

Have more, not fewer, Tiger babies: PM

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Singapore's total fertility rate slid to lowest-ever level of 1.23 last year

Singapore's productivity push to grow the economy extends beyond the factory floor and corporate boardroom, to the bedroom.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has called on couples to have more, not fewer, babies in the Year of the Tiger, which starts tomorrow.

His message comes amid a dire situation in which Singapore's total fertility rate slid to the lowest-ever level of 1.23 last year, down from 1.28 in 2008.

It is far below the replacement rate of 2.1. In other words, Singapore was short of at least 10,000 babies to replace Singaporeans in the community.

For the Chinese, the rate was even lower. It fell from 1.14 in 2008 to 1.09 last year, which is equal to the lows in 2003 and 2004.

Disclosing these figures in his Chinese New Year message, Mr Lee said: 'Probably the recession last year made couples hold back having babies. But it also reflects fundamental societal changes that are affecting all East Asian societies.'

The Prime Minister is worried the fertility rate could head further south this year, as some Chinese couples prefer not to have Tiger-year babies.

In each of the last three Tiger years in 1998, 1986 and 1974, the number of births dipped by 7 per cent.

'It is one thing to encourage ourselves with the traditional attributes of the zodiac animals,' he said. 'But it is another to cling on to superstitions against children born in the Year of the Tiger, who are really no different from children born under other animal signs.'

Regardless of the zodiac signs, he said the Government will continue to support and encourage Singaporeans to have children and ensure the country is a conducive place for families.

But family support also plays a pivotal role to lessen the burden of raising junior.

Many working mothers have told Mr Lee they depend on their families to help them juggle a career and children.

Mr Lee cited Ms Sophia Pang, 37, who participated in the all-women Commonwealth Antarctic Expedition last year, which took her away from home for more than two months.

'She told me that during her absence, her mother, mother-in-law, sister and husband all chipped in to look after her three young children,' he said.

'Not everyone will aspire to travel to the ends of the earth,' he added. 'But family support will give many of our women the opportunity and confidence to pursue their careers and interests, and to build families.'

This does not mean they can avoid sacrifices and trade-offs, but he believes it is a tremendous reassurance for a young couple to be able to count on their parents to help care for their children.

'With state and family support, I hope young people will think seriously about getting married and starting families earlier,' he said.

Sociologists, however, are not optimistic the birth dearth would improve this year.

Associate Professor Paulin Straughan, a Nominated Member of Parliament, said the economy is still uncertain, and the new productivity push at workplaces could make matters worse.

It may translate to working harder in the first few years, affecting work-life balance here which would, in turn, affect fertility rates, she said.

Dr Yap Mui Teng, a demographer and fertility expert at the Institute of Policy Studies, however, noted there could be a baby surge in 2012 during the Dragon Year, which is viewed as auspicious.

The Prime Minister also dwelt on maintaining family ties during this festive season when relatives gather for reunion dinners and home visitations.

'I am cheered to see the younger generation keeping alive this healthy tradition, for this means that Singapore families are in good shape,' he said.

But in this globalised world where family members go overseas to work, he stressed that everyone ought to make an extra effort to strengthen the family unit.

They can tap on technology to keep in touch, through e-mail, Skype or Facebook, he said, adding: 'I hope families will make full use of these modern devices to at least have a video chat over the festive period. Nowadays, the other side of the world is no longer so far away.'