

Helping parents reduce the trade-offs for the children they already have could give them greater confidence to grow their families.

Tan Poh Lin

During his National Day Rally speech, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong announced a new set of enhancements to childcare leave for parents with children under 12, the replacement of the Baby Bonus cash gift and Large Families Scheme with a new SG Child Support Package, and additional pre-school subsidies. In particular, the SG Child Support Package heralds a new era of government generosity in the form of child cash transfers. The enhancements represent an increase of \$13,000 to \$42,000 in per-child government financial support, which is not a trivial sum relative to the base support level of \$20,000 to \$49,000 under previous schemes.

By doubling down on financial support, the Government is signalling its commitment to family well-being as a goal in itself, rather than simply looking for the most cost-effective measure. This strategic shift towards well-being has a better shot at making a lasting change because it adjusts expectations, including the notion that parents need to sacrifice personal well-being after having children.

But the continued decline in fertility rates around the world despite increasingly generous grants and allowances makes it quite clear that money alone cannot be the solution.

While these enhanced measures provide a welcome shift that addresses the deeper cultural context underlying the fertility crisis, there's still a need to address a different type of sacrifice that parents worry about when it comes to expanding their family: the erosion of advantage faced by their existing children.

WHY MORE SUPPORT FOR OLDER SIBLINGS CAN HELP

Previously, the amount of cash gifts increased with birth order, making a tiered incentive more geared towards raising the fertility rate. The new structure, by contrast, is flat across birth orders, which ties the gift simply to the arrival of a new child.

This delivers a helpful message that well-being comes first and the fertility decision-making process is secondary. Yet from both well-being and incentive perspectives, there remain virtues to retaining some sensitivity to birth order in the overall support structure.

When the support is the same for every child, parents' resources are stretched thinner per child, since credits are not expected to fully compensate for additional household outlays at the margin. Although larger families can



A key reason many parents choose not to have more children is not that they cannot afford it, but that they do not want to reduce the resources for their current children, the writer's research suggests. Therefore, the well-being of older siblings, not just the family as a whole, matters, she says.
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Make a second child less of a sacrifice for the first

expect additional support for healthcare, transport and potentially housing, only a minority of families today go on to have a third child, leaving the dilution of household resources a pertinent issue.

Along with money, time is also stretched when a family grows. Enhanced childcare leave will allow parents to spend more time with their children, but because benefits taper at the margin, a couple with one child may still worry that a second baby would mean less time for their first.

As research suggests, the amount of time that parents spend is usually not equally distributed among their children, but tends to be skewed towards younger children who need more supervision. And as the children get older, parents may turn to more generic group activities suitable for a wide age range, at the expense of catering to individual interests.

These are not minor considerations. My research suggests that a key reason many parents choose not to have more children is not that they cannot

afford it, but that they don't want to reduce the resources for their current children. Therefore, the well-being of older siblings, not just the family as a whole, matters.

To meet these considerations, the policy reset should also consider how having a younger sibling can be less of a perceived sacrifice and more of an advantage for parents and kids.

Research I have conducted on sibling dynamics with Emma Zang of Yale University and Philip Cook of Duke University shows that how older siblings fare in school has a causal impact on

their younger siblings' performance.

For every standard deviation increase in older siblings' test scores, the younger sibling's score rises by 0.16 of a standard deviation. Simply put, when an older sibling performs better at school, the younger sibling tends to do better too.

The effect is observed for both verbal and quantitative performance. It peaks around late primary school ages, at a development phase where children may be especially influenced by their older siblings' example as they face the

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daunting transition to secondary school.

Results also suggest that effects are stronger for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, possibly due to lower access to other positive role models. Investments in older siblings may therefore be a powerful mechanism to counter the disadvantage and inequality arising from lower per-child resources.

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Similarly, preferential access to mentorship networks and other programmes that strengthen social capital can help families worry less about resource dilution

and look upon positive inter-sibling spillovers as a natural and helpful part of the parenthood journey.

NEW SCRIPTS FOR MARRIAGE AND PARENTHOOD

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead made a famous observation about the nature of tragedy as portrayed in dramatic art. The essence, he notes, is not in the sorrow of misfortune, but in "the solemnity of the remorseless working of things". That is to say, the forces at play conspire to an inevitable end. Things don't change, because they can't.

The only escape from a gradual relentless downward spiral is when actors can effectively choose to do things differently from the way others before them have done. There is no single script that dictates the outcome. Rather, there are many to choose from, and they all offer similar chances of a happy ending.

By identifying and resolving trade-offs that parents face – between work and family, or between having more children and investing more in each child – the number of viable marriage and parenthood scripts multiplies.

This breaks the trap by serving as an indication that alternatives exist, and that the future does not have to mimic the past.

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