

Stay-at-home fathers in S'pore face stigma amid persistent belief mothers are best caregivers: Study

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TODAY, 30 Jan 2020

Stay-at-home fathers in Singapore continue to feel that mothers are the best caregivers to their children even after years of raising their own child, a study has found.

The research paper by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) titled "Stay-at-home fathers and their families: What lessons for policymakers?" also found that such fathers, who make up a growing group here, have to contend with stigma such as "derisive" remarks from friends and family.

According to the Ministry of Manpower's Labour Force in Singapore report, there were about 1,500 stay-at-home fathers in 2017, an increase of 700 from a decade earlier.

Ms Yvonne Arivalagan, the author of the study which was released on Thursday (Jan 30), interviewed 21 stay-at-home fathers and nine of their spouses in 2018 to understand how fathers performed their parenting roles at home.

The fathers, who are Chinese or Caucasian, are from middle or high-income families. All are Singaporeans or permanent residents.

Ms Arivalagan said that low fertility rates tend to occur in societies where working mothers continue to bear the lion's share of household work and childcare.

"The purpose of my study was to see how we can support and create a more enabling environment for fathers to take on a more active role in childcare, and if that could lead to more people being willing to start families and, in a way, be one of the solutions to Singapore's fertility crisis," said Ms Arivalagan during a media briefing on her study on Thursday morning.

Singapore's total fertility rate has been gradually declining over the last few decades. As of 2018, the total fertility rate stood at 1.14, the lowest in the country's history and among the lowest worldwide.

The study found that almost all of the fathers interviewed had decided to become a stay-at-home father out of necessity, rather than a desire to make caregiving their primary role.

Most respondents chose to stay home to raise their children due to the difficulty of finding jobs, or having a spouse who earned more than them.

The fathers said that they also chose to stay home and raise their children as they were motivated by a belief that it is the parent who should be the main caregiver.

They felt that they were best placed to nurture a child's values and personal development and did not want to rely on other sources of childcare such as grandparents, childcare centres or foreign domestic workers.

LEARNING PARENTING OVER TIME

The study found that fathers who stayed home to raise their kids developed strong parenting philosophies over time and gained confidence from witnessing the positive impact of their involvement in their children's development.

This also reduced their reliance on their spouses for guidance.

However, the study noted that fathers continued to describe their parenting roles in masculine terms. For instance, they would describe their roles as being a "protector" or "provider".

They would also continue to leave daily household chores such as cleaning and laundry to domestic helpers or their mothers or mothers-in-law.

The emphasis on masculinity when describing their parenting roles is a coping strategy to deal with society's disrespect or disregard for stay-at-home dads, said Ms Arivalagan.

In addition, despite finding ways to succeed in their roles as stay-at-home fathers, many of these men continued to feel that their wives were better at being the primary caregiver.

For instance, one man said that "no matter how much a father has done, a child will always need a mother", reflecting the sense of inferiority that some stay-at-home fathers feel about performing their roles as a parent compared to women.

DEALING WITH STIGMA

The fathers interviewed also said that they experienced "acute stigma" from society, including from their family members and friends.

For instance, some said that they received derisive comments from their parents-in-law, who would accuse the fathers of "wasting" their potential or "mooching" off their wives.

They also said that there was a lack of support from employers and co-workers. For instance, one father said that his employer had called him "troublesome" after he conveyed his decision to become his child's primary caregiver.

ENCOURAGING FATHERS TO PLAY A MORE ACTIVE PARENTING ROLE

The study said that family policies in Singapore continue to signal that childcare is a woman's responsibility and reinforce gender stereotypes, even as the line is blurring between the traditional roles of men and women.

The policy recommendations put forth by the study include extending the length of paternity leave. The study said that time was a "crucial factor" for fathers to learn parenting skills and that the current two weeks of parenting leave are not sufficient, although it did not recommend how long it should be.

The study also recommends that instead of shared parenting leave, exclusive and non-transferable paternity leave can be put in place for parents.

In Singapore, working fathers may share up to four weeks of the 16 weeks given to their wives for maternity leave.

However, this made mothers the “owners” of the leave, and may dissuade fathers from taking time off to care for their children.

In its place, the study recommends that separate blocks of parental leave be provided to fathers and mothers to care for their children. This leave, which cannot be transferred to one’s spouse, would signal that fathers have a role to play in childcare, said the study.

Ms Arivalagan said that the policy recommendations could signal to society that fathers who are caregivers are accepted and valued. This would help to normalise fathers as the primary caregivers and reduce gender stereotypes, she added.

Mr Kris Tan, who has been a stay-at-home father for the past four years, told TODAY that contrary to the report’s findings, he did not face any stigma from family or friends for his decision to become the primary caregiver to his two daughters. He did not participate in the study.

The 39-year-old said that his friends and family were supportive when he made the decision to raise his daughters, now aged four and four months, while his wife focused on her hawker business.

Nevertheless, like the respondents in the study, Mr Tan also believes that raising children “should be very much done by parents” and not by external caregivers such as foreign domestic workers.

Commenting on the policy proposals recommended by IPS, Mr Tan said that fathers should receive the same length of paternity leave as mothers.

“Without considering the fact that women go through pregnancy and need more time to recover, when we talk about the growth of the child, everything else should be equal because the man has as much responsibility as helping with the children,” said Mr Tan.