

# Raising kids shouldn't be such a struggle. How society treats parents matters

Parenthood is not just a personal choice but a sacrifice for the common good that deserves more social recognition.

**Tan Poh Lin**

For the first time, Singapore's resident total fertility rate fell below one. The 0.97 figure for 2023, a preliminary estimate, is approximately half of the level needed for the population to replace itself.

The decline comes despite several policy announcements in the last two years to make parenthood more attractive to Singaporean couples. These include the enhancement of the Baby Bonus cash gift by \$3,000, the extension of paid paternity leave from two weeks to four weeks and the launching of tripartite guidelines to increase workers' access to flexible work arrangements.

In the recent Budget 2024 announcements, Singapore is also lowering childcare centre and special education fees, and introducing a new housing voucher system that will allow families the option to rent from the open market while waiting for their Build-To-Order flats.

Will these steps go some way towards addressing the concerns?

Many of these policies are designed to offset childbearing expenditures and to make parenthood more compatible with work. Yet, couples often remark that although policy measures to support parenthood are helpful, this help, increasingly generous as it is, simply doesn't go far enough in addressing the high monetary and non-monetary



Giving parents greater social recognition through rethinking childbearing as more than just a consumer or lifestyle choice, as well as offering concrete advantages, reflects what society owes parents in taking on dramatic life-transforming costs and contributing to Singapore's demographic needs, says the writer. ST FILE PHOTO

costs they foresee.

The Baby Bonus scheme provides objectively a sizeable sum of money – up to \$33,000 when the Child Development Account grants and matched contributions are included. But for most families, this sum is unlikely to cover the total financial outlay of child-rearing for more than the first few years.

Beyond financial costs, parents also shell out large “invisible” expenditures on children in the form of time, for which they are uncompensated. One National University of Singapore study estimates that on average, mothers spend four hours engaging with their children on a weekday, while fathers spend two hours. On weekends, these figures balloon up to over seven and six hours, respectively.

For many, these costs are high

enough to deter them from enlarging their families.

Though policy measures can reduce the costs of childbearing, it would be unrealistic to expect them to fully close the leisure and disposable income gaps between parents and non-parents.

In other words, in addition to offsetting costs, we also need more pull factors for parenting.

Recent research by the Institute of Policy Studies found that young people are less likely to see marriage and parenthood as a necessary phase of life, as seen by previous generations.

So, to move the needle, it's important that parenthood is not merely seen through the lens of costs, but also viewed as something that generates social returns in the form of recognition and moral support that can help make it a rewarding experience,

or at least less of a struggle, for those who step up.

To do so, there needs to be the introduction of a systemwide recognition of the important role that parents play. It requires a mindset shift in how we value parenthood and what we as a society can do, so it becomes an easier choice for those contemplating having more children.

## FORMS OF SOCIAL RECOGNITION

The simplest, yet perhaps most important, forms that this can take include daily interactions, such as greater adherence to the norm of giving way to prams when entering lifts or on the sidewalk. For many exhausted parents trying to get around with their toddlers in tow, that can make their day.

Holding regular school and community appreciation events also provides a forum for parents to build support networks, receive public affirmation and hear from their own children that their efforts have all been worth it.

To undergird systemwide attitudinal change, public awareness campaigns and greater media representation of the challenges and rewards of parenthood can highlight the significance of parents' contributions, while creating a space for tackling unrealistically high expectations placed on parents, especially mothers.

Beyond symbolic gestures, concrete measures such as a separate car ballot system for families with at least two pre-school-age children can make a meaningful difference to the parenthood experience.

Most parents will likely tell you that travelling by public transport is certainly possible, but is much harder than two adults travelling alone, due to the need to push a stroller weighed down by diaper bags, tissues, extra clothes and snack packs, among other things, while making sure that the children are safely by their side and staying out of trouble.

Private-hire cars are a possible option, but the booster seat requirements make it more difficult to find a match, especially if there are multiple children needing the seats.

As a society, do we simply say this is what parents signed up for, so they should just join the queue for goods and services, or do we see families with children as deserving of a status worthy of additional consideration and collective investment?

Childbearing is often still regarded as just a personal choice. According to this view, since no one is forcing parents to have children, those who do decide to pull the trigger have chosen to commit themselves, and therefore should bear the brunt of the burdens.

Agreed, parenthood is a voluntary choice. But that should not be a penalising factor. An outward-looking spirit of doing more than what is obligatory is worth encouraging and indeed necessary to building a caring society.

Of course, one can point to selfish motivations such as the intrinsic rewards of raising children and old-age support. But that reasoning is less relevant today. As Singaporeans' education and earnings have increased, few couples contemplating having children are doing so because they want to rely on monthly income support from them.

## CHILDBEARING AS A CIVIC CONTRIBUTION

It is high time we understood the big picture. Parenthood is a necessity for society. The production of future generations is a social imperative.

So, while childbearing is not a civic duty, it is a civic contribution. That means couples who are disinclined to pursue parenthood should not be subjected to undue pressure.

But it also means parents, who have placed themselves in a position where they expect to sacrifice personal well-being for the betterment of society, should receive, in return, some measure of social recognition and status.

Parenthood creates large positive net fiscal externalities enjoyed by the rest of society. People are needed to forge relationships and connections, and carry on our traditions and belief systems. Our future children play economic and social functions that cannot be readily replaced by machines or even immigrants.

For Singapore, our fertility rate is so low that it is teetering on the edge of a demographic crisis due to a rapidly ageing population and drastic social change.

Giving parents greater social recognition through both a rethinking of childbearing as more than just a consumer or lifestyle choice, as well as offering concrete advantages, reflects what society owes parents in taking on dramatic life-transforming costs and contributing to Singapore's demographic needs.

It also reflects increased consideration and kindness towards those among us who take on a greater share of caregiving, which should be extended to other types of households with additional needs.

Yet in singling out parents and other caregiving groups for additional support, there is also a need to be careful not to inadvertently relegate them to the “caregiver” track.

While they should be first in line for care-related goods and services, benefits such as access to care leave and flexible work arrangements should be made as universal as possible.

Such an approach combats discrimination, and fosters healthier attitudes towards balancing work and life.

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