

More support and mindset change needed to encourage dads to be active parents, says stay-home dad of 11 years

Goh Yan Han

The Straits Times, 30 Jan 2020

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 born and diagnosed with haemophilia B, a rare disorder where his blood does not clot normally. He is now a Primary 5 student 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 the 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 focusing on my children, coaching them - and I find pride in their achievements."

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

Although his son's condition is now more stable, unexpected situations still crop up 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 that "more paternity leave should have been implemented long ago, especially since more mums are being involved with making money". This would better support fathers looking to be more active in taking care of their children.

Mindsets towards dads taking a more active role at home or being stay-home dads also 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-home fathering.

"But in the end, it comes back to stigma, which is the most difficult to overcome."