

New parents are a category by themselves. Treat them as such

They have more demands on their time, different housing needs. They will always fall short if a non-parent benchmark is the default.

Tan Poh Lin

Even though it's been almost 10 years now, I still remember four exact words in an e-mail sent to me on a Friday evening by a well-meaning senior colleague: "Have a productive weekend." If I allow myself to dwell on it, I can still taste the unease and guilt I felt at that moment because my plans for that weekend did not look very productive.

The message was clear: You must always be working. That is how you get ahead.

For parents who are primary caregivers to young children, always working is not an option. Instead, for us, the alternative message is: the perfect balance between work and life still exists out there. You just have to manage time wisely and, with luck, find a sympathetic supervisor.

The alternative message can work for some. A newly promoted

colleague shared that when her children were the same age as mine, she was able to manage her workload by turning down work engagements after office hours.

But even this more optimistic testimony failed to fully clear my doubts as a mother of young children. The tension still existed. Assessed against a non-parent benchmark, the odds would generally be against me.

That's because being on the "parenthood track" is not just about having less time due to the steady stream of medical appointments and school announcements. More than that, I feel that I've lost some of the energy that used to fuel agility at the workplace, which means sometimes missing out on time-sensitive opportunities.

As long as we treat parenting as a deviation from the default standard rather than a different path with its own logic, the consensus will remain that "parenting = sacrifice". To challenge this, we must reshape the parenthood track in life and at work.

RESHAPING PARENTHOOD TRACK

More than inspirational narratives and uplifting stories, parents need the real thing from society – an acknowledgement that life is fundamentally different when a child, a new human being, is

added to the equation, and therefore, that qualification for support in life and markers of achievement at the workplace should be different.

Without this acknowledgement, parents will continue to count the cost. Flexible work arrangements can help, but cannot fully close the gap because the time demands of parenthood are simply much larger than commute time. Ultimately, parents still have to somehow do as much as non-parents in a narrower window of time. When parents are measured against those without such responsibilities as the default, they will always fall short in comparison.

What does a reshaped parenthood track look like? Consider Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Just like anyone else, would-be parents desire a reasonable standard of living. Beyond just the conditions of their living environment, they also care about emotional ties, social esteem and a sense of living up to their full potential.

Perhaps that's why couples so often mention financial costs as a barrier for childbearing. We are conditioned to first consider material resources, and the truth is that child-related expenses could instead be funnelled to more luxurious living or early retirement. It's not merely a

matter of affordability – or else we'd see wealthy families having lots of kids, which is not the case – but the whole package, a matter of lifestyle. Perhaps one could afford two children, tuition and all, but not two children, a car and a condo. And sometimes, the condo wins out.

A different parenthood track would seek to present this choice no longer as a dichotomy, but rather as a bundle. Households with young children should be in a separate category that shields them from competing with other groups for larger Housing Board homes and cars. To reflect the incremental costs of additional children, these separate categories can be further tiered to support larger families. These measures work by targeting big-ticket items, thereby acknowledging the scale of expenses that parents incur.

As an example, a couple may start married life with a four-room HDB flat, with one room serving as a master bedroom and another converted to a study. After having their first child, the third room may be converted to a nursery, perhaps shared with a migrant domestic worker. With the arrival of more children, the couple would benefit from priority and subsidy schemes based on the number of children for upgrading to a five-room or larger flat, which would allow space for another bedroom in addition to a segregated study in the common area. The couple would also qualify for lower costs of car ownership, allowing them to improve living standards while growing their family size.

Pivoting now from the bottom to the top of Maslow's pyramid, would-be parents also have to consider potential hits to social status and self-actualisation in the form of a slowdown in one's career. Often these "opportunity costs" are minimised simply as forgone income, to be considered alongside "direct" monetary costs of childrearing, but I'd argue that the psychological threat to

identity is likely just as important. Most of us worked hard in school to be trained for some form of paid employment, and it can be deeply rewarding to see these efforts pay off.

A reshaped parenthood track would seek to protect workers who choose to have children to preserve these ambitions, while creating new ones. Publicly provided or organised measures, in the form of privileged access to upgrading programmes and mentorship networks, are needed to allow working parents to become more attractive in the labour market and open doors to new jobs or industries, rather than merely seek to play catch-up with non-parenting colleagues.

These resources are increasingly relevant in the artificial intelligence age as business models and in-demand skill sets continue to churn, offering beneficiaries more chances to reshape employment profiles and better tailor them to their family needs.

By contrast, since most businesses are strongly motivated by the bottom line, workplace benefits such as family care leave and flexible work arrangements should be provided as universally as possible to all employees. This is needed not only to normalise good working conditions and discourage discriminatory hiring and promotion practices, but also to prevent backlash from colleagues against working caregivers by minimising one-way work spillovers. In doing so, we replace a system that tends to push working mothers into the slow lane with a highway with multiple fast lanes.

Reshaping the parenthood track, to some, may still seem like it's asking a lot of the rest of society, including those who are not childless by choice. After all, housing and cars are scarce goods in Singapore, and coveted well-paying job offers don't come by every day.

The question is whether society, including policymakers, employers, community leaders and other members of the public, views the greater needs of families with young children for scarce resources as legitimate, or whether we continue to expect them to privatise the costs. Do we bite the bullet and acknowledge that life is fundamentally different for new parents, and equip them to meet needs and aspirations, like everyone else? Or do we continue to frame it as a matter of choice and individual responsibility?

Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Indranee Rajah's announcement of a new workgroup to draw support from stakeholders across society to change mindsets surrounding childbearing presents an opportune moment for exploring new directions.

If one of the markers of success under this reset is identified as happier, more relaxed marriage and parenthood experiences, through reshaped pathways to achieving the good life, the message to would-be parents would be a powerful one: that it's not just about raising the total fertility rate, but about continual efforts to raise their and their future children's well-being itself.

• Tan Poh Lin is senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore.



As long as we treat parenting as a deviation from the default standard rather than a different path with its own logic, the consensus will remain that "parenting = sacrifice", says the writer. To challenge this, we must reshape the parenthood track in life and at work. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG