

# DADDY'S HOME

## Fathers who stay at home do so for economic and parenting reasons, new study shows

Goh Yan Han

More paternity leave and measures to reduce the stigma of stay-home fathering are among a new set of policy recommendations to support fathers in active parenting.

Twenty-one stay-at-home fathers and nine of their spouses were interviewed to better understand how they perform their roles and draw insights on fatherhood, parenting and household work.

The study, conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), was released yesterday.

The study's author, Ms Yvonne Arivalagan, a research associate with IPS, said: "Economic reasons as well as a preference to raise their children on their own without external support were the two main reasons why the dads became stay-at-home dads."

Traditional gender norms were less important in deliberating over the decision, she added.

These fathers, interviewed in 2018, were mostly from the middle-to upper-middle classes.

They were between the ages of 29 and 67, and had been stay-at-home fathers for an average of around six years.

The study was funded by the Ministry of Social and Family Development under the Social and Family Research Fund.

Many of the fathers interviewed had assumed the role due to difficulties in finding employment, or had a spouse with a higher and more stable income.

They also believed that a parent should be the child's main caregiver, as opposed to asking grandparents for help, hiring a foreign domestic worker or sending the child to childcare centres.

The interviewees also saw parenting as a gender-neutral activity.

One 31-year-old father said: "We have our own style of teaching, we have our own philosophy – which is also why we can't agree with a mass care setting for young children."

Time spent as a stay-at-home father had also allowed the men to develop skills and adaptive strategies, such as learning the cues, needs and patterns of children's behaviour, to successfully perform the role that they were unfamiliar with.

"This challenges the assumption that mothers have an advantage when it comes to parenting," said Ms Arivalagan.

The fathers also emphasised the "useful" and conventionally masculine aspects of fatherhood, using words like "protector" and "leader" when describing their roles, which

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they also said was different from mothers'.

This was likely a coping mechanism or response to the stigma faced by fathers for choosing to stay at home, said Ms Arivalagan.

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Family members would comment on them "wasting" their potential or "mooching" off their wives.

The study also found that strong cultural scripts prevented stay-at-home fathers and breadwinner mothers from fully embracing their roles, which are traditionally reversed.

One 44-year-old father said: "No matter how much a father has done, a child will always need (his) mother because we have different modes of care and love."

A 34-year-old mother said: "I have to be very mindful and careful about the decisions that I make and how I can actually progress in my career... while being mindful that I also have a role to play as a mum."

The study presented several policy recommendations, gathered from interviewees as well as expanded upon from the findings.

It suggested policies here could more closely reflect that economic reasons play a large factor over gender norms in dads' decisions to stay home.

For example, changes could be made to the Grandparent Caregiver Relief, given to working mothers who engage the help of their parents, grandparents, parents-in-law or grandparents-in-law to take care of their children. Working fathers are not eligible for this relief.

Given the importance of time in developing fathers' skills and confidence, the study also called for more paternity leave.

Two weeks of paternity leave is not enough time to contribute significantly to childcare, with one father noting that "it's just a vacation".

Paternity leave should, hence, be extended, and be exclusive and non-transferable for fathers, rather than having increased shared parental leave, said the study.

Research in other countries found that mothers were seen as the "owners" of such leave.

Workplaces could also introduce a paternity cover policy where a temporary employee is hired for a six-month period while a staff member is on extended paternity leave, similar to the maternity cover practised by some companies here, said Ms Arivalagan.

Government policy support and communications could also highlight that being a father and caregiver is not emasculating, and frame parenting as involving a spectrum of roles that both parents can fulfil equally well.

Should the policy recommendations be implemented, it could reduce the stress many mothers face in taking on the lion's share of household work, she said.

"It could also bring fathers closer to their children," she added. "A lot of parents naturally would want to spend time with their children, fathers and mothers alike."

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Mr Lee Kwong Luen became a stay-at-home dad 11 years ago to take care of his son, Jue Ming, who has haemophilia B, a rare disorder where his blood does not clot normally, as well as mild autism. Mr Lee said that "living in an Asian country, we are used to fathers being the ones out working", and one of the biggest challenges he has faced has been the stigma that comes with being a stay-at-home father. PHOTO: COURTESY OF LEE KWONG LUEN

## Need to change mindsets, says father

For the past 11 years, Mr Lee Kwong Luen, 49, has been a stay-at-home father.

One of the biggest challenges he has faced has been the stigma that comes with the role.

"Living in an Asian country, we are used to fathers being the ones out working," said Mr Lee.

"I have come across a few instances when I send my son to school where I'm met with looks from other parents who don't understand my situation," he said.

His son Lee Jue Ming, 12, was diagnosed shortly after birth with haemophilia B, a rare disorder where his blood does not clot normally. He is now a Primary 5 pupil in a mainstream school, and also has mild autism.

Mr Lee and his wife, 46, who works in human resources, also have a 16-year-old daughter.

The decision to stay home was a difficult one, said Mr Lee, who was with his last company for 15 years as a mechanical engineering technician. But his son's growing size meant it was too physically demanding for his wife or mother to carry him around and take him to hospital regularly.

His wife was also earning more than him at the time, while his employer, who had been understanding at the start, was showing signs of unhappiness over his frequent taking of urgent leave, as well as medical leave as caring for his son took a toll on his own body, said Mr Lee.

"I put my heart and soul (into my job), and suddenly I had to give it all up. It took some time for me to adjust," he added.

For many men, success in their careers gives a sense of achievement, said Mr Lee. But for him, that was gone. "Now I shift my attention to my children, coaching them – and I find pride in their achievements."

He does the household chores like cleaning and the laundry, while his mother helps with the cooking.

Although his son's condition is now more stable, unexpected situations still crop up from time to time, making it difficult for him to go back to work, which is something he thinks about occasionally.

"I'd like to do something to help lighten the financial burden, but I have also been away from the workforce for more than a decade. Things have changed," he said.

Mr Lee felt "more paternity leave should have been introduced long ago". This would better support fathers looking to be more active in caring for their children. Mindsets towards fathers taking a more active role at home or being stay-at-home dads have to be changed, and policies to support parents can be more gender-neutral, he added.

"More support has to be given to help make this decision, which can be difficult," said Mr Lee, referring to stay-at-home fathering. "But in the end, it comes back to stigma, which is the most difficult to overcome."

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