

IPS study says more support and time could encourage active fathering

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More can be done to encourage active parenting among fathers in Singapore. For instance, increased paternity leave and economic support, and reduced stigma, can help those who want to be more actively involved in bringing up their children.

These are part of a list of policy recommendations based on a study done by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), which interviewed 21 stay-at-home fathers and nine of their spouses.

These fathers, interviewed in 2018, were mostly from middle to upper middle class families, and mainly Chinese and Caucasians, aged between 29 and 67. They had spent an average of six years as stay-at-home dads.

The study was funded by the Ministry of Social and Family Development under the Social and Family Research Fund, and took about three years to complete.

It found that in most families with stay-at-home fathers, the role of a parent is viewed as gender neutral, and it is often driven by economic reasons, or parenting ideologies such as wanting to spend more time with their children instead of employing childcare alternatives.

The study also found that in families with such fathers, the spouses experienced reduced stress and post-natal depression. They also experienced improved marital satisfaction.

IPS research associate Yvonne Arivalagan said improved paternal involvement helps bring fathers closer to their children and perhaps even improves workforce participation of women after childbirth.

Despite the potential benefits, Ms Arivalagan said stay-at-home fathers face considerable challenges, in particular, stigma. She said such fathers often feel useless or that they are doing an inferior job than their wives would, especially when it comes to parenting.

They may face derisive comments from friends and family, often be made to feel that care work is not worth as much as paid work, and may feel guilt and inadequacy - with many also believing the role of the mother is still more important.

In order to do more to support fathers in their parenthood journey, Ms Arivalagan proposed several policy changes, including economic support through initiatives like the caregiver grant, which can help show that the government supports caregiver equality, and will support either parent in caring for their child.

One way to do so would be to extend the Grandparent Caregiver Relief, given to working mothers whose parents, grandparents, parents-in-law or grandparents-in-law help to take care of their children.

Working fathers are currently not eligible for this relief.

She also stressed the importance of time, suggesting that a good way to get fathers more involved could be to extend paternity leave or have more exclusive, non-transferable leave. She added that for some, the current two weeks of paternity leave is not enough to develop skills and confidence in caring for a child.

Mr Brian Chee, 45, who has been a stay-at-home father for about 10 years, told The New Paper that while such policies are useful, it is also important to future-proof fathers who want to take time off to care for their kids.

He said: "A big concern for fathers like me is that after 10 years of caring for your children, how do we re-enter the work force?"

"I cannot put the past 10 years of caring for my child into my resume, so how will I remain competitive?"