

Singapore to Celebrate its Babies With Goodie Bags

Jake Maxwell Watts

The Wall Street Journal, 17 April 2014

Singapore's famously low birthrate may get a boost next year during the country's 50th Independence Day celebrations, when the government says it will celebrate its newborns with baby goodie bags.

Every Singaporean baby born in 2015, the city-state's golden jubilee year, will receive a small collection of gifts, courtesy of the state, according to Singapore's National Population and Talent Division, or NPTD, the government department organizing the goodie bags alongside REACH, the government agency responsible for connecting with citizens.

On April 1 organizers asked Singaporeans to put forth ideas of what should be included in each package, which the NPTD says are solely meant to be celebratory. Around 6,500 suggestions were put forward on websites and at focus group meetings.

A shortlist of 15 items was announced by the NPTD on Wednesday and includes a mix of family-oriented kit, such as a baby sling, diaper bag, picture frame and sippy cup.

Singaporeans have until May 15 to choose five of the shortlisted items that they would most like to see in the jubilee baby gift set. They can make their selections on the NPTD website. An advisory panel comprised of family-oriented interest groups such, as Families for Life, and I Love Children, will select the final prizes sometime after the public phase ends on May 15.

"Children are our hope for the future, and our golden jubilee babies symbolize our hopes and aspirations for the Singapore of tomorrow," Grace Fu, a minister in the prime minister's office, said during the first focus group session about the goodie bags at the beginning of April.

The rising cost of living in Singapore, coupled with changing lifestyles and work priorities, has pushed the average number of children born to each family down to 1.2, just over half of the 2.1 children required to replace the existing population.

A spokesperson at the NPTD denied that the baby gift initiative is aimed at boosting Singapore's birth rate.

Singapore's Yap Mui Teng, a senior research fellow specializing in demography and family at the Institute of Policy Studies, a think-tank at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, said it is not unusual to celebrate national anniversaries with a gift.

But the jubilee year may inadvertently provide some relief to the city-state's perennial population problem.

Take Taiwan as an example. It also struggles with a low birth rate – 0.9 children per woman in 2010, the world's lowest – and, like Singapore, uses a wide range of financial incentives to persuade its population to procreate.

In 2011, when it celebrated its 100th anniversary, nearly 200,000 children were born, a 17.8% increase on the year before, according to Taiwanese government statistics.

Ms. Yap said she believes Singapore's goodie bag initiative "really is commemorative." But she doesn't dismiss the idea that a boost to the birth rate in 2015 would likely be welcome by the government.

"If it happens I think they will be happy about it," she said.