

## **It's dual-race for 1 in 6 babies of mixed parentage**

### **Some parents may want to let kids choose later; others may be unaware of new option: Experts**

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One in six newborn babies of mixed parentage was registered as having a double-barrelled race last year after a new policy kicked in allowing parents to do so.

This full-year figure, released for the first time to The Straits Times, comes a year after the policy was implemented in January last year.

The Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) said 16 per cent of mixed-race babies born last year were recorded as being of dual race.

About four in five of those mixed-race babies had their father's race listed first, while one in five had their mother's listed first.

The remaining 84 per cent of mixed-race babies were registered as Eurasian or as having their father's or mother's race.

The option to register a double-barrelled race was introduced to reflect evolving societal changes, in particular, an increasing number of inter-racial marriages in the past decade.

In 2009, 18.3 per cent of 26,000 marriages were inter-racial, a rise from 10.6 per cent of 25,600 marriages in 1999.

Last year, mixed-race newborn babies made up less than 20 per cent of the total number of births.

While official figures for the year have not been released, about 20,500 births were recorded from June to November, according to the Registry of Births and Deaths.

The average number of births a year from 2008 to 2010 was 39,121.

Race is not reflected in birth certificates, but parents of newborn babies must fill in a birth registration form for ICA records.

All Singaporeans of mixed parentage can also have a dual race recorded on their identity cards when they are eligible for one later in life. They are allowed to make changes to it twice - once before they turn 21 and once after that.

While the dual-race take-up rate might appear to be low, Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, called it 'decent' and a 'good start'.

'This initiative is fairly new, so there's no baseline for comparison. It'll take another four to five years to see if it proves to be popular,' he said.

Sociologist Paulin Tay Straughan noted that some parents may want to involve their children in the decision-making process.

'I suspect parents want to see what their child's preference is before they choose to record a race. The individual has a choice when it comes to appreciation of cultural identity,' she said.

She also pointed out that the awareness of such an option may not be widespread.

'It's not easy to understand what the implications are... which race should come first and the factors to be considered. In their confusion, parents withhold a decision first,' she said.

Gynaecologist Christopher Ng said many couples do not know of the option.

'For most of these mixed couples, they find out after the delivery. There should be more awareness of this option... people would probably want to think about it before the baby is born,' he said, suggesting that prenatal classes cover such ground.

But besides cultural identity, there are pragmatic issues to consider too, said parents, referring to how the first component of the dual race will be used for relevant government policies such as the initial assignment to a mother tongue language.

That was the reason Singaporean Mariana Sulaiman and her British husband, banker Miles Peckham-Cooper, both 30, registered their 10-month-old daughter as Malay-Caucasian.

'We live in Singapore and in terms of benefiting from policies, Malay may be more applicable,' said Ms Mariana, a housewife. 'It will also give us more options later, whether we decide to enrol her in a local or international school and in the languages she can take up.'

Another parent, Ms Cai Silei, recently registered her 10-day-old daughter as Indian-Chinese, using her husband's race as the first component.

'Hopefully, this means it will be less competitive for her when she wants to buy an HDB flat in the future,' said the 28-year-old, referring to rules under the Ethnic Integration Policy, which sets ratios for ethnic groups in HDB blocks and precincts to prevent enclaves from forming.

The Singaporean insurance and real estate agent will have to apply for a change of race for their older daughter, P. Shyla, two, who was born in 2010 before the dual-race option was offered. Then, Ms Cai had her race registered as Indian.

Still, families like Ms Cai's said it is important for children to be aware of their mixed parentage as well as the norms and traditions that come with it.

Korean Yu Hee Kyung, 36, for instance, wished she knew of the option when she gave birth to her second child three weeks ago.

'We registered her as a Chinese, like my husband. If we knew, we definitely would have gone for a double-barrelled race,' said Ms Yu, who is married to a Chinese Singaporean.

The couple, who are self-employed, are considering applying for a switch to a dual race for both of their children.

'We think it is important for our children to know their roots. We have given them Korean names to remind them they are of a mixed heritage,' she said.