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Give more help to children with more siblings

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For The Straits Times

Singapore's fertility rate is among the lowest in the world and raising the birth rate is a top policy priority.

A key concern of parents-to-be is whether they will be able to provide their children with a strong start in life, including an excellent education that maximises their children's potential. Parents often gauge their children's educational progress not in terms of static developmental milestones, but rather relative to how other children are doing.

Hence, while a recent Institute of Policy Studies poll of 1,500 parents found that 90 per cent were satisfied with their children's primary schools and the quality of education they provided, more than 70 per cent continue to feel stressed over their children's schoolwork and exam preparation.

And according to the Household Expenditure Survey in 2014, Singaporeans spent more than $1 billion on tuition. Some parents even attend tuition courses themselves in order to help their children score well.

This competitive view of education, which often begins well before primary school, can significantly diminish the joys of parenthood and make it a tedious, time-consuming and stressful affair for Singaporeans. Given that no one, including policymakers, is willing to compromise on the importance of education, what are the policy options? We propose a novel set of "incremental" policies which provide additional support for children who have more siblings.

These policies can be thought of as the reverse of China's one-child policy: Rather than penalising higher fertility by reducing the prospects of children from larger families, they reward higher fertility by making it easier for children with siblings to succeed in life.

These policies could take a number of forms. For example, schools and universities could favour applicants who have more siblings. Specifically, an applicant with a sibling could be advantaged in the admission process, compared with an only child. In addition, the Government could provide tiered housing, childcare or educational subsidies, which provide additional resources to families with more children.

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How do incremental policies compare with current Marriage and Parenthood incentives? One crucial difference is that apart from the Baby Bonus and governmental co-savings for the Child Development Account, which are higher for the third child and beyond, most of the incentives – including parental leave, childcare subsidies and tax rebates – are on a per-child basis and still others, such as paid childcare leave, do not increase with the number of children.

By contrast, the benefits of incremental policies are designed to scale up with family size, so that the marginal benefit of having another child is not constant but rather increases with family size, directly countering the pressures on parents to have a smaller number of children so that they can invest more heavily in those they have. To some extent, the policies also extend the current incentive system underlying primary school admissions policies, which already advantages younger siblings of children attending good primary schools, and makes it available to a larger segment of the population.

From a fiscal viewpoint, incremental policies deliver more bang for the buck since the benefits from having an additional child are conferred on all children in the household rather than just on the additional child. Moreover, the effects of the policies would not be undermined by a parental "arms race" in a paradigm where a child's educational ability is assessed relative to that of other children, unlike universal per-child benefits which do not reduce parents' motivation to spend in order to get ahead of the pack.

Finally, incremental policies can help to level the playing field, since larger families, who are often less well-off, cannot afford to devote as much time and financial resources to compete for coveted spots at top primary schools or pay for high-quality private tuition.

While some may understandably worry that the policies may place some families with fewer children at a disadvantage through no fault of their own, especially if these couples had fewer children due to unforeseen circumstances, the policies would still help to reduce social inequality since children with more siblings have to compete harder for resources to begin with.

To address potential concerns and maximise fairness to children and parents, the implementation of the policies could be targeted for a number of years from the time of enactment, so as not to penalise those born under a prior policy regime. Importantly, however, the policies are expected to have immediate impact on the childbearing decisions of couples, since children born after the policies are adopted would be affected.

While the policies may require some adjustment of social attitudes, we note that the Government is increasingly open to confronting structural constraints on fertility, including work-life balance and gender equity issues, which also face significant cultural barriers and are likely to take a long time to change.

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