

Marriage and Parenthood (M&P) Reset

Submission to the M&P Workgroup

By **Cultivate SG**

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Executive Summary

1. People are Singapore's only natural resource, and the record-low fertility rates are a sign that something is amiss in Singapore's wider culture and ecosystem. While policies are important, Cultivate SG believes that we need to focus also on our **values and priorities** as a nation.

I. Factors Affecting Marriage and Parenthood

2. In our view, there are four core reasons which we believe to be the greatest contributing factors to our low fertility rates: values, 'kiasu' and 'kancheong' narratives, desocialisation, and a skewed economic trade-off between standard of living and number of children.

A. Values

3. Firstly, values are more important than finances in affecting marriage and parenthood. As Cultivate SG's research shows, parenthood aversion is about whether Singaporeans believe that family life is worth re-ordering their lives around, and for.
4. These explain why, despite rising financial incentives, our TFR has continued to fall. Singaporeans are pursuing a higher standard of living, rather than basic needs *per se*. Despite fewer children, Singaporeans are increasing spending on each child, in an education "arms race", spending \$1.8 billion on private tuition in 2023.
5. This pursuit of an ever-higher standard of living (in terms of material achievement) has inherent limits, which renders this desire difficult to satisfy, because:
 - (a) Singapore has an already-high standard of living;
 - (b) Meritocracy has its limits, making it harder for those less privileged, and this challenge is aggravated by increasing cost of living;
 - (c) According to the economic law of diminishing returns, it becomes increasingly difficult to climb to the next level of attainment at a certain point;
 - (d) Human capacity has its limits, including burnout and mental health challenges;
 - (e) Policies aimed at financial support for childbearing may reinforce a negative feedback loop of the cultural perception that "children are expensive".



B. 'Kiasu' and 'Kancheong' Narratives

6. Secondly, the overarching *narratives, priorities* and *values* frequently stress the vulnerability of Singapore and the need for constant striving in order to survive. This has persisted from the time of the population control campaigns (including the “Stop at Two” campaign) since Independence till today, notwithstanding the reversal of population control policies.
7. The *narratives, priorities* and *values* which remain deeply ingrained throughout Singapore society include:
 - (a) Survivalist national narrative of vulnerability and scarcity;
 - (b) Narrow definition of success based on material achievement and economic growth;
 - (c) “Concerted cultivation” parenting, where parents carefully curate and organise children’s activities for the sake of success;
 - (d) Societal expectations and pursuit of an ever-higher standard of living;
 - (e) Lack of lived experiences in or with large families;
 - (f) Persistent stigma against large families;
 - (g) Economic priorities and work culture being implicitly hostile to family life.
8. The culmination of these *narratives, priorities* and *values* is to produce a culture of hyper-competitiveness, materialism, feelings of lack and constraint, fear and anxiety, and desire for control over our circumstances in present-day Singapore. These mindsets are encapsulated in the colloquial expressions ‘kiasu’ and ‘kancheong’. We need to correct the over-emphasis through a more holistic perspective.

C. Desocialisation

9. Thirdly, we are experiencing desocialisation – defined as the “deprivation of the capacity for social intercourse” – in our digital age, which has negative impacts on marriage, parenthood and society as a whole. Technological revolutions over the past few decades – Internet, smartphones and social media – fundamentally change and condition human development and relationships.
10. Growing evidence of harms include:
 - (a) Negative impact of social media on personal and social development;
 - (b) Loss of opportunities for personal growth through unstructured physical play and interaction;



- (c) Combination with overprotective parenting (also known as “helicopter parenting”) resulting in poor development of physical and mental resilience, and ability to adapt to life’s challenges;
 - (d) Mental health risks of excessive social media use;
 - (e) Exposure to online pornography, which corrupts attitudes towards sex and relationships;
 - (f) Exposure to radical or extreme ideologies which sow enmity between men and women.
11. With the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), we should be highly cautious about the further desocialisation impact of AI.
 12. Another trend in desocialisation is the divide in attitudes among younger men and women towards marriage and parenthood, with younger women feeling less positive about both. These differences in attitudes, especially among the young, are not conducive to the development of good relationships (whether romantic or otherwise) between men and women, and the formation of new marriages and families.
- D. Skewed economic trade-off between standard of living and children
13. Fourthly, there is a clear economic trade-off between *the pursuit of a higher standard of living (for oneself and one’s children, if any)* on one hand, and *the number of children (if any)* on the other. Currently, the trend is heavily skewed against having children (if at all).
 14. The cultural over-emphasis on narrow success – and, relatedly, a purely economic approach towards caregiving – disincentivises people from having and raising children, which ironically has long-term economic and social consequences of the kind that Singapore is now contending with. In her essay *Love and Money*, Anne Manne notes that developed economies have arrived at a society where “there is an economic disincentive to have and care for children, but an economic incentive to restrict fertility and instead invest in one’s own skills and income. It is the irrationality of rational economics”.
 15. We thus recommend addressing the fertility challenge in two broad prongs:
 - (a) Values-based solutions: Looking beyond the metaphorical “weighing scale” by cultivating better values and narratives, and resocialisation through development of character and relationships;
 - (b) Policy solutions: Rebalancing the trade-off between standard of living and parenthood, by addressing practical needs and conveying positive values through policies.



II. Values-based Solutions: Re-prioritising Marriage and Parenthood

16. Low fertility rates are “existential” in at least two ways: they raise questions about the survival and sustainability of the population, and are philosophically “existential”, suggesting a gap in Singaporeans’ sense of purpose, hope and joy of life.
17. For a mid- to long-term shift in marriage and parenthood, a whole-of-society “reset” will require numerous significant shifts:
 - A. Changing the national narrative to one of security, hope and optimism
 18. Firstly, narratives shape values, and national narratives shape national values. To catalyse a shift in values, we need a different story from one of scarcity and survivalism; we need a narrative of *security*, *hope* and *optimism* about Singapore.
 19. The message, both explicit and implicit, should send the message: *Singapore is a safe, secure and comfortable place to have and raise families, and there is hope for our future*. Key features of these narratives include:
 - (a) Developing a healthy patriotism by recognising Singapore’s strengths, including:
 - (i) High standard of living;
 - (ii) Low levels of corruption;
 - (iii) Peace and security;
 - (iv) Power and influence as a nation;
 - (v) Social cohesion and strong values to repel internal and external threats;
 - (b) Gratitude and joy, without complacency;
 - (c) Hope and optimism for the future.
 20. As these are national messages, the Government has an important role to play in shifting the narrative carried within messages on national platforms, the education system, and also to shift its narrative when working with other stakeholders in society.
 - B. Redefining success towards holistic flourishing
 21. Secondly, we urge Singapore to redefine its view of success, to embrace a holistic view of human flourishing. On a neo-Aristotelian understanding, human flourishing encompasses seven universal, self-evident, equally fundamental basic goods: life, knowledge, practical reasonableness, religion (an interest in the higher order), play, aesthetic experience, and friendship (or sociability).
 22. By embracing human flourishing – instead of narrow success – marriage, parenthood and family life will be properly regarded as worthwhile and meaningful pursuits in our collective psyche:
 - (a) Re-prioritisation of marriage, parenthood and family life in society;



- (b) Proper recognition of caregiving and caregivers;
- (c) Valuing rest, play, aesthetic experience and protected time.

C. Valuing children, family and marriage

- 23. Thirdly, we recommend a wholesale shift to reaffirm the intrinsic value and worth of children.
- 24. We should adopt a child-centric approach throughout society, to emphasise that every child is valued and supported. Being pro-child is consistent with being pro-family:
 - (a) Affirming the intrinsic worth and dignity of all children, including their need for special safeguards and care due to their vulnerability;
 - (b) Children have a right to know and be cared for by both father and mother, as far as possible;
 - (c) Affirming the importance of marriage and family, including their benefit to children;
 - (d) Recognising the unique and complementary contributions of men and women to marriage and parenthood;
 - (e) Where it is not possible for one or both parents to be present in a child's life, our society should do its best to help that child to thrive
- 25. A distinction should be drawn between “support” and “incentive”. Most Singaporeans agree that single parents should receive more support, but far fewer agree that single parenting should be encouraged. Thus, we agree with the new child support package announced at the National Day Rally 2026, which supports all children regardless of their parents' marital status.
- 26. At the same time, Singapore should reject bare pro-natalism (such as the view held by Elon Musk), because it is reductionist and dehumanising in nature, treating human beings (including children) as objects, statistics and tools to be used as a means to an end. It pays little or no regard to moral and ethical considerations.



D. Intentionally cultivating character and relationships through in-person activities and interactions

27. Fourthly, given the trends of desocialisation, the human developmental process can no longer be taken for granted. We must be intentional in cultivating character and relationships.
28. These are some key shifts:
 - (a) Rejecting overprotective parenting, and recognising the importance of physical play in physical and mental resilience;
 - (b) Valuing face-to-face interactions and in-person relational connections;
 - (c) Nurturing familial relationships and intergenerational bonds;
 - (d) Sound societal norms, including on men, women, sex and marriage.

III. Policy Solutions: Rebalancing the Trade-off

29. A nation's laws and policies embody and emphasise its values and priorities.
30. We recommend a "whole life course" perspective on marriage and parenthood. The impartation of values and the provision of support for marriage and parenthood should begin from a young age, and persist throughout the entire course of life for every Singaporean.
31. Seen pragmatically and economically, policies should aim at rebalancing the trade-off between maintaining (or improving) one's standard of living on one hand, and having and raising children on the other.

A. Financial costs

32. Policies on financial costs should draw a differentiated approach depending on people's needs.

(1) Supporting "big ticket" expenses – housing and car ownership – according to need

33. In land-scarce Singapore, there are two "big ticket" expenses: housing and car ownership. However, the current policies on both housing and car ownership are significantly different. In housing, the emphasis is in ownership, accessibility and affordability. For car ownership, the emphasis is on "car lite" society, leaving these to be allocated through the free market under the Certificate of Entitlement (COE) system.



34. We recommend a more equitable allocation in order to better support marriage and parenthood (as well as family life as a whole):

- (a) Recalibrating housing options according to need (addressed in sub-section D);
- (b) COE priority scheme for families and caregivers of young children, the elderly, persons with disabilities and those with serious health conditions.

(2) Public transport vouchers for each Singaporean child

35. We recommend providing Public Transport Vouchers (PTVs) as part of the newly-announced SG Child Support Package, where PTVs are provided annually to each child from the ages of 7 to 18 (on top of the existing student concessions already available; younger children currently travel for free on public transport). With this arrangement, families who have more children will naturally receive more support.

B. Work-life Support

36. With modern communication and technology, work today follows workers “everywhere, all the time, all at once” – to adapt the words of Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon – and “the possibility of being contacted at any hour... can quickly become an expectation, and indeed, a demand of constant availability”.
37. Practically, work and family life require availability and commitment. For a working parent (especially those with young children), there must be an appropriate space for both predictability and certainty at work with stable rhythms and routines, and flexibility at work to address various exigencies.
38. In our view, the biggest current challenge in work-life support for families lies in “workplace culture”, defined as “shared values, belief systems, attitudes and the set of assumptions that people in a workplace share”.
39. In setting out our recommendations, we are mindful of various competing considerations and interests:
- (a) There are limits to how far policies can affect work-life support;
 - (b) Delicate balance in the relationships between employers and employees;
 - (c) Singapore’s need to maintain competitiveness in a global economy in both the short- and long-run.



(1) Ensuring job security, especially in early career and during transitions to marriage and parenthood

40. To support marriage and parenthood, there are a few critical junctures where job security is particularly important: in early career and during transitions to marriage and parenthood.
41. We recommend strengthening job security during these critical junctures:
 - (a) Enhancing job security in early career:
 - (i) Enhancing availability and early stability of jobs, in both the private and public sectors;
 - (ii) Developing skills among new workers for a world shaped by AI;
 - (iii) Smoothening and shortening path to job security by avoiding long training periods in jobs and professions.
 - (b) Promoting seamless transitions to marriage and parenthood amidst work. The various recommendations below are addressed to these transitions.

(2) Subsidy for parental leave covers for small- and medium-sized enterprises

42. We recommend creating a grant to support parental leave covers in SMEs, to help cover part of the cost of hiring of a temporary worker or paying more to existing workers to cover the manpower absences due to parental leave.

(3) Supporting the growth of a market for temporary work covers

43. We recommend the Government to work with the private sector to help nurture a structured and regulated industry of temporary hires and to facilitate job matching to fill manpower gaps. This could involve working with job portals to build a readily available pool of “parental leave covers”.

(4) Issuing new TAFEP guidelines on fair practices in light of parental and childcare leave

44. We recommend that the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) should issue guidelines regarding what constitutes “fair” practices (including assessment and compensation) in light of parental and childcare leave. This includes fair practices with regard to parents who take parental and/or childcare leave, and fair practices with regard to other colleagues who help to cover the additional work.



(5) Legal right to request flexible work arrangements, along with legal protections

45. To better formalise the flexible work arrangement (FWA) framework in Singapore and lay down concrete protections for workers who request FWAs, we recommend adopting a framework which shares some similarities to the Retirement and Re-employment Act (RRA):

- (a) Right of employee to request FWA in writing;
- (b) Variation of job scope, terms and conditions to be based on reasonable factors, including the employee's productivity, performance, duties and responsibilities;
- (c) Right of aggrieved employees to make representations to Minister;
- (d) Framework operates in addition to, instead of supplanting, protections under the Workplace Fairness Act and other laws or guidelines.

(6) Introduce family care leave, which includes adults caring for elderly parents and grandparents caring for grandchildren

46. We propose the introduction of a new family care leave in similar terms to the Civil Service Family Care Leave, where an employee may have Family Care Leave of up to 3 working days, for an employee to take care of an immediate family member when the main caregiver is not available. An immediate family member is defined as one's spouse, children (not covered under childcare leave), parents (including in-laws, step-parents and step-parents in-law), siblings, grandparents (including grandparents in-law) and grandchildren.

(7) Annual audit on family-friendly practices throughout the public service

47. To better promote family-friendly practices throughout the public service, we recommend establishing and conducting an annual audit throughout the public service to review compliance with family-friendly laws, policies and contractual obligations. The audit should encompass parental, childcare and family care leave take-up rates, and availability of FWAs.

(8) Company reviews on family-friendly practices in the private sector

48. We recommend the Government to work with company review websites and job portals to develop reviews of companies in relation to their family-friendly practices. These should encompass reviews in relation to their policies and practices regarding parental, childcare and family care leave, flexible work arrangements, work-life balance and work culture.



(9) Grant for employers who employ stay-at-home parents returning to the workforce

49. Currently, there are schemes such as the Senior Employment Credit (SEC), Enabling Employment Credit (EEC) and CPF Transition Offset (CTO) that are given to employers to help support the employment of seniors and persons with disabilities. We recommend implementing a grant in similar terms to support the employment of stay-at-home parents who wish to return to the workforce.

(10) Build and enforce a stronger norm against overwork

50. To strengthen predictability and certainty at work and protect workers against overwork, we recommend building and enforcing a stronger norm against overwork. Here are some policy recommendations:
- (a) Clear start and end times of work;
 - (b) Consider extending the application of the Employment Act rules on rest days, hours of work and conditions of service to more employees;
 - (c) Stricter and more proactive enforcement of rules against overwork.

C. Caregiving

51. Caregiving is formative of character, an act of love and self-giving, and a path to actualisation of our personhood. It is not ultimately reducible to a mere service; there are deeply human elements of love, reciprocity and sacrifice involved.

(1) Expand tax relief measures for working mothers to all working parents

52. We recommend extending the Working Mother's Child Relief (WMCR) and Grandparent Caregiver Relief (GCR) to all working parents.

(2) Maternity stipend for non-working mothers

53. The positions of a working mother and a non-working mother are significantly different in terms of legal entitlement and payment by the Government, notwithstanding the fact that both share the similar practical reality that they do not work for the first few months after the child's birth.
54. To support non-working mothers, we recommend a maternity stipend for non-working mothers, at a sum of \$250 per week for the duration of 16 weeks after birth (amounting to a total of \$4,000). In the event a working mother on maternity leave draws less than the stipend amount, she would be entitled to this amount as well.



D. Housing

55. As a matter of principle, housing policies should adapt to accommodate our population's needs, rather than – as per the population control campaign of the 1970s – to control our population in order to fit into housing constraints.

(1) Larger homes for larger families

56. We recommend providing *larger homes for larger families*. Possible (non-exhaustive and non-mutually exclusive) options to provide *larger homes for larger families* include:
- (a) Repurposing existing 3Gen flats for larger families;
 - (b) Building jumbo flats and maisonettes reserved for larger families and/or multi-generational families;
 - (c) Allowing larger families and/or multi-generational families to purchase adjoining HDB units;
 - (d) Giving larger families and/or multi-generational families priority and right to ballot for two adjoining units in Build-to-Order (BTO) projects.
57. To help with affordability for larger families and multi-generational families, we recommend that a grant should be made available to those who wish to upgrade to larger homes. This grant may be tiered according to household income levels, so that more assistance can be given to lower-income families.

(2) Waivers of Minimum Occupation Period for growing families

58. We recommend that a Minimum Occupation Period (MOP) waiver should be granted by default to buyers eligible for the Third Child Priority Scheme (TCPS). Similar to the existing limitation under the TCPS, the three children who have helped the buyer qualify for the waiver must continue to live with the buyer during the MOP of the new flat. This is in keeping with the policy intent of the MOP framework.
59. We invite the Government to further consider the need for measures and safeguards to ensure that the scheme is used for genuine needs of larger families, and to guard against abuse and profiteering.



E. Healthcare

60. In our view, the following areas in healthcare (for children and their families) deserve greater attention:

(1) Affordability of healthcare for premature births

61. As Singaporeans increasingly delay marriage and parenthood, there may be an increasing need to address the healthcare needs of premature births. We recommend as follows:

- (a) Review options to improve affordability of NICU;
- (b) Review insurability of children born premature.

(2) Post-partum care

62. We recommend strengthening post-partum care as follows:

- (a) Education of mothers and family members regarding post-partum depression and other mental health challenges;
- (b) Mental health screening of both parents;
- (c) Free counselling for post-partum mental health challenges.

F. Preschool

63. Three factors are significant in relation to preschools: affordability, accessibility and quality.
64. We recommend expanding government support to – as far as possible – cover all preschools, to enhance affordability, accessibility and quality. In our multi-religious society, there are preschools run by faith-based groups. Thus, the scope of support should also maintain the diversity of preschool choices by allowing them to preserve their unique character and ethos.



G. Education

65. Young Singaporeans typically spend most of their formative years of life in the education system before joining the workforce. These are critical years where children and young people learn skills, shape values, develop character and build relationships, which help them later in life.

(1) Intentional development of character, responsibility and skills for domestic life

66. We recommend the education system to make deliberate effort to develop in students the character, responsibility and skills necessary to help domestic life to thrive. This includes:
- (a) Expanding the length and scope of cleaning time, from primary school to junior college;
 - (b) Extending the amount of time allocated for culinary practice, and making it compulsory for Upper Secondary students also.

(2) Phone-free primary and secondary schools

67. We recommend taking existing bans on smartphones and smartwatches during school hours further, by implementing a phone-free policy throughout primary and secondary schools. This includes:
- (a) Ban on all mobile phones during school hours;
 - (b) Devices to be kept only in designated storage areas.

(3) Family life planning as part of career planning

68. We recommend explicitly incorporating family life planning as part of career planning. This includes:
- (a) Encouraging students to actively think about their aspirations regarding marriage and parenthood in education and career planning;
 - (b) Recognising the value of family life in education and career planning;
 - (c) Encouraging students to find a balance in their goals, between the pursuit of career and family life.



(4) Teaching accurate facts about fertility as part of sexuality education

69. We recommend including scientifically accurate facts about fertility as part of sexuality education. This includes:
- (a) Fertility decline with age, in both men and women;
 - (b) Declining success rate of assisted reproduction technology (ART) with age;
 - (c) Declining success rate of egg freezing with age.

(5) Institutes of Higher Learning to support marriage and parenthood, and offer a range of part-time courses for upskilling purposes

70. Institutes of higher learning (IHLs) have a role to play in supporting individuals at different life stages, including married individuals, pregnant students and stay-at-home parents.
71. We recommend as follows:
- (a) IHLs to offer part-time courses, with flexible schedules, to facilitate upskilling;
 - (b) Clear policies on marriage and parenthood (including pregnancy), including leaves of absence;
 - (c) Grant of additional SkillsFuture Credits to stay-at-home parents and caregivers of elderly, usable for courses at IHLs, tiered based on employment status (part-time / unemployed).

(6) Tackle the “education arms race”

72. When seen from the perspective of marriage and parenthood, the education “arms race” diminishes a child’s experience of childhood and of family life (e.g. because of high parental expectations), and raises the perceived financial and non-financial costs associated with parenthood due to the perceived need for parents to spend copious amounts of money on tuition and enrichment for children.
73. We recommend as follows:
- (a) Review and consider measures to lower the stakes associated with major exams (e.g. PSLE, ‘O’ and ‘A’ Levels);
 - (b) Increase the emphasis on skills development and work experience (e.g. internships, on-the-job training), as opposed to paper qualifications alone;
 - (c) Review and consider measures to reduce the perceived need for tuition and enrichment.



H. Other recommendations

74. We have made some other recommendations. Some of these relate more directly to marriage and parenthood than others, while some are less direct but continue to have profound impact.

(1) Adoption

75. We recommend encouraging adoption as follows:

- (a) Simplifying adoption process, through a single one-stop portal;
- (b) Regular disclosure of number and ages of children for whom adoption would be the best permanency option.

(2) Miscarriages and stillbirths

76. In situations of stillbirth and miscarriage, the parents of the deceased children need time and space to grieve and recover, as well as support. We recommend the following:

- (a) Compassionate leave for miscarriage and stillbirth;
- (b) Free counselling and medical follow-up after miscarriage and stillbirth;
- (c) Medical leave may be used for physical and mental recovery from miscarriage and stillbirth.

(3) Resisting overprotection of children

77. Overprotection of children contributes to desocialisation. It damages their physical and mental development, character formation and relationship skills. Overprotective parenting is also time-consuming and energy-draining, thereby increasing the perceived costs of parenthood.

78. We recommend a broad norm against overprotection of children, at all levels of society. These include:

- (a) Reasonable, age-appropriate balance between risk and safety in all laws and policies concerning children;
- (b) Laws and policies should not encourage overzealous litigation under the guise of child safety;
- (c) Government agencies to take a firm stance against unreasonable demands and pressure from overprotective parents and guardians;



(d) Public education against overprotective parenting.

(4) Building a broad norm in favour of phone-free childhoods, physical play and face-to-face interaction

79. We recommend building a broad norm in favour of phone-free childhoods, physical play and face-to-face interaction. Key aspects include:

- (a) Supporting phone-free childhoods through public education and collective decisions by parents;
- (b) Discouraging social media use in children;
- (c) Promoting physical play;
- (d) Encouraging face-to-face interaction;
- (e) Laws and policies against excessive social media use.

(5) National Service

80. Although the primary aim of National Service (NS) should remain national security and safety of Singapore, there are secondary benefits. The positive character, skills and values shaped through NS are good qualities in husbands and fathers, and have long-term implications that can help support marriage and parenthood.

81. We recommend the following:

- (a) Tough, safe and effective training, with strict discipline, to develop physical and mental resilience;
- (b) Messages emphasising the importance of protecting one's family and nation;
- (c) Modelling positive masculinity, and opposing negative attitudes towards women;
- (d) Involvement in chores such as cleaning, regardless of rank.

(6) Firm stance against ideologies sowing enmity between men and women

82. We recommend taking a firm stance against ideologies which sow enmity between men and women, such as extreme misogynist and misandrist rhetoric. This includes "incel" (short for "involuntary celibate") beliefs. Legally, these ideologies can be dealt with under the Online Safety (Relief and Accountability) Act (OSRAA), under the section addressing "incitement of enmity".



(7) Strengthening marriages, improving family life

83. We recommend as follows:

- (a) The Government to encourage and support programmes and activities which seek to strengthen marriages and improve family life;
- (b) Creation of “marriage and parenting growth credits” for couples and parents to develop marriage and parenting skills (akin to SkillsFuture Credits in relation to job-related upskilling).

(8) Consider gazettement more public holidays

84. We invite the Government to study and consider gazettement more public holidays to emphasise the value of rest and recreation, and spending time with one’s family (including extended family).

~~~ End of Executive Summary ~~~



## **Introduction**

1. Singapore's total fertility rate (TFR) hit a new record-low of 0.87 in 2025, having fallen below replacement level fertility of 2.1 since 1977.<sup>1</sup> Singapore entered into "super aged" status as a society this year, with at least 21% of citizens aged 65 and above.<sup>2</sup>
2. As a non-profit organisation dedicated to marriage, family, children and social harmony, Cultivate SG welcomes the establishment of the Marriage and Parenthood Reset Workgroup, and the efforts to reset attitudes and practices relating to these matters across society.<sup>3</sup>
3. People are Singapore's only natural resource, and a vibrant population is necessary for Singapore's survival and competitiveness. The record-low fertility rates are a sign that something is amiss in Singapore's wider culture and ecosystem. This includes our values and priorities, and attitudes towards the roles of men and women, marriage, family and children.
4. While policies are important, Cultivate SG believes that policy solutions alone are insufficient to catalyse a nationwide "reset" on marriage and parenthood. Instead, we need to focus also on our **values and priorities** as a nation.
5. In this submission, we will be addressing the following in three sections:
  - I. Our analysis regarding factors affecting marriage and parenthood in Singapore, which relate to our societal values, national narratives, trends of desocialisation and skewed economic trade-off between standard of living and children;
  - II. Values-based solutions, which are necessary to address the fertility decline, by reprioritising marriage and parenthood throughout society;
  - III. Policy recommendations regarding financial costs, work-life support, caregiving, housing, healthcare, preschool, education and more, seeking to rebalance the trade-off in favour of marriage and parenthood.



<sup>1</sup> Department of Statistics, "Births And Fertility Rates": <https://tablebuilder.singstat.gov.sg/table/TS/M810091>.

<sup>2</sup> National Population and Talent Division, "Population in Brief 2026": [https://www.population.gov.sg/files/Population\\_in\\_Brief\\_2026.pdf](https://www.population.gov.sg/files/Population_in_Brief_2026.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> National Population and Talent Division, "Speech by Minister Indranee Rajah on Population at the Committee of Supply Debate 2026" (26 February 2026): <https://www.population.gov.sg/speech-by-minister-indranee-rajah-on-population-at-the-committee-of-supply-debate-2026/>; National Population and Talent Division, "New Workgroup to Review Policies and Galvanise Societal Support for Marriage and Parenthood Reset" (29 April 2026): <https://www.population.gov.sg/new-workgroup-to-review-policies-and-galvanise-societal-support-for-marriage-and-parenthood-reset/>.



## **I. Values, Narratives and Desocialisation: Factors Affecting Marriage and Parenthood**

6. With the exception of one country – Israel – fertility rates have declined to below replacement levels across the developed world.<sup>4</sup> Today, the “Asian Tiger” economies who experienced rapid economic growth from the 1960s to the 1990s also experience the lowest fertility rates in the world. At a TFR of 0.87, Singapore ranks third (0.87), behind Hong Kong and South Korea (second-lowest, both at 0.8), and Taiwan (lowest, at 0.695).<sup>5</sup> This is no mere coincidence.
7. In this section, we will highlight four core reasons which we believe to be the greatest contributing factors to our low TFR:
  - A. Values are the biggest factor affecting marriage and parenthood, beyond other considerations such as financial cost;
  - B. Overarching national narratives in Singapore nurture ‘kiasu’ and ‘kancheong’ mindsets among Singaporeans – reflecting the long tail of the “Stop at Two” population control campaign – which are detrimental to marriage and parenthood;
  - C. There is a trend of desocialisation amidst our digital age, with divides in attitudes between younger men and women towards marriage and parenthood and relational deficit;
  - D. Practically and economically, there is a skewed economic trade-off between standard of living and having children (if at all), making parenthood unattractive for a pragmatic society like ours.

### **A. Values: The Biggest Factor in Marriage and Parenthood**

8. Superficially, the high financial cost of raising children ranks as the top stated reason discouraging people from having children. This was the finding of the Government’s Marriage and Parenthood Survey 2021,<sup>6</sup> and Cultivate SG has found similar data



<sup>4</sup> Melissa Garside, “The Fertility Rate of Every Country in the World” *The Visual Capitalist* (17 May 2026): <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/fertility-rate-of-world-populations/>.

<sup>5</sup> “Fertility rate falls to lowest globally” *Taipei Times* (10 January 2026): <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2026/01/10/2003850357>; “Only 23pc willing to have children as Hong Kong fertility hits record low, survey finds” *The Standard* (13 April 2026): <https://www.thestandard.com.hk/news/article/329146/>; “No. of births in 2025 breaks 15-year high at 254,500: data” *Korea.net* (26 February 2026): <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Society/view?articleId=288047>.

<sup>6</sup> National Population and Talent Division, “Marriage and Parenthood Survey 2021: Strong Aspirations Among Singaporeans To Start Families, Flexible Work Arrangements Preferred” (10 October 2022):



points as well.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, we believe in addressing the roots – the reason behind the reason – of underlying these.

9. On a deeper analysis, even though finances are important, they are not the ultimate reason for Singapore's declining and record-low fertility rates. Instead:
  - (1) Values are a more important factor than finances, and underlying the stated reason of financial cost is our society's pursuit of an ever-higher standard of living;
  - (2) There are inherent limits to the pursuit of standard of living, which renders this desire difficult to satisfy.
- (1) Values, and the pursuit of an ever-higher standard of living
10. On a deeper analysis, our "Marriage, Parenthood and Success" Survey 2025 shows that the high cost of raising children ranks as the top concern across *all income levels*.<sup>8</sup> This suggests that higher income groups are not simply thinking about basic necessities, but are aspiring to attain and maintain high standards of living.
11. Our further analysis shows that people who have highly positive views and aspirations towards marriage and parenthood – which we termed "marriage and parenthood orientation" (MPO) – are less sensitive to the costs and challenges of parenthood.<sup>9</sup> In other words, they are less likely to be discouraged by factors such as financial cost, in their pursuit of marriage and parenthood. The converse is also true; those who do not "prize" parenthood are more sensitive to the costs and challenges deterring them from parenthood.<sup>10</sup>
12. Therefore, we have concluded in our "Eyes on the Price" study: *"Parenthood aversion is not merely about the affordability of children. It is whether Singaporeans believe that family life is worth re-ordering their lives around, and for."*<sup>11</sup>



<https://www.population.gov.sg/media-centre/press-releases/key-findings-marriage-and-parenthood-survey-2021/>.

<sup>7</sup> Cultivate SG, "Marriage, Parenthood and Success Survey 2025" (17 November 2025): <https://cultivate.sg/research-recommend/marriage-parenthood-and-success-survey-2025/>.

<sup>8</sup> Cultivate SG, "Marriage, Parenthood and Success Survey 2025" (17 November 2025): <https://cultivate.sg/research-recommend/marriage-parenthood-and-success-survey-2025/>.

<sup>9</sup> Cultivate SG, "Eyes on the Price – Supplementary Analysis of the Marriage, Parenthood and Success Survey 2025" (28 March 2026): <https://cultivate.sg/research-recommend/eyes-on-the-price-supplementary-analysis-of-the-marriage-parenthood-and-success-survey-2025/>.

<sup>10</sup> Cultivate SG, "Eyes on the Price – Supplementary Analysis of the Marriage, Parenthood and Success Survey 2025" (28 March 2026): <https://cultivate.sg/research-recommend/eyes-on-the-price-supplementary-analysis-of-the-marriage-parenthood-and-success-survey-2025/>.

<sup>11</sup> Cultivate SG, "Eyes on the Price – Supplementary Analysis of the Marriage, Parenthood and Success Survey 2025" (28 March 2026): <https://cultivate.sg/research-recommend/eyes-on-the-price-supplementary-analysis-of-the-marriage-parenthood-and-success-survey-2025/>.



13. These explain why financial incentives have been ineffective to raise Singapore's TFR, as seen in these trends:
- (a) **Falling TFR over the years, despite rising financial incentives.** In the 2026 financial year, the Government expects marriage and parenthood initiatives to cost the Government close to \$7 billion,<sup>12</sup> up from \$500 million in 2001.<sup>13</sup> As one Civil Service College researcher put it, "Despite these efforts, Singapore's TFR continues to decline."<sup>14</sup>
  - (b) **Pursuing higher standard of living, rather than basic needs *per se*.** Singaporeans are aspiring for an ever-higher standard of living. As the debate over the "Minimum Income Standards" 2023 Report shows, there is a debate over whether "discretionary expenditure items such as jewellery, perfumes, and overseas holidays" ought to be factored in Singaporeans' "minimum income".<sup>15</sup>
  - (c) **Having fewer children while increasing spending on each child, in an education "arms race".** Even as TFR has continued to fall, Singaporeans are spending increasing amounts on private tuition in efforts to ensure that their children can get ahead in their education, in hopes for a better future. As of 2023, Singaporeans spent \$1.8 billion on private tuition, up from \$1.1 billion in 2013.<sup>16</sup>
14. Finances are therefore far less effective to raise fertility rates in today's "First World" Singapore, compared to a different stage of our nation's development. Our findings are generally consistent with the Second Demographic Transition theory, which stresses the importance of values rather than finances as key factors shaping fertility decisions in developed societies.<sup>17</sup>



<sup>12</sup> Parliament, "Debate on Annual Budget Statement" (25 February 2026): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=budget-2867>.

<sup>13</sup> Koh Chiu Yee, "Fertility Rebound in the OECD: Insights for Singapore" ETHOS Digital Issue 03 (September 2018): <https://knowledge.csc.gov.sg/digital-issue-03/fertility-rebound-in-the-oecd-insights-for-singapore/>.

<sup>14</sup> Koh Chiu Yee, "Fertility Rebound in the OECD: Insights for Singapore" ETHOS Digital Issue 03 (September 2018): <https://knowledge.csc.gov.sg/digital-issue-03/fertility-rebound-in-the-oecd-insights-for-singapore/>.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Minimum Income Standard: <https://whatsenough.sg/>; Ministry of Finance, "Joint MOF-MOM-MSF Response to the Minimum Income Standards 2023 Study on Household Budgets in a Time of Rising Costs by LKYSPP and NTU" (14 September 2023): <https://www.mof.gov.sg/news-resources/newsroom/joint-mof-mom-msf-response-to-the-minimum-income-standards-2023-study-on-household-budgets-in-a-time-of-rising-costs-by-lkyspp-and-ntu/>

<sup>16</sup> Department of Statistics, "Report on the Household Expenditure Survey 2023" (28 November 2024): <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/publication-resources/report-on-the-household-expenditure-survey-2023>.

<sup>17</sup> See Ron Lesthaeghe, "The second demographic transition: A concise overview of its development" 111(51) *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* (23 December 2014) 18112.



15. Thus, we agree with Mr Chan Chun Sing's remarks in March 2026 that, "at the end of the day, the choice of whether to have children is about one's value system".<sup>18</sup> In his words, "If money is the only issue that we have to tackle, then we should expect rich families to have more kids. But it's not so." He added, "Money is one issue, (but) I think it has to do a lot more with individual choices, preferences and priorities."<sup>19</sup>

(2) The limits of pursuit of standard of living

16. Even as the pursuit of an ever-higher standard of living (in terms of material achievement) is deeply ingrained in the Singaporean psyche, there are inherent limits to this pursuit, which renders this desire difficult – if not impossible – to satisfy.
17. There are several independent and cumulative reasons why:
- (a) **Singapore's already-high standard of living.** On many measures, Singapore already ranks near the top worldwide in standard of living. It is the top Asian country in terms of GDP per capita;<sup>20</sup> one ranking even placed Singapore as the richest country in the world, after adjusting for purchasing power parity.<sup>21</sup> Singapore ranks 13<sup>th</sup> on the Human Development Index; the only Asian society ahead of Singapore on this index is Hong Kong (8<sup>th</sup> in rank).<sup>22</sup> While there is always room for improvement and advancement, this raises serious practical and philosophical questions as to how much more is needed to satiate this pursuit for higher living standards.
  - (b) **Limits of meritocracy making it harder for those less privileged, a challenge aggravated by increasing cost of living.** There are limits to meritocracy, as Minister Chan Chun Sing pointed out in 2023. This includes the risk of creating an "endowment effect", "with meritocracy becoming harder and harder for those

<sup>18</sup> "Govt to look at easing hurdles for new mothers to rejoin workforce: Chan Chun Sing" *The Straits Times* (13 March 2026): <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/community/govt-to-look-at-easing-hurdles-for-new-mothers-to-rejoin-workforce-chan-chun-sing>. Then-First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong likewise noted in 1987, that "[the] biggest difficulty is changing the attitude of younger Singaporeans towards marriage and a larger family." (Statement by the First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, Mr Goh Chok Tong, "Population Policy" (1 March 1987): <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdffdoc/gct19870301s.pdf>).

<sup>19</sup> "Govt to look at easing hurdles for new mothers to rejoin workforce: Chan Chun Sing" *The Straits Times* (13 March 2026): <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/community/govt-to-look-at-easing-hurdles-for-new-mothers-to-rejoin-workforce-chan-chun-sing>.

<sup>20</sup> World Bank Group, "GDP per capita (current US\$)": <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>.

<sup>21</sup> Sakshi Jain, "Richest Countries in the World in 2025 by GDP Per Capita" *Aviation A2Z* (6 December 2025): <https://aviationa2z.com/index.php/2025/12/06/top-10-richest-countries-in-world-2025-by-gdp-per-capita/>.

<sup>22</sup> United Nations Development Program, "Human Development Insights: Singapore": <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/SGP>



with less, or those who are less privileged”.<sup>23</sup> Combined with the rising cost of living, various markers of a high standard of living – e.g. owning a car, living in a condominium, etc. – are increasingly costly or even unattainable for many Singaporeans.<sup>24</sup>

- (c) **Law of diminishing returns, making it increasingly difficult to climb to the next level of attainment.** One critical limiting principle is the “law of diminishing returns”, a core concept in economics.<sup>25</sup> According to this principle, the marginal increase in output (e.g. income) will diminish after a certain point even if one’s input (e.g. time or effort) constantly increases. This is applicable also to other matters such as the level of enjoyment (e.g. diminishing sense of pleasure notwithstanding increasing amount of material possessions, leisure or travel), gains in educational success, and more. At a certain point, the effort required to climb to the next level of attainment increases, while the returns decrease.
- (d) **The limits of human capacity, including burnout and mental health challenges.** Singapore already has one of the most intense work and education cultures, amidst various other pressures. A 2024 Ministry of Manpower survey found that one in three employees here experienced work-related stress or burnout.<sup>26</sup> Another 2022 study by Instant Offices ranked Singapore the most overworked country in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>27</sup> This year, CNA reported a rising number (up to 20 percent rise) of cases involving exam-related stress.<sup>28</sup> These raise serious questions as to whether higher living standards (from a material perspective) are attainable without undermining human wellbeing.
- (e) **Policies aimed at financial support for childbearing may reinforce a negative feedback loop of the cultural perception that “children are expensive”.** The combination of a repeated focus on cost of living (or, more specifically, standard of living) challenges as barriers to parenthood, and expanding policies focusing on financial incentives, creates a negative feedback loop reinforcing Singaporeans’ perceptions that “children are expensive”.



<sup>23</sup> Ministry of Education, “Speech by Minister Chan Chun Sing at the IPS 35th Anniversary Conference: Revisit” (12 June 2023): <https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/speeches/20230612-speech-by-minister-chan-chun-sing-at-the-ips-35th-anniversary-conference-revisit>.

<sup>24</sup> In 1996, Nominated Member of Parliament Dr Lee Tsao Yuan noted that the Singapore Dream was “fading away”. (Parliament, “Purchase of Properties by Senior Minister and Deputy Prime Minister BG Lee Hsien Loong” (22 May 1996): [https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=003\\_19960522\\_S0002\\_T0004](https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=003_19960522_S0002_T0004).)

<sup>25</sup> EBSCO, “Diminishing returns (economics)”: <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/economics/diminishing-returns-economics>.

<sup>26</sup> Ministry of Manpower, “Written Answer to PQ on Workplace Burnout” (22 September 2025): <https://www.mom.gov.sg/newsroom/parliament-questions-and-replies/2025/0922-written-answer-to-pq-on-workplace-burnout>.

<sup>27</sup> Instant Offices, “Which APAC countries are the most overworked in 2022?” (6 June 2022): <https://blog.instantoffices.com/featured/most-overworked-apac-countries/>.

<sup>28</sup> “More students seeking help for exam stress, with pressure increasingly self-driven: Psychologists” CNA (6 February 2026): <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/more-students-seeking-help-exam-stress-moe-psychologists-5912371>.



18. Beyond policy, this ongoing pursuit of higher living standards raises fundamental philosophical and moral questions as a society. Properly understood, economic wealth and high living standards are not ends in themselves, but merely means to an end, which is *human flourishing*. Associate Professor (Dr.) Tan Seow Hon put the question this way: “[How] rapidly is the economy to grow, and how much is enough, if one truly understands that it is merely a condition for human flourishing?”<sup>29</sup>

## B. ‘Kiasu’ and ‘Kancheong’ Narratives: The Long Tail of “Stop at Two”

19. Secondly, the origins of Singapore’s falling fertility rates can be traced back to the population control campaign – including the well-known “Stop at Two” campaign – pursued by the Singapore Government since Independence in 1965. Notwithstanding their reversal since 1987, the overarching *narratives, priorities* and *values* of that campaign persist till today.
20. A 1971 speech by then-Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Culture Inche Sha’ari Bin Tadin – delivered the year before the “Stop at Two” population control campaign was launched – encapsulates many of these persistent *narratives, priorities* and *values*, which have become the culture of today:

*“I noticed that nearly all the large families living in H.D.B, flats were from the lower income level... If we do not want to see our H.D.B, estates degenerate into slums because of this kind of overcrowding, **our people must be made to understand the vital importance of family planning, the need to keep a family small in order to maintain a high standard of living.**”*

***We must therefore eradicate the old concept that large families are a sign of prosperity. Large families, more often than not, mean low family income, with the parents having to work extra hard to supplement their finances. This will automatically mean that very little attention is paid to the children, and this could lead to a drop in the quality of education, at a time when education is all-important to a young and vigorous Republic determined to speed ahead.**”*<sup>30</sup>

(Emphasis added)

21. Health Minister Chua Sian Chin put it more bluntly in 1972, when announcing the “Stop at Two” population control measures: “For the Singapore of the 1970’s the third child is a luxury. The fourth and fifth are anti-social acts.”<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Seow Hon Tan, “Success and Flourishing in Singapore: The Impact of Laws and Policies on the Ethos and Character of a People” (2026) *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-026-10453-6>.

<sup>30</sup> Parliament, “Debate on President’s Address” (5 August 1971): [https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=007\\_19710805\\_S0004\\_T0007](https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=007_19710805_S0004_T0007).

<sup>31</sup> Parliament, “Addenda, Ministry of Health” (12 October 1972): [https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=015\\_19721012\\_S0004\\_T0010](https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=015_19721012_S0004_T0010).



22. Even when the Government officially reversed its population control policies in 1987 with the campaign “Have three, and more *if you can afford it*” (emphasis added),<sup>32</sup> the emphasis remained on *affordability* as well as other expectations about the quality of life.<sup>33</sup> Today, our national narratives still frequently stress the vulnerability of Singapore and the need for constant striving in order to survive.<sup>34</sup>
23. As a result, the *narratives, priorities* and *values* which remain deeply ingrained throughout Singapore society include:
  - (a) **Survivalist national narrative of vulnerability and scarcity.** Since Independence, national narratives have consistently emphasised Singapore’s status as a small nation vulnerable to internal and external threats, lacking natural resources, and having scarcity of land area.<sup>35</sup> These emphases undergirded the population control campaign, due to fears of overcrowding,<sup>36</sup> and persisted even when the Government pursued pro-natalist policies. Thus, our national narratives maintain this survivalist bent, stressing the importance of hard work and collectively striving for a better future because – to quote the 2025 National Day Rally – “in today’s world, standing still is the same as falling behind.”<sup>37</sup>
  - (b) **Narrow definition of success based on material achievement and economic growth.** Singapore’s survivalist orientation has produced a narrow conception of

<sup>32</sup> Statement by the First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, Mr Goh Chok Tong, “Population Policy” (1 March 1987): <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/gct19870301s.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> “We must however be mindful that bringing, up a child is a heavy responsibility. The child needs to be fed and clothed. He needs a supportive home environment, adequate care and parental attention. Every baby born must be well-looked after by its parents. Otherwise, he or she will be put at a disadvantage against children from better homes.” (Statement by the First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, Mr Goh Chok Tong, “Population Policy” (1 March 1987): <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/gct19870301s.pdf>)

<sup>34</sup> In May 2026, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong said that “[we] are and will always be a small nation – exposed, vulnerable with little margin for error.” (Prime Minister’s Office, “PM Lawrence Wong at May Day Rally 2026” (1 May 2026): <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/pm-lawrence-wong-at-may-day-rally-2026/>)

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s speech to Parliament in 1965 “Yang Di-Pertuan Negara’s Speech (Debate on the Address” (14 December 1965): [https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=003\\_19651214\\_S0004\\_T0004](https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=003_19651214_S0004_T0004).

<sup>36</sup> Shortly after Independence, Health Minister Yong Nyuk Lin said: “Singapore’s present population is over 1.8 million and our population density is more than 8,000 persons per square mile, certainly a very over-crowded little island State!” (Parliament, “Singapore Family Planning and Population Board Bill” (31 December 1965): [https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=014\\_19651231\\_S0003\\_T0009](https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=014_19651231_S0003_T0009))

<sup>37</sup> During that National Day Rally 2025, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong further summed the “heart of who we are as Singaporeans” as such: “We take pride in whatever we do, and strive to be the best possible versions of ourselves. We never give up. And we never let each other down. That is how we have achieved exceptional performance. And that is how we will continue to stay exceptional – as a people and a country.” (Prime Minister’s Office, “National Day Rally 2025” (17 August 2025): <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/ndr/>); see also Prime Minister’s Office, “PM Lawrence Wong at May Day Rally 2026” (1 May 2026): <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/pm-lawrence-wong-at-may-day-rally-2026/>.



success based on material achievement and economic growth, as pointed out by Associate Professor (Dr.) Tan Seow Hon in a 2026 article.<sup>38</sup> The population control ideology which subordinated family size (and, by implication, family life) to a “high standard of living” – as seen in the 1971 remarks cited above – have become mainstreamed in our culture. Today, marriage and parenthood rank low in Singaporeans’ priorities, as our survey found.<sup>39</sup>

- (c) **“Concerted cultivation” parenting, where parents carefully curate and organise children’s activities for the sake of success.** Singaporeans generally practise “concerted cultivation” in parenting, a term coined by sociologist Annette Lareau to describe a practice where parents develop their children through curated and organised activities (whether learning or leisure).<sup>40</sup> It stands in contrast with the “accomplishment of natural growth” where parents care for children’s basic needs and leave them free to grow.<sup>41</sup> “Concerted cultivation” primes children for material success in our modern economy, but significantly increases the pressures and costs in parenting, and accentuates socio-economic inequalities because lower-income groups are less able to afford these activities.<sup>42</sup>
- (d) **Societal expectations and pursuit of an ever-higher standard of living.** As noted above in sub-section A, the pursuit of an ever-higher standard of living (in terms of material achievement) is deeply ingrained in the Singaporean psyche. Yet there are inherent limits to this pursuit, which renders this desire difficult – if not impossible – to satisfy.
- (e) **Lack of lived experiences in or with large families.** Few Singaporeans have actual lived experiences in or with large families in today’s Singapore. Studies show that the two-child family is the norm in Singapore, with a growing number of Singaporeans who have never married and record-low fertility rates.<sup>43</sup> As a result, large families are perceived as unusual and even abnormal in our wider culture.



<sup>38</sup> Seow Hon Tan, “Success and Flourishing in Singapore: The Impact of Laws and Policies on the Ethos and Character of a People” (2026) *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-026-10453-6>.

<sup>39</sup> Cultivate SG, “Marriage, Parenthood and Success Survey 2025” (17 November 2025): <https://cultivate.sg/research-recommend/marriage-parenthood-and-success-survey-2025/>.

<sup>40</sup> Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (California: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (California: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> For further reading, please see Cultivate SG, ““Concerted Cultivation” on Steroids? How Singaporeans’ ‘kiasu’ parenting arises from our notions of success” (11 February 2025): <https://cultivate.sg/concerted-cultivation-on-steroids-how-singaporeans-kiasu-parenting-arises-from-our-notions-of-success/>.

<sup>43</sup> Our 2024 survey found that the median ideal number of children is two children. (Cultivate SG, “Marriage, Family and Social Discourse Survey 2024” (15 November 2024): <https://cultivate.sg/research-recommend/marriage-family-and-social-discourse-survey-2024/>); Ministry of Social and Family Development, “Family Trends Report 2026” (July 2026): <https://www.msf.gov.sg/docs/default-source/research-data/family-trends-report-2026.pdf>.



- (f) **Persistent stigma against large families.** Echoing the attitudes sowed by the population control campaign (such as the remarks made in 1971 and 1972 cited above), a July 2026 *Straits Times* article reported that “outdated stereotypes and prejudices” against large families persist, including perceptions that they are lower-educated and poor couples who depend on government financial aid to get by.<sup>44</sup> Large families whom Cultivate SG has spoken to have also reported being questioned about affordability.<sup>45</sup>
- (g) **Economic priorities and work culture being implicitly hostile to family life.** A relatively untold part of Singapore’s progress from “Third World to First” is the role of demographic shifts. Due to a mixture of high fertility in the 1960s, combined with an emphasis on education and population control in the 1970s, the country had a large, young and well-educated workforce who generally had small families. As a result, Singaporeans could dedicate an enormous amount of time, energy and effort to work, resulting in a huge economic boom.<sup>46</sup> Thus, embedded within Singapore’s intense work culture is an implicit hostility towards family life, tracing its origins to the years of rapid growth aided by population control.
24. The culmination of these *narratives, priorities* and *values* is to produce a culture of hyper-competitiveness, materialism, feelings of lack and constraint, fear and anxiety, and desire for control over our circumstances in present-day Singapore. These lie at the root of Singapore’s low fertility rates. These mindsets – encapsulated in the colloquial expressions ‘kiasu’ and ‘kancheong’ – have been ingrained through years of messaging from the government about how Singapore is small and vulnerable, and needs to curb population growth in order to survive and attain a higher standard of living.<sup>47</sup>
25. It bears emphasis that *not all* of these *narratives, priorities* and *values* are necessarily wrong or false; Singapore does face genuine challenges and there are positive aspects to attitudes such as hard work and achievement.
26. Instead, the point here is to correct the over-emphasis through a more holistic perspective. If our nation is to truly “reset” our attitudes and approach towards



<sup>44</sup> “S’pore wants more babies, so why do stereotypes about big families persist?” *The Straits Times* (4 July 2026): <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/community/singapore-wants-more-babies-its-time-to-rethink-stereotypes-about-big-families>.

<sup>45</sup> Cultivate SG, “Update from Cultivate Commune: Large Families” (1 July 2024): <https://cultivate.sg/update-from-cultivate-commune-large-families/>; Cultivate SG, “Large Families II: A Cultivate Commune (July) update” (18 August 2026): <https://cultivate.sg/large-families-ii-a-cultivate-commune-july-update/>.

<sup>46</sup> David E. Bloom and Jeffrey G. Williamson, “Demographic Transitions and Economic Miracles in Emerging Asia” 12(3) *The World Bank Economic Review* 419; see also World Bank, *The East Asian Miracle: Economic Growth and Public Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>47</sup> For a further analysis of the issue, please see “Singapore TFR: How Our Economic Miracle Engineered a Crisis” *Regardless* (17 June 2026): <https://regardless.sg/singapore-tfr-how-our-economic-miracle-engineered-a-crisis/>.



marriage and parenthood, these *narratives*, *priorities* and *values* need to be fundamentally re-examined and recalibrated.<sup>48</sup>

### C. Desocialisation: Men, Women and Relational Deficit

27. Dating, marriage and family hinge heavily on individuals' quality of character and in-person, face-to-face interpersonal skills. They are shaped and affected by a person's social skills, capacity for emotional regulation, and various social values including attitudes towards the roles of men and women and norms of social interaction.
28. On the other hand, we live in an age of technological revolution, which alter human interaction and even human development. With the introduction of the Internet here in 1994,<sup>49</sup> invention of the iPhone in 2007<sup>50</sup> and the growth of numerous social media sites since the 2000s.<sup>51</sup> Today, we are facing the growth and popularisation of artificial intelligence (AI), which presents new challenges.
29. For a society with near-ubiquitous digital access through internet and smartphones,<sup>52</sup> one deeply concerning trend in Singapore is that of *desocialisation* – defined as the “deprivation of the capacity for social intercourse”<sup>53</sup> – which has negative impacts on marriage, parenthood and society as a whole.
30. We note two significant trends on this front:
  - (1) In our digital age, the Internet, smartphones and social media have negatively affected the development of people, social skills and interpersonal relationships, especially among the young;
  - (2) Divide in attitudes among younger men and women towards marriage and parenthood, with younger women feeling less positive about both.



<sup>48</sup> “A root and branch overhaul of the understanding of the place of marriage and family in human flourishing, and therefore, in the state (which is secondary to the individual), is necessary.” (Seow Hon Tan, “Success and Flourishing in Singapore: The Impact of Laws and Policies on the Ethos and Character of a People” (2026) *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-026-10453-6>.)

<sup>49</sup> GovTech, “History of internet in Singapore: From academic link to 5G digital future” (12 August 2021): <https://www.tech.gov.sg/technews/history-of-the-internet/>.

<sup>50</sup> History.com, “Steve Jobs debuts the iPhone” (29 August 2012): <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/january-9/steve-jobs-debuts-the-iphone>.

<sup>51</sup> Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, “The rise of social media” (18 September 2019): <https://ourworldindata.org/rise-of-social-media>.

<sup>52</sup> 99% of resident households are connected to the internet, and 97% of residents own smartphones. (Infocomm Media Development Authority, “Singapore Digital Society Report 2023”: <https://www.imda.gov.sg/assets/df67e0d4-3a1d-4fe1-a438-51ca36ab9b3a>)

<sup>53</sup> Merriam-Webster, “desocialization”: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/desocialization>.



(1) Desocialisation amidst our digital age

31. Technological revolutions over the past few decades – Internet, smartphones and social media – have impacted human development in ways that societies are only now catching up with. With these three technologies people today (including and especially children and teenagers) have virtually unlimited, round-the-clock, personalised and atomised access to the Internet and social media content. These fundamentally change and condition how human beings live and interact with one another, with negative impacts on the development of people, social skills and interpersonal relationships, especially among the young.
32. There is a growing body of evidence of the harms associated with these technological developments, including:
  - (a) **Negative impact of social media on personal and social development.** Children need physical play and face-to-face, in-person interactions for healthy development. These interactions are important in social learning, the development of empathy and acculturation. However, social media not only transforms human interaction into asynchronous remote interaction, it also hijacks the social learning process through its engagement-driven design and addictive nature.<sup>54</sup> These supplant in-person interactions and, over time, negatively affect children's relational development.
  - (b) **Loss of opportunities for personal growth through unstructured physical play and interaction.** Unstructured physical play is important for children's holistic development, including the development of social skills. Through such play, children learn to manage risks, navigate challenging situations, negotiate social relationships and develop the physical and mental resilience to handle stressful situations; these equip children for challenges later in life.<sup>55</sup> These have declined in recent decades due to a combination of overprotective parenting and excessive use of smartphones.<sup>56</sup>



<sup>54</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024).

<sup>55</sup> Øyvind Kvalnes and Ellen Beate Hansen Sandseter, *Risky Play: An Ethical Challenge* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

<sup>56</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024).



- (c) **Combination with overprotective parenting (also known as “helicopter parenting”) resulting in poor development of physical and mental resilience, and ability to adapt to life’s challenges.** With declining fertility rates and families having fewer children, some parents are devoting excessive amounts of attention on their children to the point of overprotection.<sup>57</sup> Overprotective parenting (also known as “helicopter parenting”) reduces children’s physical and mental resilience, and lowers children’s levels of autonomy, competence, belonging, self-control, coping skills and ability to adapt in the workplace.<sup>58</sup> Overprotective parenting also raises the perceived cost of parenthood in terms of time and energy required for each child, which in turn discourages people from parenthood.
- (d) **Mental health risks of excessive social media use.** Social media use has been associated with a range of mental health risks including anxiety, depression, self-esteem issues and eating disorders. These arise from a range of factors including the highly curated, edited and often unrealistic content people present on social media, and the constant comparison and judgments people pass on themselves and others.<sup>59</sup> There is also exposure to online harms such as harassment, cancel culture, etc.<sup>60</sup>
- (e) **Exposure to online pornography, which corrupts attitudes towards sex and relationships.** Pornography is degrading, dehumanising and corrupting, objectifying people as instruments of pleasure instead of persons with inherent dignity.<sup>61</sup> It impairs and damages the ability of people to develop healthy meaningful and appropriate relationships. It is potentially addictive and hijacks novelty-seeking tendencies,<sup>62</sup> which can lead individuals to seek out increasingly violent, extreme and illegal content.<sup>63</sup>



<sup>57</sup> In 2017, the Ministry of Education put out a Facebook post discouraging helicopter parenting: <https://www.facebook.com/moesingapore/posts/pfbid02hbcn86r9g2tyAkpxk7FVrYMD2TRsgj9uV2MUK82G7M8qXvCDzvzLyVHoo9eQpTyal>.

<sup>58</sup> Øyvind Kvalnes and Ellen Beate Hansen Sandseter, *Risky Play: An Ethical Challenge* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

<sup>59</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024).

<sup>60</sup> See our recommendations regarding online harms, in response to the 2024 consultation by the Ministry of Law: <https://cultivate.sg/research-recommend/public-consultation-on-online-harms/>. In the first two months of operations, the Online Safety Commission has received more than 500 reports of online harms. Around 17% of eligible reports involved a young victim (below 18 years old). (Online Safety Commission, “Factsheet – Update on the OSC: Update as of 17 September 2026” (22 September 2026): [https://isomer-user-content.by.gov.sg/161/c2738bb2-40bc-4474-88b1-b4639fe8f0f0/Factsheet%20-%20OSC%20Update%20\(17%20Sep%202026\).pdf](https://isomer-user-content.by.gov.sg/161/c2738bb2-40bc-4474-88b1-b4639fe8f0f0/Factsheet%20-%20OSC%20Update%20(17%20Sep%202026).pdf))

<sup>61</sup> Robert P. George and Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, “Pornography, Respect, and Responsibility: A Letter to the Hotel Industry” *The Public Discourse* (9 July 2012): <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2012/07/5815/>.

<sup>62</sup> Paula Blanca, et al., “Novelty, conditioning and attentional bias to sexual rewards” (2016) 72 *Journal of Psychiatric Research* 91.

<sup>63</sup> Children’s Commissioner (UK), “A lot of it is actually just abuse’: Young people and pornography” (January 2023): <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/02/cc-a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography-updated.pdf>.



- (f) **Exposure to radical or extreme ideologies which sow enmity between men and women.** To-date, the Internal Security Department has issued orders against two male teenagers who have been influenced by “incel” (short for “involuntary celibate”) ideologies (among other ideologies), one of whom made online posts threatening to kill or rape women.<sup>64</sup> There are likely many others who are being similarly influenced by radical or extreme anti-women and/or anti-men content online.
33. In its guidance on screen use in children, the Ministry of Health has recognised a range of these harms, and recommended various limits on screen use among different age groups.<sup>65</sup>
34. Some studies have drawn a causal link between smartphones and fertility decline. One study has suggested that the iPhone led to one-third or more than half of the decline in the general fertility rate among women aged 15 to 44 in the United States. The authors argue that the decline in fertility rates may be due to the issue “whether the relationships and sexual activity that produce children are forming at all”.<sup>66</sup> Another study asserts that smartphones drove a “collapse” in *teen* fertility.<sup>67</sup>
35. With the rise of AI, we should be highly cautious about the further desocialisation impact of AI. AI use can potentially short-circuit human learning processes,<sup>68</sup> undermine the authenticity of human interactions (e.g. when AI is used to write personal messages),<sup>69</sup> and – in the case of AI companions – lead to emotional dependency on AI and social withdrawal.<sup>70</sup>



<sup>64</sup> Internal Security Department, “Issuance of Orders Under the Internal Security Act (ISA) against two Singaporeans, and updates on previous ISA orders” (24 June 2026): <https://www.isd.gov.sg/news-and-resources/issuance-of-orders-under-the-internal-security-act-isa-against-two-singaporeans--and-updates-on-previous-isa-orders/>; Internal Security Department, “Issuance of Restriction Orders under the Internal Security Act (ISA) against two Singaporeans” (9 September 2025): <https://www.isd.gov.sg/news-and-resources/issuance-of-restriction-orders-under-the-internal-security-act-isa-against-two-singaporeans/>.

<sup>65</sup> Ministry of Health, “Guidance on screen use in children” (21 January 2025): <https://www.moh.gov.sg/others/resources-and-statistics/guidance-on-screen-use/>; see also Prime Minister’s Office, “National Day Rally 2026” (23 August 2026): <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/ndr2026/>.

<sup>66</sup> Caitlin K. Myers & Ezekiel Hooper, “Is the iPhone Birth Control? Causal Evidence from AT&T’s 2007–2011 Carrier Monopoly” *National Bureau of Economic Research*, Working Paper 35310 (June 2026): DOI: 10.3386/w35310.

<sup>67</sup> Nathan Hudson & Hernan J. Moscoso Boedo, “The Collapse of Teen Fertility in the Digital Era” (29 April 2026): <https://ssrn.com/abstract=6676839>.

<sup>68</sup> Anne-Laure Le Cunff, “Why AI summaries pose a danger to learning” *The Straits Times* (10 July 2026): <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/why-ai-summaries-pose-a-danger-to-learning>.

<sup>69</sup> Scott Claessens, Pierce Veitch and Jim A.C. Everett, “Negative perceptions of outsourcing to artificial intelligence” (2026) 177 *Computers in Human Behavior* 108894.

<sup>70</sup> Digital For Life, “AI Companions: How Digital Friends Are Changing Relationships and Raising New Risks” (28 May 2025): <https://www.digitalforlife.gov.sg/learn/resources/all-resources/ai-companions-ai-chatbot-risks>.



- (2) Divide in attitudes among younger men and women
36. Another trend in desocialisation is the divide in attitudes among younger men and women towards marriage and parenthood, with younger women feeling less positive about both.
37. In surveys we have conducted, we have found significant differences in attitudes between men and women (especially younger women):
- (a) **Benefit of marriage to society.** More men (84%) than women (73%) believe that marriage is beneficial to society. Younger women aged between 18 to 24 have the least favourable view towards marriage as beneficial to society, with only 59% agreeing with the statement and nearly 1 in 5 (19%) expressing disagreement.<sup>71</sup>
  - (b) **Benefit of children to society.** More men (75%) than women (63%) believe that Singapore will be better off with more children. Among women aged 18-24, only 56% agree with this statement, as compared to their male counterparts of the same age (75%).<sup>72</sup>
  - (c) **Whether women sacrifice more in marriage.** Women (nearly half, at 49%) are more likely than men (26%) to say that the wife will sacrifice more in marriage.<sup>73</sup>
  - (d) **Whether women sacrifice more in parenthood.** Women (more than half, at 57%) are more likely than men (33%) to say that mothers will sacrifice more in parenthood.<sup>74</sup>
38. In the same vein, other studies have also found differences in attitudes among younger men and women towards gender roles and norms.<sup>75</sup>
39. These differences in attitudes, especially among the young, are not conducive to the development of good relationships (whether romantic or otherwise) between men and women, and the formation of new marriages and families. If these persist or become more extreme, there may be significant long-term effects on marriage and parenthood.



<sup>71</sup> Cultivate SG, “Marriage, Family and Social Discourse Survey 2024” (15 November 2024): <https://cultivate.sg/research-recommend/marriage-family-and-social-discourse-survey-2024/>.

<sup>72</sup> Cultivate SG, “Marriage, Family and Social Discourse Survey 2024” (15 November 2024): <https://cultivate.sg/research-recommend/marriage-family-and-social-discourse-survey-2024/>.

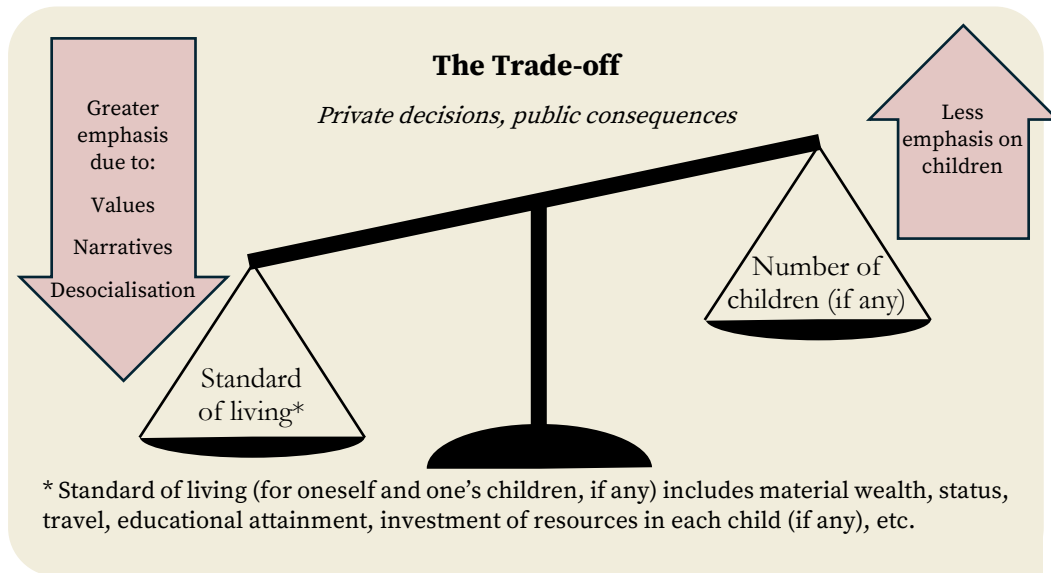
<sup>73</sup> Cultivate SG, “Marriage, Parenthood and Success Survey 2025” (17 November 2025): <https://cultivate.sg/research-recommend/marriage-parenthood-and-success-survey-2025/>.

<sup>74</sup> Cultivate SG, “Marriage, Parenthood and Success Survey 2025” (17 November 2025): <https://cultivate.sg/research-recommend/marriage-parenthood-and-success-survey-2025/>.

<sup>75</sup> “Study finds younger Singaporeans more divided on gender roles, younger men more accepting of spousal violence” CNA (23 July 2026): <https://cnalifestyle.channelnewsasia.com/women/sg-her-empowerment-study-gender-norms-586326>.

## D. Skewed Economic Trade-off: Standard of Living vs. Children

40. Economically, there is a clear trade-off between *the pursuit of a higher standard of living (for oneself and one's children, if any)* on one hand, and *the number of children (if any)* on the other. Singapore has always recognised this trade-off, as this was the basic assumption undergirding the population control campaign.



41. Currently, the trend is heavily skewed against having children (if at all). Existing *societal values* and *narratives* strongly prioritise the pursuit of an ever-higher standard of living, defined in material terms. Trends of desocialisation make it difficult to form and maintain relationships, thus increasing the perceived cost of marriage and parenthood relative to the perceived cost of pursuing a higher standard of living. These *values*, *narratives* and *desocialisation trends* also decrease the perceived value of children and increase the perceived costs of having and raising children.
42. The cultural over-emphasis on narrow success – and, relatedly, viewing caregiving through an economic lens – disincentivises people from having and raising children, which ironically has long-term economic and social consequences of the kind that Singapore is now contending with. Anne Manne critiques the economic incentive structure in developed economies bluntly in *Love and Money*:

*“When seen through the narrow lens of a proponent of the Get to Work program [i.e. the ideology of Linda Hirshman that women should put work first and never have more than one child], a woman who bears and cares full time for five children is an economically irrational and unproductive citizen. She is worth “less” because she is outside the paid workforce. A childless career woman, or one who obeys Hirshman’s Rule and has just one child, viewed through such a lens, is of more value to society. The other way of looking at the homemaker is that she is contributing in a different way, not just in terms of rearing children and the value of unpaid work, but simply by having children.*”



*The childless dual-career couple, if prosperous, are likely to have a more comfortable old age, while the homemaker (especially if she divorces) is more likely to have a penurious one. Yet it is her children's taxes and the labour that enable both financial provision for social security and the care needed for the childless couple's old age. In a nutshell, we have foolishly arrived at a society where **there is an economic disincentive to have and care for children, but an economic incentive to restrict fertility and instead invest in one's own skills and income. It is the irrationality of rational economics.***<sup>76</sup>

(Emphasis added)

43. If decisions to have children are regarded as purely private decisions with the costs to be borne purely by individuals making these choices, then parenthood would be little more than an extremely expensive hobby.<sup>77</sup> This is despite the fact that *private decisions relating to marriage and parenthood have public consequences*, as can be seen from Singapore's low and falling fertility rates as well as the various consequences therefrom. These consequences include impacts on Singapore's economic competitiveness, workforce, social support systems and more.<sup>78</sup>
44. We recommend addressing the challenge in two broad prongs, which we will address in the rest of this paper:
  - (a) **Values-based solutions: Looking beyond the metaphorical "weighing scale" by cultivating better values and narratives, and resocialisation through development of character and relationships.** The best and most enduring approach is to re-prioritise marriage and parenthood throughout society by shifting our values and narratives towards a more holistic perspective. Likewise, faced with a trend of desocialisation, we need to take the cultivation of character and relationships more intentionally. (Section II)
  - (b) **Policy solutions: Rebalancing the trade-off between standard of living and parenthood, by addressing practical needs and conveying positive values through policies.** As per Anne Manne's analysis above, one key policy goal is to address the existing "economic disincentive to have and care for children" (as opposed to the "economic incentive to restrict fertility and instead invest in one's own skills and income"). We set out our recommendations in Section III.

(Note: These various aspects may overlap.)



<sup>76</sup> Anne Manne, *Love & Money: The Family and the Free Market* (2008) *Quarterly Essay*, Issue 29 at pages 72 to 73.

<sup>77</sup> Angela Shanahan, "Give income support to families, not the childcare industry" *The Australian* (4 March 2013): <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/columnists/angela-shanahan/give-income-support-to-families-not-the-childcare-industry/news-story/b331449d39813849d0db0a46fbac6905>.

<sup>78</sup> National Population and Talent Division, "Speech by Minister Indranee Rajah on Population at the Committee of Supply Debate 2024" (28 February 2024): <https://www.population.gov.sg/media-centre/speeches/speech-by-minister-indranee-on-population-at-the-cos-2024/>.



## II. Values-based Solutions: Re-prioritising Marriage and Parenthood

*Having and raising children are challenging,  
but immensely meaningful.*

*It calls us to faith, hope and love:  
Faith beyond the here and now,  
hope for the future, and  
love which involves sacrifice,  
and puts the needs of others before oneself.*

- From our *Straits Times* opinion piece,  
“It breaks one’s heart to see Singaporeans forgoing children”

45. Low fertility rates are an “existential challenge”<sup>79</sup> for society in more ways than one. From a policy and societal perspective, it raises serious questions about the survival and sustainability of the population. It is also “existential” from a philosophical perspective, suggesting a gap in Singaporeans’ sense of purpose, hope and joy of life.<sup>80</sup>
46. Having and raising children requires faith, hope and love. Marriage and parenthood call a person to transcend oneself to look into the future and to give of oneself for the good of another person.
47. As analysed above, there are numerous factors which directly and indirectly affect marriage and parenthood. Policies can only go so far to address these. To reverse these trends in the mid- to long-term, a whole-of-society “reset” will require numerous significant shifts:
  - A. In order to reshape values around marriage and parenthood, we need a better national narrative of security, hope and optimism;
  - B. As a society, we need to move away from a narrow definition of success based on academic or material achievement, towards holistic flourishing;
  - C. Amidst desocialisation and other trends, we should intentionally cultivate character and relationships through in-person activities and interactions;

<sup>79</sup> National Population and Talent Division, “Speech by Deputy Prime Minister Gan Kim Yong Committee of Supply Debate 2026” (26 February 2026): <https://www.population.gov.sg/speech-by-deputy-prime-minister-gan-kim-yong-committee-of-supply-debate-2026/>.

<sup>80</sup> Apart from numerous insecurities about finances, Singaporeans who are not oriented towards marriage and parenthood rank “I do not want to bring children into a world full of suffering” as the fourth highest factor discouraging them from having children. (Cultivate SG, “Marriage, Parenthood and Success Survey 2025” (17 November 2025): <https://cultivate.sg/research-recommend/marriage-parenthood-and-success-survey-2025/>.)



- D. We need to value all children and make children our priority, which includes strengthening marriage and family as these provide a stable environment for children to thrive.

## A. Changing the national narrative to one of security, hope and optimism

48. Narratives shape values, and national narratives shape national values.<sup>81</sup> We recognise the need for the Government to give a clear view of the challenges ahead, explain policies, and rally Singaporeans to collective action in the face of challenges. Likewise, there is no doubt that cost of living is high here in Singapore, as a developed country. However, a national narrative that frequently stresses *the vulnerability of Singapore and the need to constantly strive for survival* is not one which shapes positive values around marriage and parenthood, or gives confidence to its citizens to marry and start families.
49. To catalyse a shift in values, we need a different story from one of scarcity and survivalism; we need a narrative of *security, hope* and *optimism* about Singapore. Even as we address challenges candidly and boldly, there is a need to shift our discourse to recognise and appreciate the numerous positive aspects of life here.
50. As such, we recommend fundamental changes to our national narratives, to give more room for a sense of purpose, hope and joy of life here in Singapore. The message, both explicit and implicit, should send the message: *Singapore is a safe, secure and comfortable place to have and raise families, and there is hope for our future*. Key features of these narratives include:
- (a) **Developing a healthy patriotism by recognising Singapore's strengths.** Relative to many parts of the world or the region, Singapore has numerous strengths that should contribute positively to a sense of security and inspire pride in Singapore through a healthy patriotism. These include:
    - (i) **High standard of living.** As mentioned above, Singapore ranks near the top worldwide in standard of living. It is the top Asian country in terms of GDP per capita;<sup>82</sup> one ranking even placed Singapore as the top richest country in the

<sup>81</sup> For example, the importance of racial and religious harmony in Singapore is frequently underscored by citing the communal tensions and riots in the early years of Singapore's history. In *Public Prosecutor v Koh Song Huat Benjamin* [2005] SGDC 272, Senior District Judge Richard Magnus cited "the especial sensitivity of racial and religious issues in our multi-cultural society, particularly given our history of the Maria Hertogh incident in the 1950s and the July and September 1964 race riots; and the current domestic and international security climate." (at para. 6)

<sup>82</sup> World Bank Group, "GDP per capita (current US\$)": <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>.



world, after adjusting for purchasing power parity.<sup>83</sup> Singapore ranks 13<sup>th</sup> on the Human Development Index; the only Asian society ahead of Singapore on this index is Hong Kong (8<sup>th</sup> in rank).<sup>84</sup>

- (ii) **Low levels of corruption.** Singapore ranks third on the 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), behind only Denmark and Finland.<sup>85</sup>
- (iii) **Peace and security.** Singapore has never been involved in any war since Independence,<sup>86</sup> and ranks eighth on the 2026 Global Peace Index, making it the top Asian country on the index.<sup>87</sup>
- (iv) **Power and influence as a nation.** Singapore ranks eighth out of 27 countries and territories on the Asia Power Index, which ranks their respective capacities to shape their external environment. This places Singapore in top place within Southeast Asia.<sup>88</sup>
- (v) **Social cohesion and strong values to repel internal and external threats.** 90% of Singaporeans are willing to play their part in Total Defence.<sup>89</sup> Two-thirds (65.4%) of Singapore residents rated Singapore's racial and religious harmony as "high" or "very high".<sup>90</sup>

All of these elements ought to place Singapore among the safest, most secure and most comfortable places in the world to have and raise families.

- (b) **Gratitude and joy, without complacency.** With Singapore's numerous strengths and successes, there is much to be grateful for and to learn to enjoy our lives here, without becoming complacent or ceasing in the process of growth as a nation. Our nation's numerous strengths should in fact provide assurance to Singaporeans



<sup>83</sup> Sakshi Jain, "Richest Countries in the World in 2025 by GDP Per Capita" *Aviation A2Z* (6 December 2025): <https://aviationa2z.com/index.php/2025/12/06/top-10-richest-countries-in-world-2025-by-gdp-per-capita/>.

<sup>84</sup> United Nations Development Program, "Human Development Insights: Singapore": <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/SGP>

<sup>85</sup> Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index": <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2025>.

<sup>86</sup> However, Singapore has been involved in United Nations peacekeeping operations. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "International Peacekeeping": <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/about-mfa/international-issues/international-peacekeeping/>)

<sup>87</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, "Global Peace Index 2026": <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Global-Peace-Index-2026-Report.pdf>.

<sup>88</sup> Susannah Patton and Jack Sato, "Asia Power Index: 2025 Key Findings Report" *Lowry Institute*: <https://power.lowryinstitute.org/downloads/lowry-institute-2025-asia-power-index-key-findings-report.pdf>.

<sup>89</sup> Mindef, "Written Reply By SMS Heng Chee How To Parliamentary Question On The Total Defence Survey" (18 February 2025): [https://www.mindef.gov.sg/news-and-events/latest-releases/18feb25\\_nr1/](https://www.mindef.gov.sg/news-and-events/latest-releases/18feb25_nr1/).

<sup>90</sup> Mathew Mathews, Teo Kay Key, Rachyl Poh and Melvin Tay, "Results from the IPS-Onepeople.sg Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony 2024" IPS Working Papers No. 59 (February 2025): [https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/ips-working-paper-no-59\\_results-from-the-ips-onepeoplesg-indicators-of-racial-and-religious-harmony-2024.pdf](https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/ips-working-paper-no-59_results-from-the-ips-onepeoplesg-indicators-of-racial-and-religious-harmony-2024.pdf).



that it is a safe and secure place to raise families, and these deserve greater attention and appreciation.

- (c) **Hope and optimism for the future.** To develop positive attitudes and aspirations towards marriage and parenthood, people need to believe in the future of Singapore and in Singaporeans. Our numerous qualities as a nation ought to give Singaporeans much hope and optimism about our future. These qualities need to be regularly emphasised, appreciated and strengthened.

51. As these are national messages, the Government has an important role to play in shifting the narrative carried within messages on national platforms (e.g. National Day Rally, May Day Rally, Budget speeches in Parliament), the education system, and also to shift its narrative when working with other stakeholders in society.

## B. Redefining success towards holistic flourishing

52. Singapore has been taking positive steps to embrace wider definitions of success, towards one “where different skills and talents can thrive” and “every Singaporean can find meaning and fulfilment in what we do”.<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless, this does not go far enough to compass marriage and parenthood. We would urge Singapore to go further, to embrace a holistic view of human flourishing.
53. On a neo-Aristotelian understanding, human flourishing encompasses seven universal, self-evident, equally fundamental basic goods: life, knowledge, practical reasonableness, religion (an interest in the higher order, even if one’s conclusion is that there exists no higher order), play, aesthetic experience, and friendship (or sociability in the broader sense, which entails caring for others as ends in themselves).<sup>92</sup> Marriage and family concern the basic goods of sociability and life.
54. Parenthood ranks poorly among Singaporeans’ definitions of “success” in Singapore, even among those who are highly oriented towards marriage and parenthood.<sup>93</sup> This suggests that “success” is the wrong basis to build positive attitudes towards marriage and parenthood.



<sup>91</sup> Lawrence Wong, “What does success mean in Singapore?” (22 June 2024): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AnyFWfW9lDQ>; Forward SG, “Building Our Shared Future” (October 2023): [https://isomer-user-content.by.gov.sg/103/16fcf663-3c70-43ee-8205-185878547bf2/MCI%20FSG%20Final%20Report\\_FA\\_RGB\\_Web\\_20%20Oct%202023.pdf](https://isomer-user-content.by.gov.sg/103/16fcf663-3c70-43ee-8205-185878547bf2/MCI%20FSG%20Final%20Report_FA_RGB_Web_20%20Oct%202023.pdf).

<sup>92</sup> This draws from the neo-Aristotelian conception of human flourishing articulated by John Finnis. (Seow Hon Tan, “Success and Flourishing in Singapore: The Impact of Laws and Policies on the Ethos and Character of a People” (2026) *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-026-10453-6>)

<sup>93</sup> Cultivate SG, “Marriage, Parenthood and Success Survey 2025” (17 November 2025): <https://cultivate.sg/research-recommend/marriage-parenthood-and-success-survey-2025/>.



55. By embracing human flourishing – instead of narrow success – marriage, parenthood and family life will be properly regarded as worthwhile and meaningful pursuits in our collective psyche:
- (a) **Re-prioritisation of marriage, parenthood and family life in society.** Family, as the Government regularly emphasises, is the basic building block of society.<sup>94</sup> Accordingly, educational, material or other achievements should be put in the right perspective. These should be *means* to support marriage, parenthood and family life – and, in turn, society – rather than ends in and of themselves.<sup>95</sup>
  - (b) **Proper recognition of caregiving and caregivers.** Caregiving is formative of character, an act of love and self-giving, and a path to actualisation of our personhood, as noted by Associate Professor (Dr.) Tan Seow Hon.<sup>96</sup> Caregivers – such as parents who step back from careers to care for children or adult children who step back from careers to care for elderly parents – may not be “successful” in a material sense, but their decisions to care for their loved ones are meaningful and valuable in and of themselves.
  - (c) **Valuing rest, play, aesthetic experience and protected time.** Play, aesthetic experience and sociability are legitimate aspects of human flourishing; they are not merely means by which a person can “recharge” in order to better contribute to work and the economy.<sup>97</sup> Likewise, time that is spent engaging in such activities is not wasted, but deserves to be protected so that human beings are not reduced to mere economic digits.



<sup>94</sup> See, for example, Prime Minister’s Office, “National Day Rally 2022” (21 August 2022): <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/national-day-rally-2022-english/>.

<sup>95</sup> “Are attaining material wealth and social status more valuable than nurturing a new life and impacting the next generation? What if all our study and work are actually meant to support family, and a strong family in turn supports every other social institution in society as its basic building block?” (Darius Lee, “It breaks one’s heart to see Singaporeans forgoing children” *The Straits Times* (5 March 2024): <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/it-breaks-one-s-heart-to-see-singaporeans-forgoing-children>)

<sup>96</sup> ““Unfiltered” Conference 2025 - Dialogue - “Success and Family”” (at 33:57) (November 2025): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XRr3JVAiuU>.

<sup>97</sup> “When we engage in play or aesthetic experience, we need no further justification for engaging in play or aesthetic experience. But some of us feel guilty. We must explain why we are playing or enjoying aesthetic experience. It’s almost as if we must say that we are actually recharging, we need rest so that we can better contribute to the economy.” (Cultivate SG, “Unfiltered – The Family on Trial 2025: “Singapore Awakened: How Success and the Alternative of Flourishing Shape Family”, Keynote Address by Assoc. Prof. (Dr.) Tan Seow Hon” (5 December 2025): <https://cultivate.sg/unfiltered-the-family-on-trial-2025-singapore-awakened-how-success-and-the-alternative-of-flourishing-shape-family-keynote-address-by-assoc-prof-dr-tan-seow-hon/>)



## C. Valuing children, family and marriage

56. In our view, Singapore's low fertility rates suggest that we have not adequately valued and prioritised children in our society, as compared to other pursuits such as economic success. We would therefore recommend a wholesale shift to reaffirm the intrinsic value and worth of children, including their best interests and welfare, through the following:
- (1) Supporting all children, by valuing marriage and family while looking out for those in less ideal circumstances;
  - (2) Distinguishing between support for individuals on one hand, and incentives for behaviours on the other;
  - (3) Adopting a genuinely pro-family approach towards our fertility challenge, as opposed to bare pro-natalism.
- (1) Supporting children, valuing marriage and family, and looking out for those in less ideal circumstances
57. Singapore is a party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child – the most widely ratified human rights treaty<sup>98</sup> – which emphasises that “the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration”.<sup>99</sup> Likewise, our local laws emphasise that the child's welfare is “the first and paramount consideration”.<sup>100</sup>
58. We should adopt a child-centric approach throughout society, to emphasise that every child is valued and supported. In this vein, being pro-child is consistent with being pro-family:
- (a) **Affirming the intrinsic worth and dignity of all children, including their need for special safeguards and care due to their vulnerability.** Children, like all human beings, have intrinsic worth and dignity. They are entitled to protection from discrimination, and need “special safeguards and care” on account of their “physical and mental immaturity”.<sup>101</sup>
  - (b) **Children have a right to know and be cared for by both father and mother, as far as possible.** Article 7(1) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child provides that the child shall have, “as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents.” Likewise, our courts have recognised the right of children to

<sup>98</sup> UNICEF, “Convention on the Rights of the Child”: <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention>.

<sup>99</sup> Article 3(1), Convention on the Rights of the Child.

<sup>100</sup> *UKM v Attorney-General* [2019] 3 SLR 874.

<sup>101</sup> Preamble, Convention on the Rights of the Child.



know their biological parents,<sup>102</sup> and affirmed that “the welfare of a child is best secured by letting him enjoy the love, care and support of both parents”.<sup>103</sup>

- (c) **Affirming the importance of marriage and family, including their benefit to children.** Marriage formalises love and commitment between husband and wife, and provides a stable foundation for the family unit, which is the basic building block of society. An important part of prioritising children’s welfare is to prioritise marriage and family as the best environment for the upbringing of children.<sup>104</sup>
- (d) **Recognising the unique and complementary contributions of men and women to marriage and parenthood.** As the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (as it was then known) concluded in a 2009 research booklet, “Mothers and fathers often bring different strengths and styles to their parenting roles.”<sup>105</sup> The unique and complementary contributions of both sexes to marriage and parenthood help with the holistic development of children, and our society should support the active involvement of both parents in their children’s lives.
- (e) **Where it is not possible for one or both parents to be present in a child’s life, our society should do its best to help that child to thrive.** Some children may not have one or both parents in their lives due to death, divorce, incarceration or various other reasons. Our society should value every child and ensure that children in these circumstances are nevertheless enabled to maximise their potential.

## (2) Distinction between support and incentive

- 59. As Minister for Social and Family Development Masagos Zulkifli pointed out in Parliament, the Government makes a distinction between “support” and “incentive”. He cited the previous Baby Bonus Cash Grant as an instance which is not provided to single unwed parents “because this is an incentive for married couples to have children.”<sup>106</sup>
- 60. We agree with the distinction between “support” and “incentive” in principle, and note that this view is shared by most Singaporeans. In our “Marriage, Family and

<sup>102</sup> *Melati bte Haji Salleh v Registrar-General of Births and Deaths and another* [1989] 1 SLR(R) 534.

<sup>103</sup> *CX v CY (minor: custody and access)* [2005] 3 SLR(R) 690 at para. 26.

<sup>104</sup> The preamble of the Convention on the Rights of the Child declares that “the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding”.

<sup>105</sup> “Mothers and fathers often bring different strengths and styles to their parenting roles. Compared to mothers, fathers spend more of their one-on-one interactions with infants and preschoolers in stimulating, playful activity, and are more boisterous in their play with not just sons but also daughters. From such interactions, children learn how to regulate their feelings and behaviour, are more comfortable exploring the world around them, and are more likely to exhibit self-control and pro-social behaviour.” (Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, “The Difference a Dad Makes – What Does International Research Say?” (November 2009), at 7).

<sup>106</sup> Parliament, “Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (Amendment No 3) Bill” (28 November 2022): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=bill-605>.



Social Discourse” Survey 2024, more than 8 in 10 respondents (83%) agreed that single parents should receive more support. By contrast, only about one-quarter (24%) agreed that single parenting should be encouraged.<sup>107</sup>

61. Thus, we agree with the child-centric approach announced at the National Day Rally 2026. Under the new child support package, the Government will extend “the same level of support” to *every Singaporean child* regardless of their parents’ marital status, amounting to almost \$70,000 in direct financial support as they grow up.<sup>108</sup> Even as children of unwed parents will receive this support equally, we appreciate the Government’s position that there is “no shift in thinking” on supporting parenthood within marriage.<sup>109</sup>

(3) Pro-family, not bare pro-natalism

62. Although low fertility rates are a challenge in our society, Cultivate SG believes in the importance of being pro-family as opposed to bare pro-natalism, such as that held by Elon Musk. Musk has reportedly voiced an aspiration for a “legion-level” number of children through the use of surrogates, and has fathered many children with different women.<sup>110</sup>
63. Bare pro-natalism is reductionist and dehumanising in nature, treating human beings (including children) as objects, statistics and tools to be used as a means to an end. It pays little or no regard to moral and ethical considerations.
64. Thus, Singapore should reject this kind of bare pro-natalism, but instead aim to raise fertility rates in a way that upholds and respects the intrinsic dignity and worth of all human beings, especially children, given their special vulnerability. This includes supporting marriage and family, which provide a stable environment for children to thrive.



<sup>107</sup> Cultivate SG, “Marriage, Family and Social Discourse Survey 2024” (15 November 2024): <https://cultivate.sg/research-recommend/marriage-family-and-social-discourse-survey-2024/>. Our survey was focused on the topic of single parents receiving support in general, and the question did not explore whom should be providing such support. Therefore, respondents may possibly be referring to support from various sources like family, community groups and friends, and not necessarily the Government.

<sup>108</sup> Prime Minister’s Office, “National Day Rally 2026” (23 August 2026): <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/ndr2026/>.

<sup>109</sup> “Children of unwed parents to receive cash benefits under SG Child Support Package” *The Straits Times* (26 August 2026): <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/community/every-child-counts-new-cash-benefits-in-sg-child-support-package-given-to-kids-of-unmarried-mums>.

<sup>110</sup> Rachel Raposas, “Elon Musk, Father of 14, Said He Wants to Have a ‘Legion-Level’ of Kids ‘Before the Apocalypse’: Report” *People* (16 April 2025): <https://people.com/elon-musk-father-of-14-wants-to-have-legion-level-of-kids-before-apocalypse-report-11716621>.



## D. Intentionally cultivating character and relationships through in-person activities and interactions

65. Compared to animals, human beings have a long developmental trajectory where we progressively grow physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually and relationally. Compared to machines (including AI), human beings have physical flesh-and-blood bodies through which we interact with one another and the world. There is a process of acculturation and social learning where children and young people grow up and learn appropriate social and moral norms.
66. In dating, marriage and parenthood, the *mettle of one's character* and the ability of a *person to develop and maintain healthy in-person relationships* are highly important:
  - (a) **Character qualities:** Personal qualities such as emotional stability, adaptability, resilience, the ability to handle and overcome adversity, and the ability and willingness to make sacrifices for others.
  - (b) **Relationship abilities:** To develop and maintain good relationships, one needs qualities such as compassion, empathy, conflict management skills, mutual respect, and a sound moral compass.
67. Given the trends of desocialisation identified above, the human developmental process can no longer be taken for granted. Likewise, the local education “arms race” and enormous spending on private tuition show that much of the emphasis in Singapore has focused on the familiar Singaporean success narrative (focused on educational and material achievement): *study hard, graduate with a university degree, and get a good job*. We need a shift in emphasis; as a society, we must be intentional in cultivating character and relationships.
68. Here are some key shifts to better cultivate character and relationships:
  - (a) **Rejecting overprotective parenting, and recognising the importance of physical play in physical and mental resilience.** Physical play activities are fun and exciting for children. While there is risk of injury, they also contribute positively to children's overall development. Kvalnes and Sandseter write in *Risky Play* (2023): “The fact that children have the opportunity to meet, explore, and overcome physical challenges and activities they were initially afraid of through play will thus contribute positively to their physical and mental health. They become physically strong, agile, and healthy, and they gain mental strength and an increased belief in their own mastery.”<sup>111</sup> Conversely, overprotective parenting deprives children of these important growth opportunities. A reasonable, age-appropriate balance between risk and safety is needed.



<sup>111</sup> Øyvind Kvalnes and Ellen Beate Hansen Sandseter, *Risky Play: An Ethical Challenge* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023) at 42.



- (b) **Valuing face-to-face interactions and in-person relational connections.** “Disconnect to connect”, a theme adopted by Families for Life in 2024,<sup>112</sup> reflects the important message of in-person, face-to-face interactions as opposed to connecting digitally through devices. These face-to-face interactions are important in social learning, the development of empathy and acculturation.<sup>113</sup>
- (c) **Nurturing familial relationships and intergenerational bonds.** Much of our society is age-segregated (e.g. preschools, schools, workplaces and nursing homes), and the family unit remains one key institution that is truly “age integrated” in principle.<sup>114</sup> Nevertheless, families may still be engaged in “separate islands of activity even if they live together.”<sup>115</sup> As a society, we need to reemphasise the importance of human relationships across the different generations, including and especially within the family and extended family.
- (d) **Sound societal norms, including on men, women, sex and marriage.** Men and women are complementary; no society can thrive if either sex is demeaned and diminished in significance. In matters of sexual ethics, consent is necessary as a moral and legal norm, but insufficient in and of itself.<sup>116</sup> Societally, we should uphold the importance of enduring commitment between a man and a woman in the union of marriage, “for better or for worse”; this level of lifelong, enduring commitment to one’s spouse expresses a high view of the uniqueness and irreplaceability of each individual.



<sup>112</sup> Families for Life, “Disconnect to Connect: Intergenerational Family Meet Up”: <https://familiesforlife.sg/pages/Event/Disconnect-to-Connect-Intergenerational-Family-Meet-Up>.

<sup>113</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024).

<sup>114</sup> Leng Leng Thang, “Promoting intergenerational understanding between the young and old: the case of Singapore”: [https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/docs/egm11/EGM\\_Expert\\_Paper\\_Theng\\_Leng\\_Leng.pdf](https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/docs/egm11/EGM_Expert_Paper_Theng_Leng_Leng.pdf)

<sup>115</sup> Leng Leng Thang, “Promoting intergenerational understanding between the young and old: the case of Singapore”: [https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/docs/egm11/EGM\\_Expert\\_Paper\\_Theng\\_Leng\\_Leng.pdf](https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/docs/egm11/EGM_Expert_Paper_Theng_Leng_Leng.pdf)

<sup>116</sup> Louise Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution: A New Guide to Sex in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2022).



### III. Policy Solutions: Rebalancing the Trade-off

69. A nation's laws and policies embody and emphasise its values and priorities. Laws, policies and justifications thereof offered by policymakers convey messages that seek to nudge and persuade the general public. When maintained for extended periods of time, they ingrain and reinforce cultural attitudes that persist long after these the laws and policies are discontinued.<sup>117</sup>
70. With regard to policy, we recommend a “whole life course” perspective on marriage and parenthood. The impartation of values and the provision of support for marriage and parenthood should begin from a young age, and persist throughout the entire course of life for every Singaporean. In other words, how would we inspire and encourage Singaporeans – including children, young people and subsequent generations to come – to value and aspire to marry and embrace parenthood?
71. Seen pragmatically and economically, policies should aim at rebalancing the trade-off between maintaining (or improving) one's standard of living on one hand, and having and raising children on the other. For a nation like ours where people are our only natural resource, parents play an important role in raising the next generation of citizens, taxpayers and workers who will sustain Singapore. Thus, parenthood deserves support because of its essential social contribution.
72. In making recommendations on policies, we have taken account various changing demographic realities, including:
  - (a) **High male and female workforce participation rates.** Singapore has a high labour force participation rate (aged 15 years and over), being one of the highest when compared to countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The labour force participation rate for men (91.8% in 2025) and women (80.5% in 2025) is high, when compared to OECD countries.<sup>118</sup>
  - (b) **Majority of married couples are dual-career.** Since 2020, a majority of married couples in Singapore have been dual-career, where both husband and wife are employed.<sup>119</sup>
  - (c) **Prevalence of migrant domestic workers (MDWs).** For many Singaporeans, MDWs provide an important source of support in domestic chores, caregiving of

<sup>117</sup> As can be seen from Section I above, the values, priorities, policies and justifications of the “Stop at Two” population control campaign remain deeply embedded in our culture and collective psyche.

<sup>118</sup> Ministry of Manpower, “Labour Force in Singapore 2025”: [https://stats.mom.gov.sg/iMAS\\_Tables1/LabourForce/LabourForce\\_2025/mrdsd\\_2025LabourForce\\_survey\\_findings.pdf](https://stats.mom.gov.sg/iMAS_Tables1/LabourForce/LabourForce_2025/mrdsd_2025LabourForce_survey_findings.pdf).

<sup>119</sup> Department of Statistics, “General Household Survey 2025”: <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/files/1559c94a-efc1-4262-84fd-042c9bd96e68.pdf>.



young and old, and more. Statistics from December 2025 show that there are 316,900 MDWs here.<sup>120</sup>

- (d) **Ageing population and “super-aged” status as a society.** Singapore is a “super-aged” society this year (i.e. 2026), with at least 21% of locals aged 65 and above.<sup>121</sup>
- (e) **Growing number of “sandwiched couples” having to care for both young and old.** With our ageing population and low fertility rates, there are more sandwiched couples having to care for both the young and old.<sup>122</sup>
- (f) **Wider diversity in marriage and parenthood aspirations.** While most Singaporeans aspire towards marriage and parenthood, there is a growing number who do not necessarily share these aspirations.<sup>123</sup>
- (g) **Wider diversity in household sizes, and marriage and parenthood realities.** There are a growing number of households with people living alone and married couples without children.<sup>124</sup> On the other hand, there are some larger families. among babies born in 2025, 2.1% of them are their families’ fifth or later child, up from 1.4% in 2015 and 1.5% in 2005.<sup>125</sup>
- (h) **Some grandparents are involved as main caregivers of grandchildren.** Our research suggests that a significant number of grandparents (15%) are involved as main caregivers of their grandchildren during the day on weekdays.<sup>126</sup>



<sup>120</sup> Ministry of Manpower, “Foreign workforce numbers”: <https://www.mom.gov.sg/foreign-workforce-numbers>.

<sup>121</sup> Ministry of Health, “Speech by Mr Ong Ye Kung, Minister for Health and Coordinating Minister for Social Policies, at the Business Times Policy Forum” (25 July 2026): <https://www.moh.gov.sg/newsroom/speech-by-mr-ong-ye-kung--minister-for-health-and-coordinating-minister-for-social-policies--at-the-business-times-longevity-forum/>.

<sup>122</sup> National Population and Talent Division, “Speech by Minister Indranee Rajah on Population at the Committee of Supply Debate 2024” (28 February 2024): <https://www.population.gov.sg/media-centre/speeches/speech-by-minister-indranee-on-population-at-the-cos-2024/>.

<sup>123</sup> National Population and Talent Division, “Marriage and Parenthood Survey 2021: Strong Aspirations Among Singaporeans To Start Families, Flexible Work Arrangements Preferred” (10 October 2022): <https://www.population.gov.sg/media-centre/press-releases/key-findings-marriage-and-parenthood-survey-2021/>.

<sup>124</sup> Department of Statistics, “General Household Survey 2025”: <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/files/1559c94a-efc1-4262-84fd-042c9bd96e68.pdf>; Cultivate SG, “Marriage, Parenthood and Success Survey 2025” (17 November 2025): <https://cultivate.sg/research-recommend/marriage-parenthood-and-success-survey-2025/>.

<sup>125</sup> “Going big: Why some Singaporeans choose to have 5 or more kids” *The Straits Times* (8 June 2026): <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/community/going-big-why-some-singaporeans-are-choosing-to-have-5-or-more-kids>.

<sup>126</sup> Cultivate SG, “Parenthood and Work Survey 2024” (16 August 2024): <https://cultivate.sg/research-recommend/parenthood-and-work-survey-2024/>. See also Singapore Children’s Society, “The Infancy Study: The Impact of Caregiving Arrangements on Early Childhood Development” (July 2019): <https://www.childrensociety.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/The-Infancy-Study-Research-Monograph-2019.pdf>.



73. We note that the Workgroup is examining “key factors that influence M&P decisions including financial costs, work-life support, caregiving, housing, healthcare, preschool and education”.<sup>127</sup>
74. Thus, our policy recommendations will be structured accordingly. In this section, we will address our recommendations in relation to:
- A. Financial costs
  - B. Work-life support
  - C. Caregiving
  - D. Housing
  - E. Healthcare
  - F. Preschool
  - G. Education
  - H. Other recommendations
75. At the National Day Rally 2026, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong had also announced various policy changes as a “sneak preview” of various changes that the Workgroup will be proposing.<sup>128</sup> Thus, this paper will not rehash the policy changes already announced at the Rally.

## A. Financial Costs

76. Financial costs are the top stated reason discouraging people from having children.<sup>129</sup> However, as noted in Section I, this is only superficially true for the most part. Especially for higher income groups, the concern is about attaining or maintaining a high standard of living. Values and desocialisation trends also play a significant role in affecting marriage and parenthood.
77. In this analysis, the more important questions are: *What are people intending to spend on, and why?* Our policies should draw a differentiated approach depending on people’s needs.

<sup>127</sup> National Population and Talent Division, “New Workgroup to Review Policies and Galvanise Societal Support for Marriage and Parenthood Reset” (29 April 2026): <https://www.population.gov.sg/new-workgroup-to-review-policies-and-galvanise-societal-support-for-marriage-and-parenthood-reset/>.

<sup>128</sup> Prime Minister’s Office, “National Day Rally 2026” (23 August 2026): <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/ndr2026/>.

<sup>129</sup> National Population and Talent Division, “Marriage and Parenthood Survey 2021: Strong Aspirations Among Singaporeans To Start Families, Flexible Work Arrangements Preferred” (10 October 2022): <https://www.population.gov.sg/media-centre/press-releases/key-findings-marriage-and-parenthood-survey-2021/>; Cultivate SG, “Marriage, Parenthood and Success Survey 2025” (17 November 2025): <https://cultivate.sg/research-recommend/marriage-parenthood-and-success-survey-2025/>.



- (1) Supporting “big ticket” expenses – housing and car ownership – according to need
78. In land-scarce Singapore, there are two “big ticket” expenses: housing and car ownership.
79. Given our current demographic challenges and the reality of land scarcity, the key question is one of allocation of limited resources to address diverse needs (e.g. economic activity, domestic needs, etc.). There is room to recalibrate our policies to meet social needs.
80. However, the current policies on both housing and car ownership are significantly different notwithstanding similar realities and challenges:
- (a) **Housing: Emphasis on home ownership.** The Housing and Development Board (HDB) aims to “[help] every Singaporean own their home”.<sup>130</sup> According to Founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, home ownership helped Singapore in the early days – an immigrant community with no common history – “to quickly forge a sense of rootedness in Singapore. It is the foundation upon which nationhood was forged.”<sup>131</sup> As such, there is a strong emphasis on accessibility and affordability of public housing, and there have been recent changes to enhance access by singles to HDB homes.<sup>132</sup>
- (b) **Car: Emphasis on “car lite” society and free market.** By contrast, the Government’s aim is to create a “car lite” Singapore.<sup>133</sup> The vehicle population is regulated and rationed through the Certificate of Entitlement (COE) system, and is allocated based on market value.<sup>134</sup> With rising COE prices,<sup>135</sup> this effectively means that only wealthier Singaporeans – regardless of marital status, family size or caregiving responsibilities – can afford to own cars, regardless of their actual needs or otherwise. The Government instead aims to invest in “quality and



<sup>130</sup> Housing and Development Board, “Our Role: Enable Home Ownership”: <https://www.hdb.gov.sg/about-us/our-role/enable-home-ownership>.

<sup>131</sup> “Speech by Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Minister Mentor, at the key handover ceremony for The Pinnacle@Duxton, 13 December 2009, 9.00am at Pinnacle@Duxton”: <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdffdoc/20091221001.htm>

<sup>132</sup> See, for example, Prime Minister’s Office, “National Day Rally 2023” (20 August 2023): <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/national-day-rally-2023/>.

<sup>133</sup> Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources and Ministry of National Development, “Sustainable Singapore Blueprint” (2015): <https://isomer-user-content.by.gov.sg/50/3db854a5-473a-4d18-ae26-6991464a17a1/ssbcombined-cover-text.pdf>.

<sup>134</sup> Prime Minister’s Office, “SM Lee Hsien Loong’s Dialogue at the 69th Economic Society of Singapore Annual Dinner” (16 July 2025): <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/sm-lee-hsien-loong-dialogue-at-the-69th-ess-annual-dinner/>.

<sup>135</sup> Parliament, “Reasons for Continued Increase in COE Premiums Despite Implementation of “Cut-and-fill” and Other Measures” (6 May 2026): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=written-answer-na-23464>.



inclusive public transport” and “broaden point-to-point transport options for commuters who may require occasional access to cars”.<sup>136</sup>

81. We recommend a more equitable allocation in order to better support marriage and parenthood (as well as family life as a whole):

(a) **Recalibrating housing options according to need.** We will address housing related matters in sub-section D below.

(b) **COE priority scheme for families and caregivers of young children, the elderly, persons with disabilities and those with serious health conditions.** Such a scheme could involve a partial or complete COE waiver if certain conditions are fulfilled, or the introduction of a separate COE category. Due to evolving needs, the validity of the COE could also be capped at a shorter length of time (e.g. to be renewed annually instead of 5 or 10 years).

(2) Public transport vouchers for each Singaporean child

82. Transport is a basic need for families in today’s Singapore and, as mentioned at the National Day Rally 2026, “getting around becomes more costly with a bigger family”.<sup>137</sup>

83. Currently, Public Transport Vouchers (PTVs) are provided in years where public transport fares are increased to cushion the impact of the immediate cost increase on lower-income households.<sup>138</sup>

84. We recommend providing PTVs as part of the newly-announced SG Child Support Package, where PTVs are provided annually to each child from the ages of 7 to 18 (on top of the existing student concessions already available; younger children currently travel for free on public transport).<sup>139</sup> With this arrangement, families who have more children will naturally receive more support.



<sup>136</sup> Parliament, “Providing Affordable Vehicle Access for Families with Special Needs and Elderly Dependants in View of Rising COE Prices” (4 November 2025): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=written-answer-20852>.

<sup>137</sup> Prime Minister’s Office, “National Day Rally 2026” (23 August 2026): <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/ndr2026/>.

<sup>138</sup> Parliament, “Scope and Rationale of Public Transport Voucher in Offsetting Recent and Cumulative Fare Increases” (7 May 2026): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=written-answer-23446>.

<sup>139</sup> Note: Children under seven years old and up to 0.9m in height can travel for free on basic bus and train services, when accompanied by a fare-paying adult. Children under seven years old and above 0.9m in height can also travel for free on the above-mentioned services with a valid Child Concession Card. Students are also entitled to student concessionary fares. (SimplyGo, “Child Concessionary Fares”: <https://simplygo.com.sg/travel-fares/child-concessionary-fares/>; SimplyGo, “Student Concessionary Fares”: <https://simplygo.com.sg/travel-fares/student-concessionary-fares/>)



## B. Work-life Support

85. Our findings suggest that careers are not impediments to parenthood in and of themselves,<sup>140</sup> the challenge seems to lie in the immediate, day-to-day demands these competing responsibilities place on one's time and capacity.<sup>141</sup> With modern communication and technology, work today follows workers "everywhere, all the time, all at once" – to adapt the words of Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon – and "the possibility of being contacted at any hour... can quickly become an expectation, and indeed, a demand of constant availability".<sup>142</sup>
86. Practically, work and family life require availability and commitment. For a working parent (especially those with young children), there must be an appropriate space for both:
- (a) **Predictability and certainty at work, with stable rhythms and routines.** Caregiving is fundamentally about *rhythms* and *routines*, such as dropping off a child at school before heading to work and picking up a child from school during lunchtime or after work. Predictability and certainty (such as clear and fixed start and end to one's working hours) are important to establish and synchronise work with these *rhythms* and *routines* to enable working parents to fulfil their obligations on multiple fronts.
  - (b) **Flexibility at work to address various exigencies.** There are exigencies such as a child's illness, where working parents will need to take urgent leave or at least take time and effort to make alternative caregiving arrangements. Flexibility at work will help to accommodate these circumstances.
87. In our view, the biggest current challenge in work-life support for families lies in "workplace culture", which is the "shared values, belief systems, attitudes and the set of assumptions that people in a workplace share".<sup>143</sup> While individual organisations and various trades have their own workplace cultures, there remain certain overarching trends across workplaces in Singapore.

<sup>140</sup> Only less than one in 10 (8.9%) respondents said careers held back their childbearing. (Cultivate SG, "Parenthood and Work Survey 2024" (16 August 2024): <https://cultivate.sg/research-recommend/parenthood-and-work-survey-2024/>)

<sup>141</sup> National Population and Talent Division, "Marriage and Parenthood Survey 2021: Strong Aspirations Among Singaporeans To Start Families, Flexible Work Arrangements Preferred" (10 October 2022): <https://www.population.gov.sg/media-centre/press-releases/key-findings-marriage-and-parenthood-survey-2021/>.

<sup>142</sup> SG Courts, "Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon: Opening Address at the Legal Profession Symposium 2026" (29 July 2026): <https://www.judiciary.gov.sg/news-and-resources/news/news-details/chief-justice-sundaresh-menon--opening-address-at-the-legal-profession-symposium-2026>.

<sup>143</sup> Dr Pragya Agawal, "How To Create A Positive Workplace Culture" *Forbes* (29 August 2018): <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pragyaagarwaleurope/2018/08/29/how-to-create-a-positive-work-place-culture/>.



88. In setting out our recommendations, we at Cultivate SG are mindful of various competing considerations and interests:
- (a) **There are limits to how far policies can affect work-life support.** For example, as can be seen from 2023 take-up rates of maternity leave (74%) and paternity leave (56%),<sup>144</sup> there are various factors beyond the scope of government policies that affect the reality of family-friendly practices.
  - (b) **Delicate balance in the relationships between employers and employees.** Singapore seeks to foster fair and harmonious employer-employee relationships.<sup>145</sup> These are shaped by numerous factors such as applicable laws, policies, social norms, organisation culture and staff morale.
  - (c) **Singapore's need to maintain competitiveness in a global economy in both the short- and long-run.** Prime Minister Lawrence Wong stressed in 2024 that Singapore seeks economic growth, “because that is how we create more opportunities and a better quality of life for all Singaporeans.”<sup>146</sup>
89. Here are our recommendations:
- (1) Ensuring job security, especially in early career and during transitions to marriage and parenthood
90. Job security is important. This is especially so for a country with high labour force participation rates among men and women, as well as a majority of married couples being dual-career. To support marriage and parenthood, there are a few critical junctures where job security is particularly important: *in early career and during transitions to marriage and parenthood*.
91. Scientifically, a woman's fertility peaks in one's 20s, and declines in one's 30s, particularly after age 35, as the number and quality of eggs that remain in the ovaries decrease with age. For men, sperm quality deteriorates with age, which could reduce the chances of conception and increase potential risk of gene defects.<sup>147</sup>



<sup>144</sup> Ministry of Social and Family Development, “Family Trends Report 2025” (July 2025): <https://www.msf.gov.sg/docs/default-source/research-data/family-trends-report-2025.pdf>.

<sup>145</sup> See, for example, Ministry of Manpower, “Passing Of Workplace Fairness Bill Marks Next Step In Building Fair and Harmonious Workplaces” (8 January 2025): <https://www.mom.gov.sg/newsroom/press-releases/2025/passing-of-workplace-fairness-bill-marks-next-step-in-building-fair-and-harmonious-workplaces>.

<sup>146</sup> Prime Minister's Office, “National Day Rally 2024” (18 August 2024): <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/national-day-rally-2024/>.

<sup>147</sup> HealthHub, “Debunking 5 Myths of Fertility Health” (last updated 4 May 2026): <https://www.healthhub.sg/well-being-and-lifestyle/sexual-health/debunking-5-myths-of-fertility-health>.



92. From the perspective of improving fertility rates, it is therefore ideal to encourage people to marry and have children in their 20s and early 30s. However, these coincide with the period in which the bulk of Singaporeans typically enter the workforce (mid-to late-20s),<sup>148</sup> and begin to establish their careers.
93. For a society where financial cost is frequently cited as the top reason discouraging parenthood, job security is essential, especially during these critical junctures:
- (a) **Enhancing job security in early career.**
- (i) **Enhancing availability and early stability of jobs, in both the private and public sectors.** For young Singaporeans entering the workforce, finding and securing employment is important for stability. We encourage the Government to constantly ensure that the job market has sufficient entry level jobs for new entrants to the workforce, and to encourage early stability of these jobs (e.g. avoiding long probation or training periods).
  - (ii) **Developing skills among new workers for a world shaped by AI.** AI is one significant challenge to entry-level jobs today.<sup>149</sup> It is important to train new workers (e.g. through education, professional training, etc.) with skills for a world shaped by AI. This includes the ability to use AI effectively and do “higher order” work of assessing, analysing and applying the output generated by AI, as well as the ability to function in the absence of AI.
  - (iii) **Smoothing and shortening path to job security by avoiding long training periods in jobs and professions.** Some jobs and professions have long training periods for fresh graduates. For example, in 2025, the legal profession extended its practice training period from 6 months to a year,<sup>150</sup> effectively creating a five-and-a-half-year process towards becoming a full-fledged practising lawyer (four years for an undergraduate degree, half a year for the “Part B” Bar course and one year of practice training). While aimed at developing professional competencies, these prolong the path to job security for young professionals, which may further delay entry into marriage and parenthood for those who wish to do so. As far as possible, the path from traineeship to actual job security should be smoothed and shortened instead.
- (b) **Promoting seamless transitions to marriage and parenthood amidst work.** The various recommendations below are addressed to these transitions.



<sup>148</sup> Ministry of Manpower, “Labour Force in Singapore 2025”: [https://stats.mom.gov.sg/iMAS/Tables1/LabourForce/LabourForce\\_2025/mrsl\\_2025LabourForce\\_survey\\_findings.pdf](https://stats.mom.gov.sg/iMAS/Tables1/LabourForce/LabourForce_2025/mrsl_2025LabourForce_survey_findings.pdf).

<sup>149</sup> “As AI reshapes entry-level work, fresh grads must prepare for the ‘third-year job’: panel” *Business Times* (21 May 2026): <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/singapore/ai-reshapes-entry-level-work-fresh-grads-must-prepare-third-year-job-panel>

<sup>150</sup> Ministry of Law, “Strengthening the Professional Training Regime for Lawyers in Singapore” (3 October 2023): <https://www.mlaw.gov.sg/news/press-releases/strengthening-professional-training-regime-for-lawyers-sg/>.



(2) Subsidy for parental leave covers for small- and medium-sized enterprises

94. Parental leave imposes various hidden costs on employers,<sup>151</sup> even when the leave is fully paid for by the Government. When employees go on parental leave, employers have to address work interruptions, possible friction from handovers and impact on staff morale. There are challenges when seeking a replacement for the absent worker, whether by hiring a temporary worker or paying more to existing workers to cover the work. Some workers might not be so easily replaceable, such as those in specialised roles or higher management. Especially in situations of prolonged parental leave, employers are required to keep the position open for the absent employee, while facing uncertainties about whether the employee will eventually return to work or seek another job elsewhere instead.
95. This challenge is acute for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Thus, we recommend the creation of a grant for parental leave covers, to help further offset the hidden costs of obtaining covers for parental leave.
96. Japan has implemented such a policy. Under the Japanese policy, if an SME provides an allowance to a worker who takes over the duties of an employee on parental leave, the government will subsidise up to three-quarters of the cost, with a maximum of 100,000 yen per month. The grant period is one year.<sup>152</sup>
97. We recommend creating a grant to support parental leave covers in SMEs, to help cover part of the cost of hiring of a temporary worker or paying more to existing workers to cover the manpower absences due to parental leave.

(3) Supporting the growth of a market for temporary work covers

98. The findings from our “Parenthood and Work” Survey 2024 suggest that colleagues may also experience a significant degree of frustration because of colleagues who go on parental leave.<sup>153</sup>
99. We recommend the Government to work with the private sector to help nurture a structured and regulated industry of temporary hires and to facilitate job matching to fill manpower gaps. This could involve working with job portals to build a readily available pool of “parental leave covers”.

<sup>151</sup> These were points made in our piece “Can parents enjoy extra leave without irritating their employers?” *The Straits Times* (2 October 2024): <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/can-parents-enjoy-extra-leave-without-irritating-their-employers>.

<sup>152</sup> “Japan gov’t to subsidize firms for coworkers covering for staff on child care leave” *The Mainichi* (5 September 2023): <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20230904/p2a/00m/0na/015000c>.

<sup>153</sup> Cultivate SG, “Parenthood and Work Survey 2024” (16 August 2024): <https://cultivate.sg/research-recommend/parenthood-and-work-survey-2024/>



(4) Issuing new TAFEP guidelines on fair practices in light of parental and childcare leave

100. Parental and childcare leave impose hidden costs, as noted above. These include work interruptions, possible friction from handovers and impact on staff morale. In the case of childcare leave, temporary work covers are generally untenable, and existing colleagues (including non-parents, parents of older children, etc.) may have to take on additional work. If negative feelings arising from these challenges are left unaddressed, there may be various negative consequences, such as employers and colleagues discriminating against parents, or parents being deterred from taking childcare or parental leave.
101. We recommend that the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) should issue guidelines regarding what constitutes “fair” practices (including assessment and compensation) in light of parental and childcare leave. This includes fair practices with regard to parents who take parental and/or childcare leave, and fair practices with regard to other colleagues who help to cover the additional work.

(5) Legal right to request flexible work arrangements, along with legal protections

102. Flexible work arrangements (FWAs) can broadly fall into three categories: flexi-place, flexi-time and flexi-load. Currently, the Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangement Requests (TG-FWAR) are in place to allow employees to request FWAs. We recommend taking this a step further, by giving employees a legal right to request FWAs (flexi-place, flexi-time and/or flexi-load).
103. The Workplace Fairness Act (WFA) protects against discrimination on the grounds of age, nationality, sex, marital status, pregnancy status, caregiving responsibilities, race, religion, language, disability and mental health conditions.
104. With regard to age discrimination, there is a unique framework under the Retirement and Re-employment Act (RRA), which operates separately from the WFA and offers additional age-related protections:
- (a) **Re-employment for employees at retirement age.** Under the RRA, employers must offer re-employment to eligible employees who attain retirement age (which is 64 years as of 1 July 2026), up till the re-employment age (which is 69 years as of 1 July 2026). The employee must have been assessed by the employer to have at least satisfactory work performance and be medically fit to continue working.
  - (b) **Representations to the Minister.** Under the RRA, an employee below retirement age who considers that he or she has been unlawfully dismissed on the ground of age, he or she may make representations in writing to the Minister to be reinstated in his or her former employment. This initiates an inquiry process where the Minister may order reinstatement of the employee or direct the employer to pay compensation.



105. To better formalise the FWA framework in Singapore and lay down concrete protections for workers who request FWAs, we recommend adopting a framework which shares some similarities to the RRA.
106. Our proposed framework is as follows:
- (a) **Right of employee to request FWA in writing.** Similar to the TG-FWAR, an employee will have the right to request FWA in writing from one's employer.
  - (b) **Variation of job scope, terms and conditions to be based on reasonable factors, including the employee's productivity, performance, duties and responsibilities.** The job scope and the terms and conditions may vary from those in the previous contract of service between the employer and employee. However, similar to the RRA framework, the variations must be based on reasonable factors such as, but not limited to, the employee's productivity, performance, duties and responsibilities, and the wage system such as the seniority system applicable to the employee.<sup>154</sup>
  - (c) **Right of aggrieved employees to make representations to Minister.** An employee who considers that he or she has been unlawfully dismissed for making an FWA request under this framework may make representations in writing to the Minister to be reinstated in his or her former employment.
  - (d) **Framework operates in addition to, instead of supplanting, protections under the Workplace Fairness Act and other laws or guidelines.** Similar to the interface between the RRA and WFA, our proposed framework should complement rather than supplant the protections under the WFA and other laws or guidelines (such as the TG-FWAR).
- (6) Introduce family care leave, which includes adults caring for elderly parents and grandparents caring for grandchildren
107. With our changing demographics and increasing pressures in caring for both young and old, caregiving is not limited to caring for young children, but includes adults who care for elderly parents and grandparents who care for grandchildren. There may additionally be sandwiched couples who are simultaneously caring for children and elderly parents at the same time. We propose the introduction of family care leave alongside childcare leave.
108. Since 1 January 2025, the Civil Service has expanded its Parent Care Leave to Family Care Leave of up to 3 working days, for an employee to take care of an immediate family member when the main caregiver is not available. An immediate family member is defined as one's spouse, children (not covered under childcare leave),



<sup>154</sup> See Section 7A, Retirement and Re-employment Act 1993.



parents (including in-laws, step-parents and step-parents in-law), siblings, grandparents (including grandparents in-law) and grandchildren.<sup>155</sup>

109. At the National Day Rally 2026, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong announced a new childcare leave arrangement as follows: Every working parent will get: 8 days with one child, aged 12 and below, 10 days with two children, aged 12 and below, and 12 days with three or more children.<sup>156</sup>
110. We propose the introduction of a new family care leave in similar terms to the Civil Service Family Care Leave, where an employee may have Family Care Leave of up to 3 working days, for an employee to take care of an immediate family member when the main caregiver is not available. An immediate family member is defined as one's spouse, children (not covered under childcare leave), parents (including in-laws, step-parents and step-parents in-law), siblings, grandparents (including grandparents in-law) and grandchildren.

(7) Annual audit on family-friendly practices throughout the public service

111. The Singapore Public Service is one of Singapore's largest employers, employing around 158,000 public officers working in 16 Ministries and more than 50 Statutory Boards.<sup>157</sup>
112. To better promote family-friendly practices throughout the public service, we recommend establishing and conducting an annual audit throughout the public service to review compliance with family-friendly laws, policies and contractual obligations. The audit should encompass:
  - (a) **Parental leave (maternity leave, paternity leave and shared parental leave) take-up rates.** The audit should examine the take-up rates of parental leave (maternity leave, paternity leave and shared parental leave) and reasons for not taking parental leave. The goal should be a 100% (or near-100%) take-up rate of all days of parental leave for all new parents.
  - (b) **Childcare and family care leave take-up rates.** The audit should examine the take-up rates of childcare and family care leave, the ease of application for leave, and the reasons for which applications for such leave are rejected.
  - (c) **Availability of flexible work arrangements.** The audit should encompass the types and number of FWAs granted, ease of requesting FWAs, the reasons for which FWAs are requested, approved and rejected.

<sup>155</sup> Industrial Relations Supplement No. 9 (10 January 2025): <https://assets.egazette.gov.sg/2025/Other%20Supplements/Industrial%20Relations%20Supplement/09.pdf>.

<sup>156</sup> Prime Minister's Office, National Day Rally 2026 (23 August 2026): <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/ndr2026/>.

<sup>157</sup> Careers@Gov, "The Singapore Public Service": <https://www.careers.gov.sg/who-we-are/the-singapore-public-service/>.



(8) Company reviews on family-friendly practices in the private sector

113. Company reviews (e.g. Indeed and Glassdoor) are useful to help inform job applicants and industries about various factors such as culture, work-life balance and salaries.
114. We recommend the Government to work with company review websites and job portals to develop reviews of companies in relation to their family-friendly practices. These should encompass reviews in relation to their policies and practices regarding parental, childcare and family care leave, flexible work arrangements, work-life balance and work culture.

(9) Grant for employers who employ stay-at-home parents returning to the workforce

115. Stay-at-home parents (SAHPs) face various challenges when returning to the workforce, as their career breaks may be perceived negatively by employers. There is a need for better support for the employment of SAHPs if, when and to the extent that they wish to return to the workforce.
116. Currently, there are schemes such as the Senior Employment Credit (SEC), Enabling Employment Credit (EEC) and CPF Transition Offset (CTO) that are given to employers to help support the employment of seniors and persons with disabilities.<sup>158</sup>
117. We recommend implementing a grant in similar terms to support the employment of SAHPs who wish to return to the workforce.

(10) Build and enforce a stronger norm against overwork

118. To strengthen predictability and certainty at work and protect workers against overwork, we recommend building and enforcing a stronger norm against overwork. This benefits not only working parents, but all workers in general.
119. Here are some policy recommendations to better strengthen the norm against overwork:
- (a) **Clear start and end times of work.** We recommend creating a broad social norm through public education campaigns in favour of clear start and end times of work, and reminders to employers to respect personal time of employees. This includes the principle that employees have no obligation to respond outside of work hours except if reasonable prior notice is given or on genuinely urgent matters.



<sup>158</sup> Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore, “Senior Employment Credit (SEC), Enabling Employment Credit (EEC) and CPF Transition Offset (CTO)”: [https://www.iras.gov.sg/schemes/disbursement-schemes/senior-employment-credit-\(sec\)-cpf-transition-offset-\(cto\)-and-enabling-employment-credit-\(eec\)](https://www.iras.gov.sg/schemes/disbursement-schemes/senior-employment-credit-(sec)-cpf-transition-offset-(cto)-and-enabling-employment-credit-(eec)).



- (b) **Consider extending the application of the Employment Act rules on rest days, hours of work and conditions of service to more employees.** Part 4 of the Employment Act regulates rest days, hours of work and other conditions of service. However, it applies to workmen who are in receipt of a salary not exceeding \$4,500 a month and to every employee (other than a workman or a person employed in a managerial or an executive position) who receives a salary not exceeding \$2,600 a month; the Minister may prescribe different amounts.<sup>159</sup> We recommend reviewing the Employment Act with a view to extending its application to more employees, in order to better protect various employees from overwork.
- (c) **Stricter and more proactive enforcement of rules against overwork.** There are existing rules under the Employment Act which regulate overtime work and work on rest days. We recommend stricter and more proactive enforcement of these rules.

### C. Caregiving

120. Caregiving is formative of character, an act of love and self-giving, and a path to actualisation of our personhood.<sup>160</sup> While there are aspects of caregiving that can be provided by paid caregivers, it is not ultimately reducible to a mere service and should not be reduced as such. There are deeply human elements of love, reciprocity and sacrifice involved.
121. On the other hand, many of our existing support schemes and subsidies for caregiving prioritise working mothers, and send the message that mothers should place their children with other caregivers (e.g. childcare, grandparents, etc.) while going to work.
122. As a matter of principle, a number of our recommendations in sub-section B above may overlap with the recommendations in this part. Bearing this in mind, here are our recommendations:

<sup>159</sup> Section 35, Employment Act.

<sup>160</sup> See Assoc. Prof. (Dr.) Tan Seow Hon's remarks at ““Unfiltered” Conference 2025 - Dialogue - “Success and Family”” (at 33:57) (November 2025): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XRr3JVAiuU>.



- (1) Expand tax relief measures for working mothers to all working parents
123. We recommend a review of tax relief measures currently intended for working mothers, to extend them to all working parents.
124. Currently, there are a number of relief measures meant for working mothers (who are either married, divorced or widowed) only:
- (a) **Working Mother's Child Relief (WMCR).** Depending on the number of children, WMCR is between \$8,000 to \$12,000 for Singaporean children born or adopted on or after 1 January 2024 (or between 15% to 25% of earned income for those born or adopted before 1 January 2024). It is intended to encourage married women to remain in the workforce after having children, encourage parents to take up Singapore Citizenship for their children and reward families with children who are Singapore Citizens.<sup>161</sup>
  - (b) **Grandparent Caregiver Relief (GCR).** A sum of \$3,000 in relief may be claimed. It is given to working mothers who engage the help of their or their husband's parents, grandparents, step-parents, step-grandparents, adoptive parents, or adoptive grandparents (including those of ex-husband) to take care of their children,<sup>162</sup> and also to "recognise the important role that grandparents play in bringing up the next generation".<sup>163</sup>
125. We urge a review of these policies, as attitudes and realities regarding work and parenthood have changed significantly since the introduction of WMCR and GCR in 2004. Today, a majority of married couples are dual-income and female labour force participation rates are much higher (see paragraph 72 above). As of 2021, only 40% of married Singaporeans polled agreed that "ideally, the mother should take care of her children full-time", and even fewer singles agreed (24%).<sup>164</sup> Conversely, fertility rates are much lower compared to 2004.
126. Thus, we recommend extending the WMCR and GCR to all working parents.



<sup>161</sup> Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore, "Working Mother's Child Relief (WMCR)": [https://www.iras.gov.sg/taxes/individual-income-tax/basics-of-individual-income-tax/tax-reliefs-rebates-and-deductions/tax-reliefs/working-mother's-child-relief-\(wmcr\)](https://www.iras.gov.sg/taxes/individual-income-tax/basics-of-individual-income-tax/tax-reliefs-rebates-and-deductions/tax-reliefs/working-mother's-child-relief-(wmcr)); Parliament, *Income Tax (Amendment) Bill* (17 November 2004): [https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=012\\_20041117\\_S0002\\_T0006](https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=012_20041117_S0002_T0006).

<sup>162</sup> Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore, "Grandparent Caregiver Relief": <https://www.iras.gov.sg/taxes/individual-income-tax/basics-of-individual-income-tax/tax-reliefs-rebates-and-deductions/tax-reliefs/grandparent-caregiver-relief>

<sup>163</sup> Parliament, *Income Tax (Amendment) Bill* (17 November 2004): [https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=012\\_20041117\\_S0002\\_T0006](https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=012_20041117_S0002_T0006).

<sup>164</sup> National Population and Talent Division, "Marriage and Parenthood Survey 2021: Strong Aspirations Among Singaporeans To Start Families, Flexible Work Arrangements Preferred" (10 October 2022): <https://www.population.gov.sg/media-centre/press-releases/key-findings-marriage-and-parenthood-survey-2021/>.



(2) Maternity stipend for non-working mothers

127. Currently, working mothers are entitled to maternity leave (or maternity benefits, for self-employed working mothers). Non-working mothers are not entitled to any such maternity leave.
128. The positions of a working mother and a non-working mother are significantly different in terms of legal entitlement and payment by the Government, notwithstanding the fact that both share the similar practical reality that they do not work for the first few months after the child's birth:

**Comparison of Working and Non-working Mothers for First 4 Months After Birth**

|                                         | <b>Working Mother</b>                                                                                                                                                 | <b>Non-working Mother</b>                                 |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Practical Reality During First 4 Months | Not working during the first 4 months after child's birth, due to maternity leave                                                                                     | Not working during the first 4 months after child's birth |
| Amount Received                         | 16 weeks' worth of the working mother's salary (i.e. amount varies according to salary)<br><br>(Amount is paid by employer and reimbursed by Government, up to a cap) | None                                                      |

129. Practically, Government-paid parental leave is a form of government support for parenthood or, more specifically, working parents. There is no comparable form of support for non-working parents currently in place. This puts non-working mothers at a significant financial disadvantage notwithstanding the similar position working and non-working mothers for the first few months after the child's birth.
130. To support non-working mothers, we recommend a maternity stipend for non-working mothers, at a sum of \$250 per week for the duration of 16 weeks after birth (amounting to a total of \$4,000). In the event a working mother on maternity leave draws less than the stipend amount, she would be entitled to this amount as well.

## D. Housing

131. Singapore's approach to housing is a fine example of how land scarcity is managed and optimised through – in PM Wong's words – “human ingenuity”, including and especially through building “upward” and land reclamation.<sup>165</sup> HDB's role has also transformed from building houses quickly and cheaply in the early years, to helping improve quality of life.<sup>166</sup>
132. For a country where more than three-quarters (77.2% in 2025) of the population live in HDB flats,<sup>167</sup> housing policy should take into account the changing realities of Singaporean families in this decade and beyond (see paragraph 72 above).
133. On the other hand, the sizes of new HDB flats have remained generally constant. The largest flats (3Gen flats) are up to 118 square metres in size.

Table 1: Average Size of HDB Flats and Typical Range of Flat Sizes Completed in 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015 and 2020 (sqm) <sup>[\*]</sup>

|                                      | 2R / SA /<br>2R Flexi<br>[#]               | 3R [®]   | 4R       |  | 5R            | 3Gen [%]      | Average<br>Household<br>Size in HDB<br>flats [®] |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|----------|----------|--|---------------|---------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| 2000                                 | NA                                         | NA       | 90       |  | 110           | NA            | 3.66                                             |
| 2005                                 | NA                                         | NA       | 90       |  | 110           | NA            | 3.51                                             |
| 2010                                 | 35 & 45                                    | 65       | 90       |  | 110           | NA            | 3.45                                             |
| 2015                                 | 35 & 45                                    | 65       | 90       |  | 110           | NA            | 3.34                                             |
| 2020                                 | 36 & 45                                    | 65       | 90       |  | 110           | 115           | 3.13                                             |
| Typical<br>Range<br>of Flat<br>Sizes | Type 1:<br>35 to 38<br>Type 2:<br>45 to 47 | 60 to 68 | 85 to 93 |  | 107 to<br>113 | 115 to<br>118 | -                                                |

<sup>[\*]</sup> The above average flat sizes are applicable to completed Build-To-Order (BTO) projects (including standalone SA blocks) and exclude Selective En bloc Redevelopment Scheme (SERS) projects, which are not the main supply of new HDB flats. The Build-to-Order (BTO) Programme was only introduced from 2001. Flats completed in 2000 were designed and launched under the Registration for Flats System (RFS) scheme.

<sup>[#]</sup> HDB re-introduced 2R flats in 2006. Subsequently, the design for SA and 2R flats were subsumed under the current 2-room Flexi scheme in 2015.

<sup>[®]</sup> HDB stopped building 3R new flats in 1980s and only resumed building 3R new flats in 2004.

<sup>[%]</sup> 3-Generation flats were introduced in 2013 to cater to the needs of large multi-generational families.

<sup>[®]</sup> Data on average household size in HDB flats, covers all HDB flats and is not restricted to newly completed flats in the year.

Source: Parliament, “Average HDB Flat Size for Each Flat Type Completed in 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015 and 2020” (4 July 2022)

<sup>165</sup> “3 ways for Singapore to stretch land options: Lawrence Wong” *The Straits Times* (26 June 2019): <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/3-ways-for-singapore-to-stretch-land-options-lawrence-wong>

<sup>166</sup> National Library Board, “Singapore Infopedia: Housing and Development Board”: <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuiid=3abd40aa-0d91-4352-b9fe-0de1d68e3d85>

<sup>167</sup> Department of Statistics, “General Household Survey 2025”: <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/files/1559c94a-efc1-4262-84fd-042c9bd96e68.pdf>.



134. As a matter of principle, housing policies should adapt to accommodate our population's needs, rather than – as per the population control campaign of the 1970s – to control our population in order to fit into housing constraints.
135. Here are our recommendations:
- (1) Larger homes for larger families
136. Singaporean households are changing, including the majority of married couples being dual career and prevalence of MDWs. Practically, a typical family home will need space for the couple, children and live-in MDW. With the push for FWAs, some may need a separate work area to ensure sufficient privacy and confidentiality to work from home.
137. Furthermore, as Singapore has become a super-aged society in 2026, more couples may have to live with or near their ageing parents or relatives to provide support.
138. A typical four-room or five-room HDB flat may not provide sufficient space for larger families or parents who wish to have more children, especially as the children grow older and need more personal space. A 3Gen HDB flat has some additional space, but remains intended for couples to live together with elderly parents,<sup>168</sup> rather than for families to have more children.
139. Instead of accommodating family sizes to space constraints in HDB flats (as per the philosophy during the population control years), we recommend accommodating HDB flats to growing families. This entails providing *larger homes for larger families*.
140. Possible (non-exhaustive and non-mutually exclusive) options to provide *larger homes for larger families* include:
- (a) **Repurposing existing 3Gen flats for larger families.** As there are already 3Gen flats in existence, albeit with restrictions at the moment, one option is to allow larger families to purchase 3Gen flats.
  - (b) **Building jumbo flats and maisonettes reserved for larger families and/or multi-generational families.** The next option is to build new jumbo flats and maisonettes (both of which were discontinued in the 1990s), to accommodate larger families and/or multi-generational families.
  - (c) **Allowing larger families and/or multi-generational families to purchase adjoining HDB units.** Another option is to allow larger families and/or multi-generational families, with exemptions from Additional Buyer's Stamp Duty (ABSD) and other limitations or restrictions. Permission should be granted to remove the adjoining wall between the units, if sought.



<sup>168</sup> Housing and Development Board, "Couples and Families": <https://www.hdb.gov.sg/buying-a-flat/flat-grant-and-loan-eligibility/couples-and-families>.



- (d) **Giving larger families and/or multi-generational families priority and right to ballot for two adjoining units in Build-to-Order (BTO) projects.** Yet another option is to build HDB flats intended for larger families and/or multi-generational families in new Build-to-Order (BTO) projects. Larger families and/or multi-generational families can be given priority and the right to ballot for two adjoining units in BTOs.

141. To help with affordability for larger families and multi-generational families, we recommend that a grant should be made available to those who wish to upgrade to larger homes. This grant may be tiered according to household income levels, so that more assistance can be given to lower-income families.

(2) Waivers of Minimum Occupation Period for growing families

142. HDB flats have a Minimum Occupation Period (MOP) of between 5 to 10 years (or 20 years for the Fresh Start Housing Scheme), depending on scheme.<sup>169</sup> The purpose of the MOP is to ensure that owners physically occupy their flat for a certain period of time before being allowed to sell their flat on the open market.<sup>170</sup> Appeals for waiver are assessed on a case-by-case basis, and are sometimes granted to families who needed a bigger flat due to growing family size.<sup>171</sup>

143. Currently, there is a Third Child Priority Scheme (TCPS), which allocates up to 10% of Build-to-Order (BTO) flats, and up to 10% of Sale of Balance Flats (SBF) to families with three or more children, with certain conditions attached.<sup>172</sup>

144. We recommend that an MOP waiver should be granted by default to buyers eligible for the TCPS. This scheme can be added on to the TCPS scheme. Similar to the existing limitation under the TCPS, the three children who have helped the buyer qualify for the waiver must continue to live with the buyer during the MOP of the new flat. This is in keeping with the policy intent of the MOP framework.

145. We invite the Government to further consider the need for measures and safeguards to ensure that the scheme is used for genuine needs of larger families, and to guard against abuse and profiteering.

<sup>169</sup> Housing and Development Board, “Eligibility for Selling a Flat”: <https://www.hdb.gov.sg/managing-my-home/selling-a-flat/eligibility>.

<sup>170</sup> Parliament, “Criteria in Appeals For Waiver of Minimum Occupation Period for HDB Flat Sales” (26 September 2025): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=written-answer-20261>.

<sup>171</sup> Parliament, “Minimum Occupation Period Appeals for Early Sale of HDB Flats and Policy Review Considerations” (25 September 2025): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=written-answer-20132>.

<sup>172</sup> Parliament, “Committee of Supply – Head T (Ministry of National Development)” (4 March 2026): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=budget-2914>.



## E. Healthcare

146. Singapore has one of best healthcare systems in the world, and among the lowest infant mortality and maternal mortality rates globally.<sup>173</sup>
147. In our view, the following areas in healthcare (for children and their families) deserve greater attention:
  - (1) Affordability of healthcare for premature births
148. A premature birth is usually unexpected and carries various health risks for the child, apart from the emotional, mental and financial strain on the parents of the child arising from the prolonged treatment and healthcare costs. Even after the child is discharged, there may be difficulties obtaining health insurance for the child, as insurers typically defer applications for premature babies until they reach at least one year of age.<sup>174</sup>
149. Between 2020 and 2024, around 10-11% of live births in restructured hospitals are premature (i.e. born before 37 weeks of gestation, and the average length of stay of newborns in Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs) of the restructured hospitals is between 154 days and 299 days.<sup>175</sup> As Singaporeans increasingly delay marriage and parenthood, there may be an increasing need to address the healthcare needs of premature births.
150. Currently, all Singapore Citizens, including those with congenital illnesses or pre-existing conditions, are automatically covered from birth by MediShield Life.<sup>176</sup> An individual may obtain an Integrated Shield Plan (IP), which is offered by private insurers, for additional coverage.<sup>177</sup>



<sup>173</sup> Ministry of Health, “Population And Vital Statistics”: <https://www.moh.gov.sg/others/resources-and-statistics/population-and-vital-statistics/>.

<sup>174</sup> Planner Bee, “Does Child Hospitalisation Insurance Cover Pre-Existing Conditions?” (29 July 2026): <https://plannerbee.co/learn-personal-finance/does-child-hospitalisation-insurance-cover-pre-existing-conditions/>.

<sup>175</sup> Parliament, “Breakdown of Premature Live Births in Restructured Hospitals by Gestational Age Bands for Last Five Years” (24 September 2025): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=written-answer-20036>.

<sup>176</sup> Parliament, “Most Common Congenital Birth Issues and Annual Proportion of Expectant Mothers Taking up Maternity Insurance Policies” (15 February 2022): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=written-answer-10078>.

<sup>177</sup> Ministry of Health, “About Integrated Shield Plan”: <https://www.moh.gov.sg/managing-expenses/schemes-and-subsidies/integrated-shield-plans/about-integrated-shield-plans/>.



151. We recommend as follows:

- (a) **Review options to improve affordability of NICU.** While NICU fees are subsidised at restructured hospitals, they still remain very high.<sup>178</sup> We recommend the Government to take a comprehensive look at NICU care, and to examine options to make NICU more affordable.
- (b) **Review insurability of children born premature.** We recommend the Government to review the insurability of children born premature, including and especially under the Integrated Shield Plan.

(2) Post-partum care

152. In December 2023, a 33-year-old woman and her three-week-old baby were found dead at the foot of the Housing Board block where they lived. The coroner opined that the woman likely had undiagnosed post-partum depression.<sup>179</sup> Post-partum depression affects men also.<sup>180</sup>

153. Programmes for early detection and management of post-partum depression are currently available in polyclinics and public hospitals.<sup>181</sup> However, the tragic incident mentioned above suggests a need to enhance detection of mental health challenges and early intervention in post-partum care.

154. We recommend strengthening post-partum care as follows:

- (a) **Education of mothers and family members regarding post-partum depression and other mental health challenges.** During prenatal gynaecological visits and after delivery of the child, mothers and their accompanying family members should be provided with materials to educate them about post-partum depression and other mental health challenges, and informed about avenues of support.
- (b) **Mental health screening of both parents.** We recommend developing a checklist for use in follow-up visits to medical institutions. This includes follow-up visits to the gynaecologist and medical screening of the child after birth. Both parents (father and mother) should be separately and independently screened for mental health challenges. Questions in the checklist should relate not only to one's

<sup>178</sup> For example, "Couple launches fundraiser as hospital bill mounts for premature baby born at 25 weeks, weighing 590g" *CNA* (6 January 2024): <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/give-asia-fundraiser-premature-baby-5596556>.

<sup>179</sup> "Mother found dead with baby at HDB block likely had undiagnosed post-partum depression: Coroner" *The Straits Times* (11 February 2025): <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/mother-found-dead-with-baby-at-hdb-block-likely-had-undiagnosed-post-partum-depression-coroner>.

<sup>180</sup> Unicef, "Can men get postnatal depression?": <https://www.unicef.org/eca/stories/can-men-get-postnatal-depression>.

<sup>181</sup> Parliament, "Incidents of Post-partum-related Depression and Suicides" (27 February 2025): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=written-answer-na-19038>.



mental health, but one's spouse's mental health as well (i.e. a husband would be asked questions about his wife's mental health, and vice versa), to better enhance screening.

- (c) **Free counselling for post-partum mental health challenges.** Free counselling should be provided at public healthcare institutions, to support those who experience post-partum mental health challenges.

## F. Preschool

155. Three factors are significant in relation to preschools: affordability, accessibility and quality. In this regard, we note that the number of full-day preschool places are now enough nationally for every resident child aged three and above, and the Government will place greater emphasis on the quality of preschools in the coming years.<sup>182</sup> As per the announcements at the National Day Rally 2026, the Government will extend subsidies to preschools regardless of whether the parents are working, and further aims to reduce full-day childcare fees to \$150 a month, and infant care fees to \$300 a month, by 2030.<sup>183</sup>

156. Our recommendation is as follows:

### Expanding government support to cover more preschools

157. Currently, the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) has the Anchor Operator Scheme (AOP) and the Partner Operator Scheme (POP), which provides funding support to keep to certain fee caps, improve quality and for continuing professional development.<sup>184</sup> Government-supported centres under these schemes have enough places for about 80% of preschoolers.<sup>185</sup>
158. We note that the Government intends to bring support for government-supported preschools closer the support for primary education. The process will take “a few years”, and the Government “will need to significantly expand the network of government-supported operators” who are keen to meet the requirements.<sup>186</sup>

<sup>182</sup> Parliament, “Committee of Supply – Head I (Ministry of Social and Family Development)” (6 March 2026): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=budget-2934>.

<sup>183</sup> Prime Minister's Office, “National Day Rally 2026” (23 August 2026): <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/ndr2026/>.

<sup>184</sup> Early Childhood Development Agency, “Anchor Operator Scheme”: <https://www.ecda.gov.sg/parents/choosing-a-preschool/aop>; Early Childhood Development Agency, “Partner Operator Scheme”: <https://www.ecda.gov.sg/parents/choosing-a-preschool/pop>.

<sup>185</sup> Prime Minister's Office, “National Day Rally 2026” (23 August 2026): <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/ndr2026/>.

<sup>186</sup> Prime Minister's Office, “National Day Rally 2026” (23 August 2026): <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/ndr2026/>.



159. We recommend expanding government support to – as far as possible – cover all preschools, to enhance affordability, accessibility and quality. In our multi-religious society, there are preschools run by faith-based groups.<sup>187</sup> Thus, the scope of support should also maintain the diversity of preschool choices by allowing them to preserve their unique character and ethos.

## G. Education

160. Education promotes human flourishing in multiple ways.<sup>188</sup> However, wider cultural attitudes surrounding narrow success have contributed to the education “arms race”. This raises the costs of parenthood by turning parenting into an intensive investment of time, effort and money to help children attain the best academic (and co-curricular) results possible. This is in hopes that their children will do well in school, get good jobs, and obtain the best chance possible in life. However, these may lead to high degrees of stress, negative impacts on relationships and burnout.
161. Young Singaporeans typically spend most of their formative years of life in the education system before joining the workforce. These are critical years where children and young people learn skills, shape values, develop character and build relationships, which help them later in life.
162. Accordingly, here are our recommendations:
- (1) Intentional development of character, responsibility and skills for domestic life
163. With the prevalence of dual-income households, domestic helpers and desocialisation, children may not necessarily value or develop skills for domestic life. This includes important aspects of character development necessary to support domestic life, such as discipline, responsibility and teamwork.
164. In Japan, there is a tradition of *Osoji* (“big cleaning”).<sup>189</sup> Japanese schools deliberately incorporate ‘osoji’ in their education, allocating cleaning time for students to clean classrooms, corridors and toilets.



<sup>187</sup> See, for example, the discussion in Parliament on “Grants for Fees for Faith-based Preschools Run by Non-profit Organisations” (6 August 2019): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=oral-answer-2030>.

<sup>188</sup> Education is potentially capable of supporting the seven neo-Aristotelian goods of life, knowledge, practical reasonableness, religion (an interest in the higher order, even if one’s conclusion is that there exists no higher order), play, aesthetic experience, and friendship (or sociability in the broader sense, which entails caring for others as ends in themselves). (Seow Hon Tan, “Success and Flourishing in Singapore: The Impact of Laws and Policies on the Ethos and Character of a People” (2026) *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-026-10453-6>.)

<sup>189</sup> “Osoji: The Japanese technique that builds discipline in schools” *India Today* (27 March 2025): <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/featurephilia/story/osoji-the-japanese-cleaning-tradition-that-builds-discipline-and-character-in-schools-2699873-2025-03-27>; Japan Educational



165. Rather than a cost-cutting measure, cleaning time in Japan is seen as an important path to moral development. As one Japanese education expert explained, students learn the values of “taking initiative, working together, considering the next person who will use the space, and helping others once one’s own tasks are complete”. This also leads to better social skills and the “drive to live better in society”.<sup>190</sup>
166. Chores like these achieve more than the tasks at hand. They cultivate positive habits. Through the process of enduring through difficult and unpleasant circumstances, one develops skills and character that benefit oneself and others in the long run.<sup>191</sup>
167. We recommend the education system to make deliberate effort to develop in students the character, responsibility and skills necessary to help domestic life to thrive. This includes:
- (a) **Expanding the length and scope of cleaning time, from primary school to junior college.** Since 2016, schools have implemented cleaning time from primary school to junior college, where students spend at least a few minutes each day cleaning classrooms, canteens and corridors.<sup>192</sup> We recommend expanding cleaning time in duration (increasing to half an hour per day) and scope (expanding to include toilets), and minimising reliance on cleaners throughout primary school to junior college.
  - (b) **Extending the amount of time allocated for culinary practice, and making it compulsory for Upper Secondary students also.** Currently, Food and Consumer Education (FCE) (previously known as “Home Economics”) is compulsory for all Lower Secondary students, of which culinary skills are a part.<sup>193</sup> We recommend extending the amount of time allocated for culinary practice and making it compulsory for Upper Secondary students, with the aim that a student is able to prepare a reasonably suitable meal for oneself and others by the end of Secondary education.



Travel, “Cleaning Time at Japanese Schools” (5 November 2025): <https://education.jnto.go.jp/en/school-in-japan/school-life-in-japan/cleaning-time-at-japanese-schools/>.

<sup>190</sup> Japan Educational Travel, “Cleaning Time at Japanese Schools” (5 November 2025): <https://education.jnto.go.jp/en/school-in-japan/school-life-in-japan/cleaning-time-at-japanese-schools/>.

<sup>191</sup> See our opinion piece “Helping our children understand the value of suffering” *The Straits Times* (28 September 2026): <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/helping-our-children-understand-the-value-of-suffering>.

<sup>192</sup> “Daily cleaning ‘cultivates good habits for life’” *The Straits Times* (26 February 2016): <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/daily-cleaning-cultivates-good-habits-for-life>.

<sup>193</sup> Ministry of Education, “Food and Consumer Education: Teaching and Learning Syllabus, Lower Secondary” (2024): <https://www.moe.gov.sg/media/files/secondary/fsbb/syllabus/2024%20Lower%20Secondary%20Food%20and%20Consumer%20Education%20Syllabus.pdf>.



(2) Phone-free primary and secondary schools

168. Smartphones and other digital devices have various negative impacts on character and relationship development. They also negatively impact learning by distracting students from lesson time, social interactions and other school activities.
169. It is positive that, from 2026, all primary and secondary schools have disallowed the use of smartphones and smartwatches during school hours. This includes recess, co-curricular activities, supplementary/enrichment/remedial lessons, etc.<sup>194</sup> According to the policy, the students' devices will be kept in designated storage areas (e.g. lockers) or school bags during school hours. Where necessary, schools may allow students to use smartphones by exception.<sup>195</sup> For any emergency communications between parents and children, they may do so through the school's general office.<sup>196</sup>
170. We recommend MOE to go further by implementing a phone-free policy throughout primary and secondary schools. This includes:
- (a) **Ban on all mobile phones during school hours.** Current policies extend to smartphones and smartwatches, we recommend a ban on all mobile phones (including older models of phones without connection to the Internet).
  - (b) **Devices to be kept only in designated storage areas.** Current policies have allowance for students to keep their devices in their school bags. However, research shows that the mere presence of one's device reduces cognitive capacity.<sup>197</sup> We recommend that all devices should be kept only in designated storage areas (e.g. lockers).

(3) Family life planning as part of career planning

171. Currently, MOE's Education and Career Guidance (ECG) aims at helping students "develop a growth mindset, adaptability and a resilient attitude to embrace future opportunities and appreciate the value of all occupations".<sup>198</sup> The implicit message focuses on career as the end goal of education, with no mention of marriage and parenthood.



<sup>194</sup> Parliament, "Digital Break and Cyber Wellness Programmes for Students in Light of Social Media and Gaming Addiction Trend" (3 February 2026): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=written-answer-na-21794>.

<sup>195</sup> Ministry of Education, "MOE to Introduce Enhanced Measures to Promote Healthier Screen Use in Students" (30 November 2025): <https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/press-releases/20251130-moe-to-introduce-enhanced-measures-to-promote-healthier-screen-use-in-students>.

<sup>196</sup> Parliament, "Emergency Communications between Parents and their Children given Smartphone Ban in Secondary Schools" (13 January 2026): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=oral-answer-3968>.

<sup>197</sup> Ward, *et al.*, "Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of One's Own Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity" (2017) 2(2) *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* 140.

<sup>198</sup> Ministry of Education, "Overview of Education and Career Guidance": <https://www.moe.gov.sg/education-in-sg/our-programmes/education-and-career-guidance/overview>.



172. We recommend explicitly incorporating family life planning as part of career planning. This includes:
- (a) **Encouraging students to actively think about their aspirations regarding marriage and parenthood in education and career planning.** Current ECG-related materials do not mention marriage and parenthood, or invite students to consider aspirations regarding these. The education system should encourage students to actively think about these matters during career guidance and planning.
  - (b) **Recognising the value of family life in education and career planning.** While students are currently taught in ECG to “appreciate the value of all occupations”, they are not clearly taught to appreciate the value of marriage and parenthood, respect people’s decisions to detour from their education or career pathways for the sake of marriage and parenthood (e.g. stay-at-home parents), or consider their own life course in this regard. These values should be introduced as part of career guidance and planning.
  - (c) **Encouraging students to find a balance in their goals, between the pursuit of career and family life.** Related to the previous points, ECG should invite students to consider and find a balance between their goals in life, such as work-life balance, and balance between the pursuit of career and family life.
- (4) Teaching accurate facts about fertility as part of sexuality education
173. As part of the MOE sexuality education curriculum, students are taught about physical changes during the life course of sexual maturity.<sup>199</sup>
174. We recommend including scientifically accurate facts about fertility as part of sexuality education. This includes:
- (a) **Fertility decline with age, in both men and women.** To quote from Health Hub, “For men, sperm quality deteriorates with age, which could reduce the chances of conception and increase potential risk of gene defects. For women, the best chance of conceiving is in their 20s, as fertility declines in their 30s, particularly after age 35, as the number and quality of eggs that remain in the ovaries decrease with age.”<sup>200</sup>
  - (b) **Declining success rate of assisted reproduction technology (ART) with age.** According to Health Hub, “the success rate of the ART treatment decreases quite



<sup>199</sup> Ministry of Education, “MOE Sexuality Education: Overview”: <https://www.moe.gov.sg/education-in-sg/our-programmes/sexuality-education/overview>.

<sup>200</sup> HealthHub, “Debunking 5 Myths of Fertility Health” (last updated 4 May 2026): <https://www.healthhub.sg/well-being-and-lifestyle/sexual-health/debunking-5-myths-of-fertility-health>.



significantly as the age of the woman increases”, with a 6% success rate for women aged 40 years and above.<sup>201</sup>

- (c) **Declining success rate of egg freezing with age.** According to the Ministry of Health, “the success rates from egg freezing, and subsequent usage of these eggs, continue to remain relatively stable for women up to 37 years of age”, but declines after the age of 37.<sup>202</sup>
- (5) Institutes of Higher Learning to support marriage and parenthood, and offer a range of part-time courses for upskilling purposes
- 175. The broader cultural narrative emphasises a particular life course, namely: study, work, marry and have children. However, education – especially higher education – should not be seen as something meant only for young, single, unmarried individuals, but should be an important part of lifelong learning.
- 176. Institutes of higher learning (IHLs) have a role to play in supporting individuals at different life stages, including:
  - (a) **Married individuals.** IHLs should be open to married individuals of all ages. While it is relatively uncommon for Singaporeans to marry before or during their undergraduate studies, there should be support systems available for students who decide to do so.
  - (b) **Pregnant students.** It appears that most IHLs currently address pregnancy on a case-by-case basis, and pregnant students may take a leave of absence if necessary.
  - (c) **Stay-at-home parents.** For stay-at-home parents who have taken detours in their careers, part-time courses at IHLs may provide a path for them to upskill or develop new skills in the event they wish to re-enter the workforce later in life.<sup>203</sup>
- 177. Currently, IHLs have embraced Continuing Education and Training (CET). Most CET qualification programmes in IHLs are delivered in stackable micro-credentials, to allow working adults to better juggle work and upgrading. To support mid-career



<sup>201</sup> HealthHub, “Debunking 5 Myths of Fertility Health” (last updated 4 May 2026): <https://www.healthhub.sg/well-being-and-lifestyle/sexual-health/debunking-5-myths-of-fertility-health>.

<sup>202</sup> Ministry of Health, “Raising of age limit from 35 to 37 years for egg donors and elective egg freezing” (15 May 2023): <https://www.moh.gov.sg/newsroom/raising-of-age-limit-from-35-to-37-years-for-egg-donors-and-elective-egg-freezing/>.

<sup>203</sup> In 2018, the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) made the news for offering a “Marriage and Baby Bonus Scheme” to part-time students. Those who qualify will be entitled to two new or repeat courses. (“Marry or have children and get free modules, SUSS tells part-time students” *The Straits Times* (13 July 2018): <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/marry-or-have-children-and-get-free-modules-suss-tells-part-time-students>; Singapore University of Social Sciences, “Marriage and Baby Bonus Scheme: Marriage and Baby Bonus Scheme”: [https://www.suss.edu.sg/docs/default-source/content\\_admissions/mbbs\\_tnc.pdf](https://www.suss.edu.sg/docs/default-source/content_admissions/mbbs_tnc.pdf). Note: The Marriage and Baby Bonus Scheme will cease from the July 2027 semester onwards.)

individuals to transition into new sectors or enhanced job opportunities, the IHLs have also launched SkillsFuture Career Transition Programmes (SCTPs), for which SkillsFuture Credits (Mid-Career) may be used.<sup>204</sup> In our view, CET should be expanded to provide opportunities to parents who have taken detours from their career.

178. We recommend as follows:

- (a) **IHLs to offer part-time courses, with flexible schedules, to facilitate upskilling.** CET at IHLs should be expanded, and IHLs should offer a wide range of part-time courses, open to all and covering a range of specialisations equivalent to full-time courses. To support people at different life stages (including parents), the schedules should be kept flexible, such as scheduling in-person lessons during the hours when children are in school, having online lectures, remote or hybrid meetings, etc.
- (b) **Clear policies on marriage and parenthood (including pregnancy), including leaves of absence.** IHLs should publish clear policies regarding marriage and parenthood. These include leaves of absence for maternity or paternity, extensions of time for assignments or projects, and other measures to accommodate marriage and parenthood (e.g. remote or hybrid meetings).
- (c) **Grant of additional SkillsFuture Credits to stay-at-home parents and caregivers of elderly, usable for courses at IHLs, tiered based on employment status (part-time / unemployed).** To help stay-at-home parents and caregivers of elderly to upskill and return to the workforce at a later stage in life if they wish to do so, we recommend granting them additional SkillsFuture Credits that may be used at CET courses at IHLs.

(6) Tackle the “education arms race”

179. We appreciate the efforts of the Government in tackling the “education arms race”, which – in the words of Minister Desmond Lee – “diminishes the joy of learning, ... takes time away from character building and ... pits our children against one another”.<sup>205</sup> When seen from the perspective of marriage and parenthood, this “arms race” also diminishes a child’s experience of childhood and of family life (e.g. because of high parental expectations), and raises the perceived financial and non-financial costs associated with parenthood due to the perceived need for parents to spend copious amounts of money on tuition and enrichment for children.

<sup>204</sup> Ministry of Education, “Speech for Dr Janil Puthuchear, Senior Minister of State for Education & Sustainability and the Environment, SkillsFuture Festival @ NUS” (12 July 2025): <https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/speeches/20250712-speech-for-dr-janil-puthuchear-senior-minister-of-state-for-education-and-sustainability-and-the-environment-skillsfuture-festival-at-nus>.

<sup>205</sup> Parliament, “Committee of Supply – Head K (Ministry of Education)” (3 March 2026): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=budget-2902>.



180. We make the following broad recommendations:

- (a) **Review and consider measures to lower the stakes associated with major exams (e.g. PSLE, 'O' and 'A' Levels).** It is well-known that major exams such as PSLE, 'O' and 'A' Levels cause significant stress and anxiety to parents and students. This arises due to the perceived need to get to a “good school”, and perceived negative consequences from failing to do so. We invite the Government to review and consider measures to lower the stakes associated with these major exams.
- (b) **Increase the emphasis on skills development and work experience (e.g. internships, on-the-job training), as opposed to paper qualifications alone.** Part of the “arms race” stems from a perception that paper qualifications will land better jobs. We encourage a shift of emphasis towards skills development and work experience (e.g. internships, on-the-job training), as part of the education process.
- (c) **Review and consider measures to reduce the perceived need for tuition and enrichment.** We note that MOE is reviewing the measures needed to discourage undesirable advertising practices by tuition and private education providers.<sup>206</sup> We recommend the review to go further, to also review and consider measures to reduce the perceived need for tuition and enrichment.

## H. Other Recommendations

181. In this section, we will address various other recommendations. Some of these relate more directly to marriage and parenthood than others, while some are less direct but continue to have profound impact.

### (1) Adoption

182. Adoption is child-centric, life-giving, and seeks to mend a loss that is suffered by children. It is about helping children to find the families they need, and the best interests of children are paramount.

183. We recommend encouraging adoption as follows:

- (a) **Simplifying adoption process, through a single one-stop portal.** While adoption processes exist to protect the rights of children and their biological parents, the steps to adopt a child are currently fairly complex. In the case of adopting a foreign child, the adoptive parents have to engage with MSF, Immigration and

<sup>206</sup> Parliament, “Advertising Guidelines for Tuition and Private Education Services to Prevent Fear-based Marketing” (24 February 2026): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=oral-answer-4029>.

Checkpoints Authority (ICA) for a Dependant's Pass, and the courts.<sup>207</sup> We recommend simplifying the process where prospective adoptive parents can engage the process through a single portal from the beginning of the adoption process till its conclusion.

- (b) **Regular disclosure of number and ages of children for whom adoption would be the best permanency option.** We recognise concerns about privacy. MSF has disclosed at times the number of children in different forms of out-of-home care (foster, kinship and residential care).<sup>208</sup> As of 2022, there were about 1,000 children in state care at any point in time, and it was opined that “adoption would have been the best permanency option” for about 50 children, though only 10 applications to adopt them were made each year on average.<sup>209</sup> To better facilitate adoption, we recommend regular disclosure of the number and ages of children for whom adoption would be the best permanency option.

(2) Miscarriages and stillbirths

184. In 2024, Parliament took a positive step by amending the Registration of Births and Deaths Act to allow for the official naming of a stillborn child, in order “to recognise the birth of the child and support the healing process for bereaved parents”.<sup>210</sup> There have also been calls for more support for couples who experience miscarriage.<sup>211</sup>
185. In situations of stillbirth and miscarriage, the parents of the deceased children desire and are willing to pursue parenthood, but are set back by tragedy and loss. They need time and space to grieve and recover, as well as support.
186. We recommend the following:
- (a) **Compassionate leave for miscarriage and stillbirth.** While compassionate leave is not legally mandated, employers should develop a broad norm in favour of granting compassionate leave to those who experience miscarriage or stillbirth. Suitable guidelines could be issued by the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP).
- (b) **Free counselling and medical follow-up after miscarriage and stillbirth.** We propose that couples who have experienced stillbirth and miscarriage should

<sup>207</sup> Ministry of Social and Family Development, “Adoption Journey”: <https://www.msf.gov.sg/what-we-do/adoption/adoption-process/adoption-journey>.

<sup>208</sup> Data.gov.sg, “Children in out-of-home care”: [https://data.gov.sg/datasets/d\\_b85f15701092578c2aa0ae8cd263b210/view?dataExplorerPage=4](https://data.gov.sg/datasets/d_b85f15701092578c2aa0ae8cd263b210/view?dataExplorerPage=4).

<sup>209</sup> Parliament, “Adoption of Children Bill” (9 May 2022): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=bill-580>.

<sup>210</sup> Parliament, “Stillbirths and Births (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill” (9 January 2024): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=bill-669>.

<sup>211</sup> Parliament, “Committee of Supply – Head U (Prime Minister’s Office)” (26 February 2026): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=budget-2876>.



receive free mental health counselling and medical follow-up at public hospitals and medical institutions. Medical certificates should be issued accordingly.

- (c) **Medical leave may be used for physical and mental recovery from miscarriage and stillbirth.** Currently, employers must accept and grant statutory sick leave for all valid medical certificates, whether issued for physical or mental health conditions.<sup>212</sup> Thus, in tandem with the previous recommendation in (b), medical leave may be used for physical and mental recovery from miscarriage and stillbirth.

### (3) Resisting overprotection of children

187. As noted above, overprotective parenting contributes to desocialisation. It damages children's physical and mental development, character formation and relationship skills. Overprotective parenting is also time-consuming and energy-draining, thereby increasing the perceived costs of parenthood. Collectively, these have negative implications for dating, marriage and parenthood.

188. We recommend a broad norm against overprotection of children, at all levels of society. These include:

- (a) **Reasonable, age-appropriate balance between risk and safety in all laws and policies concerning children.** Safety – whether from physical or psychological harm – should not be the only priority for children. Moderate levels of risk and stress have positive benefits, developing long-term physical and mental resilience in children. In any laws and policies concerning children, a reasonable, age-appropriate balance between risk and safety is needed.
- (b) **Laws and policies should not encourage overzealous litigation under the guise of child safety.** In the making of laws and policies, the Government should be mindful not to create a litigious culture where it becomes common to sue others for any perceived wrongdoing, however slight or insignificant.<sup>213</sup> Laws should maintain a reasonable balance between risk and safety, and also take into account the fair apportionment of responsibility between the parties (or lack thereof, e.g. due to causes beyond any party's control).
- (c) **Government agencies to take a firm stance against unreasonable demands and pressure from overprotective parents and guardians.** Overprotective parents or guardians may sometimes pressure government agencies, especially the education sector, in overzealous efforts to shield children from hypothetical physical or mental harm, or even to shield children from consequences of the

<sup>212</sup> Parliament, "Employers' Acceptance of Mental Health-related Medical Certificates" (5 November 2025): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=written-answer-na-20923>.

<sup>213</sup> Øyvind Kvalnes and Ellen Beate Hansen Sandseter, *Risky Play: An Ethical Challenge* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023) at 110.



children's own negative behaviour.<sup>214</sup> We recommend that government agencies should take and maintain a firm stance against unreasonable demands and pressure of this nature. This includes refusing to accede to unreasonable demands, and enforcing laws when lines are crossed (e.g. harassment, violence, etc.).

- (d) **Public education against overprotective parenting.** Parenting talks and public education campaigns should oppose overprotective parenting, sharing about the harms of overprotective parenting to the long-term development of children. Conversely, public education should emphasise the importance of training children to develop independence, and allowing them room to make mistakes and to be exposed to reasonable and age-appropriate levels of risk and stress.<sup>215</sup>

(4) Building a broad norm in favour of phone-free childhoods, physical play and face-to-face interaction

189. As noted above, technological revolutions over the past few decades – Internet, smartphones and social media – fundamentally change how human beings live and interact with one another, with negative impacts on the development of people, social skills and interpersonal relationships, especially among the young.
190. Steps have been taken to address these harms, including the ban on smartphones and smart watches in primary and secondary schools, the guidance on screen use in children, and recommendations from the expert panel on the mental health impact of social media use.<sup>216</sup>
191. At the National Day Rally 2026, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong further added that the Government will consider raising the minimum age for access to social media platforms beyond the age of 13 years whose age-based safeguards are “inadequate”.<sup>217</sup>



<sup>214</sup> In 2017, the Singapore courts rightly dismissed a case brought by a parent against a school for confiscating his son's phone. The son had broken the school rules against phone use. In a statement, the school said that there was no change to its policy on the use of mobile phones in the wake of this case. (“Parent drops case over school holding on to son's confiscated handphone for three months” *The Straits Times* (9 November 2017): <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/parent-drops-case-over-school-holding-on-to-sons-confiscated-handphone-for>)

<sup>215</sup> See our opinion piece “Helping our children understand the value of suffering” *The Straits Times* (28 September 2026): <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/helping-our-children-understand-the-value-of-suffering>.

<sup>216</sup> Ministry of Education, “MOE to Introduce Enhanced Measures to Promote Healthier Screen Use in Students” (30 November 2025): <https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/press-releases/20251130-moe-to-introduce-enhanced-measures-to-promote-healthier-screen-use-in-students>; Ministry of Health, “Guidance on screen use in children” (21 January 2025): <https://www.moh.gov.sg/others/resources-and-statistics/guidance-on-screen-use/>; Ministry of Health, “Expert panel submits key findings and recommendations to support healthier and safer social media use among young people” (30 July 2026): <https://www.moh.gov.sg/newsroom/expert-panel-submits-key-findings-and-recommendations-to-support-healthier-and-safer-social-media-use-among-young-people/>.

<sup>217</sup> Prime Minister's Office, “National Day Rally 2026” (23 August 2026): <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/ndr2026/>



192. As a collective action problem, society-wide norms are necessary, and we recommend building a broad norm in favour of phone-free childhoods, physical play and face-to-face interaction. These can be done through a range of public education campaigns, voluntary decisions by families and communities, rules adopted by institutions having care of children (e.g. schools), as well as laws and policies. Key aspects include:
- (a) **Supporting phone-free childhoods through public education and collective decisions by parents.** Public education campaigns can address the various harms and consequences that children may be exposed to through smartphones, such as addiction, excessive screen time and more. Parents can make collective decisions not to provide their children with any phones until they reach a certain age (e.g. 12 years-old) and, even when they are of age, to provide them only with 2G phones without access to internet.
  - (b) **Discouraging social media use in children.** As a society, we should build a broad norm to discourage social media use among children. This includes public education about the risks involved in social media ranging from addiction, exposure to harmful content, cyberbullying and more.
  - (c) **Promoting physical play.** In tandem with the norm against overprotective parenting, there should be efforts to promote physical play. Schools can set aside more time during recess and other breaks so that children can play and interact face-to-face. Public education campaigns can encourage parents to set aside time for their children to play with other children at playgrounds and other public spaces.
  - (d) **Encouraging face-to-face interaction.** Families for Life campaigns like “Disconnect to connect”<sup>218</sup> reflects the important message of in-person, face-to-face interactions as opposed to connecting digitally through devices. In this vein, public education campaigns can encourage practices like having no phones at the dinner table or having certain periods of time when people put away their digital devices.
  - (e) **Laws and policies against excessive social media use.** We agree with the Government on the importance of strengthening safeguards for young users, to improve age verification and reduce the dangers of excessive use of social media. These laws and policies should work in tandem with social norms, to promote healthier and more holistic development of children and young people.



<sup>218</sup> Families for Life, “Disconnect to Connect: Intergenerational Family Meet Up”: <https://familiesforlife.sg/pages/Event/Disconnect-to-Connect-Intergenerational-Family-Meet-Up>.



(5) National Service

193. As National Service (NS) is compulsory for all Singaporean men, it is an important formative experience and rite of passage in our culture, transforming “boys to men”.<sup>219</sup> It is an important process to help foster, inculcate and develop one’s character, skills and values that help men to thrive later in life, such as discipline, respect, teamwork, sacrifice and the importance of protecting the vulnerable.
194. Although the primary aim of NS should remain national security and safety of Singapore and does not relate directly to marriage and parenthood, there are secondary benefits. The positive character, skills and values shaped through NS are good qualities in husbands and fathers, and have long-term implications that can help support marriage and parenthood.
195. We recommend the following:
- (a) **Tough, safe and effective training, with strict discipline, to develop physical and mental resilience.** For Singaporean men, NS helps to develop physical and mental toughness and resilience, through a combination of tough, safe and effective training, alongside strict discipline.
  - (b) **Messages emphasising the importance of protecting one’s family and nation.** Within NS, national education messages can emphasise the importance of protecting one’s family (including one’s spouse and children), in addition to the importance of protecting one’s nation.
  - (c) **Modelling positive masculinity, and opposing negative attitudes towards women.** Through a mixture of positive role-modelling of male role models and strict discipline to curb negative attitudes towards women, NS can be an opportunity to shape the right values in men.<sup>220</sup>
  - (d) **Involvement in chores such as cleaning, regardless of rank.** “Area cleaning” is part of NS, which is important for discipline, hygiene and health.<sup>221</sup> Other chores – otherwise known as “fatigue work” such as preparation of equipment, packing of items, etc. – are also part of NS. We recommend maintaining and strengthening the emphasis on chores (including “area cleaning”) throughout all of NS regardless of rank, and minimising reliance on cleaners.

<sup>219</sup> In a Facebook post on 17 June 2022, MINDEF wrote that “serving the nation is a rite of passage that all Singaporean males go through.”: <https://www.facebook.com/mindefsg/posts/serving-the-nation-is-a-rite-of-passage-that-all-singaporean-males-go-through-fo/393089769523014/>.

<sup>220</sup> For example, in 2013, steps were taken to stop an unauthorised version of the song “Purple Light” which contained references to rape and murder. (Ministry of Defence, “Clarification on ban of offensive verse in popular marching song “Purple Light”” (18 November 2013): <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/news-and-events/latest-releases/18nov2013-coi-001/>)

<sup>221</sup> Pioneer, “Unofficial list: What to pack for enlistment” (2 January 2025): [https://defencepioneer.sg/pioneer-articles/02jan25\\_news1](https://defencepioneer.sg/pioneer-articles/02jan25_news1).



(6) Firm stance against ideologies sowing enmity between men and women

196. A firm stance should be taken against ideologies which sow enmity between men and women, such as extreme misogynist and misandrist rhetoric.
197. One example of such rhetoric is “incel” (short for “involuntary celibate”) beliefs. According to the Internal Security Department (ISD), those who identify as “incels” often express frustration, anger, and resentment towards society, women and those they perceive as more sexually successful. To-date, the ISD has taken action against two individuals who hold “incel” beliefs, amongst a “salad bar” of extremist ideologies.<sup>222</sup>
198. Even when they do not involve the threat or endorsement of violence against women, the misogynistic and demeaning attitudes of these “incel” ideologies poison attitudes towards and relationships between the sexes. If allowed to spread, these would have negative implications for dating, marriage and parenthood in the long run.
199. Legally, these ideologies can be dealt with under the Online Safety (Relief and Accountability) Act (OSRAA). The OSRAA defines “incitement of enmity” as “the communication of online material that a reasonable person would conclude incites, or is likely to incite, feelings of enmity, hatred or hostility against any group in Singapore”.<sup>223</sup>
200. While that particular section has not yet been implemented in law,<sup>224</sup> it can be used to collectively protect women or men once implemented.

(7) Strengthening marriages, improving family life

201. Lived experiences are an important contributing factor to people’s perceptions and values towards marriage and parenthood. The quality or otherwise of one’s experiences with family life can have intergenerational effects. For example, an MSF study noted that children whose parents had divorced were slightly less likely to marry, and more likely to divorce.<sup>225</sup>

<sup>222</sup> Internal Security Department, “Issuance of Restriction Orders under the Internal Security Act (ISA) against two Singaporeans” (9 September 2025): <https://www.isd.gov.sg/news-and-resources/issuance-of-restriction-orders-under-the-internal-security-act-isa-against-two-singaporeans/>; Internal Security Department, “Issuance of Orders Under the Internal Security Act (ISA) against two Singaporeans, and updates on previous ISA orders” (24 June 2026): <https://www.isd.gov.sg/news-and-resources/issuance-of-orders-under-the-internal-security-act-isa-against-two-singaporeans--and-updates-on-previous-isa-orders/>.

<sup>223</sup> Section 20, Online Safety (Relief and Accountability) Act.

<sup>224</sup> Ministry of Law, “The Online Safety Commission Begins Operations on 29 June 2026” (28 June 2026): <https://www.mlaw.gov.sg/the-online-safety-commission-begins-operations-on-29-june-2026/>.

<sup>225</sup> Ministry of Social and Family Development, “Intergenerational Effects of Divorce on Children in Singapore” Research Series Paper No. 01/2020.



202. We recommend as follows:

- (a) **The Government to encourage and support programmes and activities which seek to strengthen marriages and improve family life.** These include courses which help people navigate transitions into marriage, parenthood and grandparenthood, marriage or parenting support groups, intergenerational fun activities and more.
- (b) **Creation of “marriage and parenting growth credits” for couples and parents to develop marriage and parenting skills (akin to SkillsFuture Credits in relation to job-related upskilling).** Drawing lessons from SkillsFuture Credits, we recommend the creation of “marriage and parenting growth credits”, for spouses and parents to spend on programmes and activities to grow their capacity and knowledge as spouses and parents.

(8) Consider gazetting more public holidays

203. Rest is an important aspect of human flourishing, and is not merely instrumental to help a person to work better. Public holidays are effectively a form of legally-mandated rest.
204. Singapore has a total of 11 gazetted public holidays a year,<sup>226</sup> placing our country among the lowest in number of public holidays per year within the region.<sup>227</sup> This current configuration and number of public holidays in Singapore has been in place since 1968, when the number of public holidays was reduced so that all workers could “be given every opportunity to make their contribution towards the national effort to remain viable economically, and progress even during the difficult years ahead” in light of British withdrawal and “the economic upheavals that may follow in its wake”.<sup>228</sup>
205. The reduction of public holidays to 11 was – in the words of Mr E.W. Barker at the time – “one of the measures we are taking to ask our people to work harder”. He added that it would be his “pleasure” to increase the number of holidays if “our island prospers”.<sup>229</sup> To-date, this configuration and number of public holidays has remained unchanged.



<sup>226</sup> Ministry of Manpower, “Public holidays: entitlement and pay”: <https://www.mom.gov.sg/employment-practices/public-holidays-entitlement-and-pay>.

<sup>227</sup> Secret Singapore, “Why Singapore Has The Fewest Public Holidays In Southeast Asia – What It Means For You” (28 October 2025): <https://secretsingapore.co/singapore-lowest-number-public-holidays-southeast-asia/>.

<sup>228</sup> Parliament, “HOLIDAYS (AMENDMENT) BILL” (1 August 1968): [https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=010\\_19680801\\_S0002\\_T0005](https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=010_19680801_S0002_T0005); Parliament, “Practice of Allocating by Ethnic Group Public Holidays for Gazetting” (3 October 2022): <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=written-answer-na-11450>.

<sup>229</sup> Parliament, “HOLIDAYS (AMENDMENT) BILL” (1 August 1968): [https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=010\\_19680801\\_S0002\\_T0005](https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=010_19680801_S0002_T0005).



206. Since then, Singapore has progressed from Third World to First, and present-day Singapore is certainly far more prosperous today than in the early years of Independence. It is high time to fulfil the promise made by Mr E.W. Barker back in 1968.
207. Thus, consistent with our emphasis on human flourishing and concerns expressed about our ‘kiasu’ and ‘kancheong’ culture, we invite the Government to study and consider gazetting more public holidays to emphasise the value of rest and recreation, and spending time with one’s family (including extended family).

## **Conclusion**

208. Marriage and parenthood are personal choices with public consequences, which Singapore’s challenges with low fertility and the various impacts on the common good make amply clear. For a marriage and parenthood “reset”, a holistic reset in our wider culture and ecosystem is necessary.
209. Children are our hope and future. At Cultivate SG, we believe that children can and should once again be prioritised and valued in our society. This includes supporting the conditions that help children to thrive, such as strong marriages, stable families and a wider environment that is conducive for children to live, love and grow.

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About Cultivate SG

Cultivate SG is a non-profit organisation which wants to see families and our society thrive for generations. We call this ‘social sustainability’. This involves individual rights and responsibilities, stable marriages, strong families, a cultural climate that supports personal and family growth, and social harmony. We believe that culture – as the sum total of values, beliefs and practices of people in society – is not a battle to be fought, but a garden to be cultivated.