has family responsibilities – as children, grandchildren, nieces or nephews.

With Singapore's ageing population, the care needs we all bear will only increase over time. By making it more common and socially acceptable for both men and women to take time off from work for infant-related reasons, colleagues who may face family obligations to elderly relatives one day are better protected from stigma.

Spillovers between work and life should be baked into human resource management and handled so that everyone has a successful integration, and family care does not come at the expense of work and business outcomes. Let's focus on what is gained rather than what is lost.

Having less marital strain and stress at home means healthier, happier and more productive employees and colleagues.

To make this cultural shift easier for everyone, we as a society must decide whether unpaid labour, be it childcare or eldercare, is seen as necessary duties to be fulfilled.

If it is valuable, the work should be acknowledged, and visibly acknowledged. Then parents and other caregivers will find it easier to ask for time off, and workplaces will find it more justifiable to support these requests.

Back to getting couples to have more kids. Ultimately, babies are their own best advertisements, with their vulnerability and the emotional pull they have on us.

Costs matter, but what will move the needle is not just making everything cheaper, but also the promise of getting to enjoy time with our children without guilt or trepidation and the space to head home when junior gets the sniffles or an emergency ensues.

Give parents time to spend with their kids, to teach, relate and guide, and play a role during the crucial growing-up years, and help workplaces be allies.

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