

Getting fathers more involved in raising children

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Singapore has a narrow gender gap in education, health and economic participation, but it is fair to say that the traditional division of labour within the family still exists here. Caring for children and household chores are seen as the domain of women, while men are seen as the economic providers.

In a 2009 research study, sociologist Paulin Tay Straughan found that, out of the 19 domestic labour tasks listed in her survey, female respondents were responsible for an average of 8.8 tasks compared with 2.7 tasks for men. The primary responsibility of men was to do household repairs, wash the car and pay the bills. Women were responsible for all other tasks, and all the caregiving.

Can more care-work (caregiving and household chores) responsibility be taken on by men and would this have a positive social impact?

In his fourth IPS-Nathan Lecture on March 4, Mr Ho Kwon Ping suggested that sharing responsibilities equally within the family, in conjunction with work-life integration, could reduce the stress that women face in balancing work and family life. This could lead to higher birth rates.

Mr Ho, the S R Nathan Fellow for Singapore, cited the example of Sweden, where “the state essentially helped mothers to nudge fathers to do their share of parenting, which was a key factor in convincing women to have more children”.

Parents in Singapore agree that caring for children should be shared by both mothers and fathers. A survey commissioned by the National Population and Talent Division (NPTD) in 2012 reported that an overwhelming 99 per cent of married respondents expressed support for shared parental responsibility.

INCLUDE DAD FROM THE START

I believe that childcare is too important to be left to only one parent. With the mother being primarily responsible, it is also unfair for the father, who becomes less likely to establish a bond with the child that is as strong as that commonly experienced by the mother.

Many mothers take at least 12 of their entitled 16 weeks of maternity leave upon the delivery of their child. Should fathers also be required to take their one week of paternity leave within the first 16 weeks of the child's life?

Currently, fathers have the option of using their paternity leave allocation any time within the child's first year. The point of my suggestion is not to remove flexibility, but to stress the importance of fathers participating in shared parental responsibility as early as possible, and supporting their wives while they recuperate from childbirth. After the first 16 weeks, the father

can rely on the six days of infant care leave and six days of childcare leave that are granted to all parents annually.

I would go further to suggest another tweak to the benefits offered to parents. Currently, the law states that working fathers can share in one week of the 16 weeks of maternity leave, subject to their wife's agreement, in addition to their one week of paternity leave. This benefit should be expanded and reframed. First, the last eight weeks of the mother's maternity leave, which is paid for by the Government, should be converted into shared parental leave. This will encourage parents to discuss how both parties can balance caregiving with work commitments.

Next, the words "subject to the agreement of the mother" should be reworded to "subject to mutual agreement between parents". Policy can shape attitudes and behaviour and by making clear that both mother and father should decide how best to utilise the state-sponsored portion of maternity leave, it reinforces the idea of shared responsibility in caring for a newborn.

The Dads for Life movement brought about the Fathers@Schools programme in 2010 to involve fathers in their children's school-life. This is significant, but roping in fathers only during their children's schooling years may come too late. Fathers should be encouraged to actively participate in childcare and even housework from the start, through caring for his newborn.

This could also support the shared role ideology, postulated by sociologist Jessie Bernard, which proposes that both parties in a marriage shoulder domestic and economic provider responsibilities, therefore allowing equal opportunities to participate in both domestic domain and formal employment regardless of gender.

Watching their fathers share in care-work and not merely "helping" their wives is positive for children. They will likely grow up learning through observation the practice of mothers and fathers playing equal roles in raising the family. Of course, a shared-role approach in care-work cannot be achieved through simply modifying the leave entitlement of parents.

The state's provision of accessible and affordable childcare services, and a commitment by employers to helping employees achieve work-life balance are among the other factors that will promote shared responsibility in caregiving and housework. It will be interesting to see if this indeed has any impact on Singapore's birth rates. Even if it does not, it is a positive direction towards a fairer society.

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