

'Frontload' parenting and step back as your child grows

It may be worth letting parents spread the newly announced additional parental leave over two years. But as deeply involved as parents are in the early years of a child's life, they should learn to let go later.

Tan Poh Lin

Parenthood is, of course, a lifelong journey.

But there is a distinct flavour to parenting at every stage: wonder amid mayhem and sleep deprivation in the first three months; recognising the emerging individual in the toddler years; facilitating curiosity and experimentation in the pre-school ages; catching glimpses of independence in primary school; and so forth.

The announcement of an additional 10 weeks of parental leave, to be shared flexibly between fathers and mothers, brings these distinctions to the fore. What is so special about a child's first year of life, and does it make sense for families when leave entitlements are frontloaded in this way?

I would say they do, as parents need all the support that they can get in the first 24 months of parenthood. That is why, I'd argue, that the window for taking the additional 10 weeks of parental leave should be expanded to two years, instead of asking parents to take this leave within the first year of a child's life.

But I'd go further. I would also argue that as deeply as parents are involved in their child's life in the early years, they should learn to step back as the child grows older. They should reject competitive parenting. In other words, it is not just parental leave that should be frontloaded, but parenting, too.

THOSE CRUCIAL 24 MONTHS

For most, the first two years of parenthood are by far physically more taxing for several reasons. Many babies cannot sit by themselves in the first six months; they only start to take their first steps at 12 months, and are still in diapers at 18 months. During this initial phase of physical

development, infants need constant supervision to keep from falling, accidentally suffocating and putting unsuitable objects in their mouths.

Very young children are also more prone to illnesses due to ongoing development of their immune systems, requiring more visits to the doctor during this vulnerable formative period. As a mother of two, I had become inured to exhausting waits at the doctor's office every month or so, and was thankfully astonished when the frequency of these trips fell off a cliff in toddlerhood.

Beyond greater physical demands, another major development milestone is attachment, which allows children to regulate stress, build confidence in their surroundings and generate healthy self-perceptions. From very young ages, infants can recognise caregivers by smell or sight, and, at 12 months, typically wish to stay in close physical proximity to attachment figures while exhibiting aversion to strangers.

Taken together, these demands make it very difficult for primary caregivers to do much apart from tending to the child's needs, particularly in the first few months. The new leave entitlements address these unique needs by giving working parents more breathing room as they transition to new care arrangements.

Currently, the maximum leave allowance of 30 weeks must be taken within the first 12 months of birth. However, the life stages of infant development suggest that it may make more sense for parents to be able to push some of that leave to the second year of life.

At 12 months of age, infants are still physically dependent on caregivers, whereas many have become effective communicators and practised walkers and runners by their second birthday. This core difference means that there is a sizeable gap as to how much time and energy parents of infants



More couples may be willing to embark on parenthood if the demands in doing so grow lighter over time with society's backing, while the rewards of having a new addition to the family are for the lifetime, says the writer. ST FILE PHOTO

A longer eligibility window for taking parental leave may also enable parents, especially fathers, to take up more of what they are entitled to. Currently, only around half of fathers take up paternity leave, and among those who do so, many strategically spread out their leave taking throughout the course of the year, in order to better accommodate their family's needs and work schedules.

need to devote to caregiving, compared to parents of older children.

This difference is also reflected in our caregiving institutions. In my experience, Singaporean parents are generally quite happy to make use of the educational and socialisation opportunities offered at formal childcare facilities starting at 18 months of age, as children at this age are wired to seek out learning opportunities and can benefit from being in an educational setting.

But formal infant care can be expensive. Also, some parents find that their children are simply not ready for formal infant care and opt to either use informal care arrangements or temporarily exit from the labour force.

Expanding the window for taking the additional 10 weeks of leave to the first two years, similar to current eligibility criteria for taking unpaid infant leave, can help such families. For other parents, having some leftover leave can help to meet the demands of health exigencies that flow over from the first year.

Importantly, a longer eligibility window for taking parental leave may also enable parents, especially fathers, to take up more of what they are entitled to. Currently, only around half of fathers take up paternity leave, and among those who do so, many strategically spread out their leave taking throughout the course of the year, in order to better accommodate their family's needs and work schedules.

Both working fathers and mothers are cognisant that even with the most understanding of employers, being away from the office for too long can weaken their career standing and erode workplace connections. Fathers, in particular, may balk at the thought of missing out on 14 weeks of work activities, but be more open to taking seven weeks each for the first two years.

LEARNING TO LET GO

There is a strong case to be made that families deserve more social and workplace support for the first two years after birth, when caregiving demands are at their

peak, and an equally strong case for promoting a parenting culture where parents can gradually play more of a supporting role – and less of an active one – as their children acquire skills and become more independent. In other words, don't micromanage your children's lives as they grow up. Give them space, instead of becoming a competitive parent.

After infancy, families naturally still face substantial childcare demands in the toddler years. But with the dramatic increase in social resources poured into training pre-school educators and curriculum development, there is less need to do make-up lessons at home to prepare for primary school. Instead, families have more freedom to pursue bonding activities in line with their own interests, values and time availability.

Recently announced plans to draw out talented students for higher ability programmes in all schools and increase funding for schools with more disadvantaged students make it increasingly pointless for parents to try to score an early win by placing their children in a certain school.

At the primary and lower-secondary school levels, the demands shift to managing schoolwork and exam preparation, which can now be supported to a significant extent by school-based and community-based student care centres. More importantly, the reduced institutional emphasis on grades and educational tracks in favour of broader life skills and mixed-ability classrooms rewards self-reliant tenacity and self-knowledge, meaning that children may actually achieve more if their parents learn to help them by doing less.

It is a good thing for society, because just as it is important that the next generation should be given plenty of opportunities to be acquainted with failure and bounce back from early setbacks, it is also healthy that the weight of self-determination should then be placed on them, which can further strengthen them for the challenges of the future.

It's also a good thing for parents to reject a competitive parenting culture and choose to trust social institutions which are there to support them, rather than duplicating educational investments.

When families endorse instead of fight the system and spend their limited time not on what they fear but rather on what they truly find meaningful, we can have a far more sustainable version of a family-centric society.

Children would have more space to develop autonomy, and parents have more time freed up to focus on their own careers and personal development, thereby demonstrating a healthier, more balanced model of parenthood to the next generation.

And if much of the physical, time-consuming burdens of parenthood can be increasingly contained with society's backing, more couples may be willing to embark on this path, with the understanding that the demands grow lighter over time, while the rewards of having a new addition to the family are for the lifetime.

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