

White Paper to offer ways to support marriage, parenthood

Financial cost, perceived stress are top two barriers to having kids in S'pore: Indranee

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To address Singapore's record-low fertility rate, policymakers will explore ways to better support couples financially and ease the perceived stress of raising children here.

These are the top two barriers to having children in Singapore, said Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Indranee Rajah on May 21 at a conference on population matters held at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

The conference was jointly organised by the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine and the Population Association of Singapore (PAS), a non-profit academic organisation.

Following the conference, NUS Medicine and PAS will develop a joint White Paper on fertility and human development, drawing on research and discussions to recom-

mend policy measures.

This is the first time the two organisations are working on such a paper. It is likely to include insights on barriers to marriage and parenthood, and the effectiveness of policy interventions across Asia, Europe and other countries.

Singapore's resident total fertility rate (TFR) fell to a historic low – and one of the lowest globally – of 0.87 in 2025, prompting renewed public debate and the formation of a working group.

The TFR, which refers to the average number of babies each woman would have during her reproductive years, was 0.97 in 2024.

Ms Indranee said marriage and parenthood are becoming less of a priority amid changing notions of what constitutes a meaningful life.

There is also a growing sentiment that Singapore's environment is not conducive to raising children, because of rising costs of living and a more intense pace of

life, added the minister, who chairs the newly formed Marriage and Parenthood Reset Workgroup.

"Many young people are not just asking, 'Can we afford children?' They are also asking, 'What kind of life will we be able to give our children, and what kind of life will we have as parents?'" said Ms Indranee.

She added that time scarcity is the toughest issue to address as it deals with the tension between "two good things".

Working hard has helped Singapore progress as a nation, but the pursuit of achievement can come at the expense of well-being and pursuing other life goals like marriage and parenthood, she said.

"Both are important to flourishing. So it is not a matter of one or the other, but rather how we can manage the tension between these two equally important objectives."

The minister pointed to a need for "rebalance" in Singapore society.

The working group will look into supporting couples financially in parenthood and ways to mitigate stress in the education system. The



Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Indranee Rajah said marriage and parenthood are becoming less of a priority amid changing notions of what constitutes a meaningful life. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

Government has also launched tripartite guidelines for flexible work arrangement requests, said Ms Indranee.

Noting that policy alone cannot move the needle, she called on employers to provide flexible work options and put in place basic facilities, like lactation rooms, to help employees feel more supported.

She added that community organisations can provide more family-friendly spaces, while everyone can support parents via gestures like offering practical help to families on public transport.

One study presented at the conference found that children who were cared for by people other than their parents in their first 18 months fared better in reading and maths tests in pre-school.

However, they faced a greater risk of behavioural challenges,

such as bullying others or worrying too much, as reported by their parents.

The study was based on a nationally representative data set of more than 2,500 children compiled between 2018 and 2022, from the Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study.

Almost nine in 10 of these children were cared for exclusively by their parents, while the others were cared for by pre-schools or infant-care centres, relatives or migrant domestic workers at least once a week for at least one month.

Their higher achievements may be because infant-care centres provide a lot of cognitive and linguistic stimulation, the study's author, Dr Kristy Lee, told *The Straits Times*.

Dr Lee, a scientist at the Institute for Human Development and Po-

tential (IHDP) at A*STAR, added that some evidence indicates children develop more language and cognitive abilities when they interact with people outside their own family.

But the greater risk of behavioural issues affecting children cared for by other people may be partly caused by their parents experiencing greater stress (for example, at work) and using harsh disciplinary practices more frequently.

Being exposed to negative peer dynamics, such as aggressive behaviour among other children, may also contribute to behavioural issues, she said.

For children in centre-based care, their primary caregivers are most likely mothers who have to work long hours, said Professor Jean Yeung, director of social sciences at IHDP and a professor at the Department of Paediatrics at NUS Medicine.

"The stress of trying to manage both work and their babies' needs could potentially increase the emotional stress, and also increase punitive parenting behaviour," said Prof Yeung, who is also PAS' president.

What this means is that infant-care providers need more training, she said, and working parents need more support during a child's first 18 months.

This could mean expanded parental leave, flexible work arrangements and providing childcare services near the workplace.

"It's important to have a very family-friendly work culture... otherwise it intensifies this maternal work stress, which is ultimately not very good for both mothers and children," she said.

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