

Policy Digest²⁰²²

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Yayasan
MENDAKI

FAMILY MATTERS



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All enquiries seeking permission should be addressed to:

Research & Design Department
51 Kee Sun Avenue, Singapore 457056
Website: <https://my.mendaki.org.sg>
Contact Page: <https://my.mendaki.org.sg/Home/ContactUs>

Series Advisors:

Mr Masagos Zulkifli Masagos Mohamad
Minister for Social and Family Development
Second Minister for Health
Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs
Chairman of Yayasan MENDAKI

Mr Zaqy Mohamad
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Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Manpower
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Mdm Zuraidah Abdullah
Chief Executive Officer of Yayasan MENDAKI

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EDITORIAL TEAM

Editor: Dr Nadira Talib

Sub-Editors: Nur Iryani Halip, Siti Syafiqah Abdul Rashid, Nur Farina Begum Binte Amsah, Nur Nadiah Zailani, Arwa D/O Izzuddin

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CEO's Foreword

The year 2022 has brought on a different set of challenges as Singapore pivots to an endemic stage after living with COVID-19 for more than two years. However, other global risks from supply-chain disruptions and higher commodity prices lie ahead of us. The Singapore government has been taking the necessary steps to help the population cope with the rising cost of living by providing relief measures and tightening our monetary policies to dampen inflation. Despite the government's economic efforts towards recovery, little is known about how such disruptions and measures had impacted the community, especially vulnerable families.

A Social Attitudes of Singaporeans survey conducted in 2019, by the Ministry of Social Family Development, showed that almost all Singaporeans have close-knit families. Based on the survey, family members provided emotional, physical, and financial support in dire times. The family is a key pillar of strength and a first line of assistance. Hence, it is essential that families are supported to ensure the well-being of the community and the nation.

The year 2022 has also been dedicated as the Year of Celebrating SG Families. To commemorate the year of the family, this year's edition of the Policy Digest is themed, **'Family Matters'**. This year's edition seeks to review the challenges parents and caregivers face in supporting their family during these challenging times, to assess and rethink how various programmes and national policies can help to address the family's needs.

As Yayasan MENDAKI celebrates our 40th Anniversary this year, we are humbled to witness the community's progress through the support given to individuals and families to achieve upward social mobility. In his speech during Yayasan MENDAKI's 40th Anniversary event in October, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong highlighted the need to start our support earlier at the early childhood level, to work with disadvantaged families and to promote lifelong learning amongst our workers. This will continue to be one of our areas of focus in the coming years. For example, programmes such as KelasMateMatika (KMM) to equip parents with mediated learning skills to help build and strengthen their child foundation in Maths will be scaled up to ensure more children are school ready when they enter Primary 1. However, we could not scale up our programmes without the support from our volunteers such as our KMM Facilitators to deliver these programmes. We are therefore heartened to note that members of the community who were once beneficiaries of Yayasan MENDAKI's assistance, are now volunteering with us.

My heartfelt gratitude goes to the authors for their valuable contributions and insights to MENDAKI Policy Digest 2022. We hope that this year's articles will give our readers a better understanding of the intricacies associated with global trends, their associated challenges, and the impact these have on the community. Let us work together to empower and navigate our community towards success.



Zuraidah Abdullah
Chief Executive Officer
Yayasan MENDAKI

Editor's Note

At the Launch of National Family Week on 4 June 2022, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong dedicated 2022 as the Year of Celebrating SG Families (YCF). The government recognises the importance of families as the first line of care and support. Led by the Families for Life Council (FFL), YCF aims to build on efforts by government agencies, community partners, and corporations to support families across different life stages.

In this edition of the MENDAKI Policy Digest, with the theme of **'Family Matters'**, we look at insightful articles on family and parenting issues faced by the community. Strong families are our starting points in building a community of success. Yayasan MENDAKI believes in the importance of parents' role in the family as a child's first teacher, nurturer, and partner. With the rise of new global challenges following the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a shift in the demands of parenting roles to develop and prepare children for their futures.

This year, we are glad to welcome a wide range of perspectives, including first-hand experiences of working parents and community leaders. With writers from various backgrounds, MENDAKI Policy Digest serves as a platform to galvanise strategic partnerships and collaboration across numerous platforms to ideate and mobilise whole-of-society support for families.

MENDAKI Policy Digest 2022 delves into three interdependent sub-themes: 'Parenting', 'Policies', and 'People'. The first section explores how parental involvement influences the child's overall development. The second section discusses the current policies and infrastructures in place to support families and their needs. The third section provides a broader perspective on communal values and community support and seeks to enhance our understanding of the challenges faced by families and explore ways to stay ahead to support and empower our families.

We would like to extend our gratitude to all writers for their relevant and valuable contributions. We hope these articles would inspire readers on how we can share fresh ideas in supporting parents and caregivers to be actively involved in children's development to uplift families and build a Community of Success.



Dr Nadira Talib
Editor

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The Importance of Quality Early Caregiving on Children's Development



Longkang Fishing with Longkang Adventures, Dover Forest West, October 2022



Dr Cheryl Seah
Director
*Centre for Evidence
and Implementation*

Dr Cheryl Seah is a developmental psychologist and a researcher with expertise in the area of child development, childhood disorders, mental health, early intervention for children and families and implementation science. She has extensive knowledge and experience coordinating, supporting family-centred programme design, as well as the implementation and management of large-scale evaluation projects, such as the 5-year KidSTART outcome evaluation. She has over 20 years of experience in clinical practice and advocacy work that aims to improve the quality of lives for vulnerable children and families. She teaches early childhood educators on inclusion at Singapore University of Social Science (SUSS), and recently received the SUSS Award for Teaching Excellence 2022. She leads the implementation work in the Centre for Holistic Initiatives for Learning and Development (CHILD) at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Cheryl has worked closely with teams from government agencies, social service agencies, foundations, hospital and University settings.

Findings from global research is conclusive that families that provide early nurturing care for children are the bedrock of thriving children, and in turn, support better outcomes for individuals and communities throughout their lives.¹

In what follows, I explore some of the key themes of early nurturing care, the importance of supporting parental mental well-being and practical ways in which parents can provide a conducive home environment for their children.

The time from pregnancy to age three is crucial for children. Their brains grow faster than at any other time period in his life wherein 80% of a baby's brain is formed. For healthy

brain development in these early years, children need a safe, secure, and loving environment, with the right nutrition and stimulation from their parents. This has been termed as *Nurturing Care* that encompass health, nutrition, security and safety, responsive caregiving, and opportunities for early learning.² Our children thrive when raised in a nurturing and supportive environment, where they are more likely to have secure parental attachment, have a safe and secure base from which to explore their environments and to which they return in times of distress. This contrasts with the poorer outcomes seen in young children exposed to emotional neglect, physical abuse, household conflict or other toxic stressors.³ In addition, parents facing mental health issues, who experience high levels of stress or relationship difficulties would

find it harder to be responsive or provide a loving and secure environment.⁴

The evidence is clear: nurturing care is vital when we consider the lasting effects of adverse childhood experiences.

Adverse childhood experiences such as physical or emotional abuse, neglect or household adversity may have a range of serious negative impacts. These range from developmental delays in the first year, worsening developmental gap during early childhood, and disparity continue throughout life, poor executive functioning and decision-making skills.⁵

¹ The Heckman Equation. (n.d.). Invest in Early Childhood Development: Reduce Deficits, Strengthen the Economy. <https://heckmanequation.org/resource/invest-in-early-childhood-development-reduce-deficits-strengthen-the-economy/>

² Britto, P. R., Lye, S. J., Proulx, K., Yousafzai, A. K., Matthews, S. G., Vaivada, T., Perez-Escamilla, R., Rao, N., Ip, P., Fernald, L., MacMillan, H., Hanson, M., Wachs, T. D., Yao, H., Yoshikawa, H., Cerezo, A., Leckman, J. F., Bhutta, Z. A., & Early Childhood Development Interventions Review Group, for the Lancet Early Childhood Development Series Steering Committee (2017). Nurturing care: promoting early childhood development. *Lancet*, 389(10064), 91-102. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(16\)31390-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)31390-3)

³ World Health Organization. (2018). Nurturing care for early childhood development: a framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential. World Health Organization. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/272603>

⁴ Andrews, K., Dunn, J.R., Prime, H. et al. (2021). Effects of household chaos and parental responsiveness on child executive functions: A novel, multi-method approach. *BMC Psychology*, 9(1), 147. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-021-00651-1>

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⁵ Lorenc, T., Lester, S., Sutcliffe, K., Stansfield, C., & Thomas, J. (2020). Interventions to support people exposed to adverse childhood experiences: Systematic review of systematic reviews. *BMC Public Health*, 20, 657. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-08789-0>

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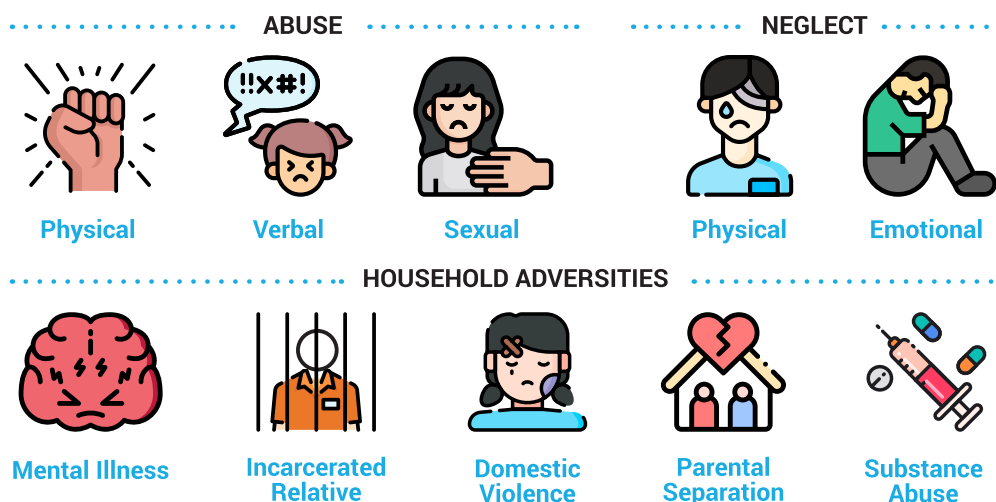
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Liu Z., Yang Y., Shi Z., Liu J., Wang Y. (2016). The risk of male adult alcohol dependence: The role of the adverse childhood experiences and ecological executive function. *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, 68, 129-133. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.comppsy.2016.04.006>

10 most commonly measured Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)



Families under chronic stress may not be able to carry out their caregiving responsibilities with their limited (e.g., time, mental capacity, financial) resources.⁶

Harsh parenting practices, hostility and potential child maltreatment may occur as a

result of overwhelming parenting stress.⁷ This would in turn result in children and adolescents displaying more internalising and externalising problems (e.g., anxiety, depression, hyperactivity), poorer cognitive skills, and socio-emotional skills.⁸

There are, however, opportunities for social sectors, healthcare providers,

policymakers, and educators to intervene to improve outcomes for families and their young ones. We are now clear that early interventions aimed at providing parental support are effective at improving parenting outcomes, including decreasing parenting stress.⁹ A systematic review – a type of literature review that looks at global evidence based on a

⁶ Cousino, M. K., & Hazen, R. A. (2013). Parenting stress among caregivers of children with chronic illness: A systematic review. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 38, 809–828. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jpepsy/jst049>

Pereira, J., Vickers, K., Atkinson, L., Gonzalez, A., Wekerle, C., & Levitan, R. (2012). Parenting stress mediates between maternal maltreatment history and maternal sensitivity in a community sample. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 36, 433–437. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2012.01.006>

⁷ Venta, A., Velez, L., & Lau, J. (2016). The role of parental depressive symptoms in predicting dysfunctional discipline among parents at high-risk for child maltreatment. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 25, 3076–3082. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-016-0473-y>

McMahon, C. A., & Meins, E. (2012). Mind-mindedness, parenting stress, and emotional availability in mothers of preschoolers. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 27, 245–252. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecresq.2011.08.002>

Chaplin, T. M., Turpin, C. C., Fischer, S., Martelli, A. M., Ross, C. E., Leichtweis, R. N., & Sinha, R. (2021). Parenting-focused mindfulness intervention reduces stress and improves parenting in highly stressed mothers of adolescents. *Mindfulness*, 12(2), 450–462. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-018-1026-9>

Miragoli, S., Balzarotti, S., Camisasca, E., & Di Blasio, P. (2018). Parents perception of child behavior, parenting stress, and child abuse potential: Individual and partner influences. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 84, 146–156. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.07.034>

Pinquart, M. (2017). Associations of parenting dimensions and styles with externalizing problems of children and adolescents: An updated meta-analysis. *Developmental Psychology*, 53, 873–932. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000295>

⁸ Mackler, J. S., Kelleher, R. T., Shanahan, L., Calkins, S. D., Keane, S. P., & O'Brien, M. (2015). Parenting stress, parental reactions, and externalizing behavior from ages 4 to 10. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 77, 388–406. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12163>

Silinskas, G., Kiuru, N., Aunola, K., Metsäpelto, R. L., Lerkkanen, M. K., & Nurmi, J. E. (2020). Maternal affection moderates the associations between parenting stress and early adolescents externalizing and internalizing behavior. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 40, 221–248. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431619833490>

de Cock, E. S., Henrichs, J., Klimstra, T. A., Maas, A. J. B., Vreeswijk, C. M., Meus, W. H., & van Bakel, H. J. (2017). Longitudinal associations between parental bonding, parenting stress, and executive functioning in toddlerhood. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 26, 1723–1733. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-017-0679-7>

⁹ Barlow, J., Smailagic, N., Huband, N., Roloff, V., & Bennett, C. (2012). Group-based parent training programmes for improving parental psychosocial health. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 8, 1–197. <https://doi.org/10.4073/csr.2012.15>

Burgdorf, V. L., Szabó, M., & Abbott, M. (2019). The effect of mindful interventions for parents on parenting stress and youth psychological outcomes: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 1336. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01336>

topic to draw out what the evidence says – was conducted on parenting interventions.¹⁰ This review looked at high quality (randomly controlled) experiments involving nearly 5,000 parents and found that group-based parent training programmes are effective in improving parental psychosocial functioning and well-being, in addition to decreasing levels of parental stress.¹¹ Examples of these parenting interventions include Incredible Years, Triple P, Abecedarian Approach but their effectiveness need to be evaluated when they are adapted for the local context.

Parental mental well-being

While we now have more insight into the implications of the social context, parental stress and economic disadvantage on parenting practices and children's outcomes, it is important to identify sources of parental stress (e.g., financial strain, chronic stress) and intervene early to reduce these stressors.¹²

There is a need to prevent chronic stress from undermining parent and child psychological well-being, which can lead to conflictual relationships between parents and their children.¹³

Parental mental well-being before conceiving and at pregnancy influence children's brain development. The early influence of parental mental health problems, stressors and anxiety can influence patterns of their children's brain development in its structure, connectivity, and electrophysiology.

This can result in children's behavioural problems and poorer executive functions such as working memory, attention, self-regulation, impulsivity and sensory processing.¹⁴ These would have implications on children's learning and lifelong functioning. Taken together, the

effects of parental depression can elicit intense frustration in the parent, which can lead to dysfunctional family relationships and increase in overall parenting stress.¹⁵ Hence, early interventions would need to focus on parental mental well-being and provide parental support before the child is born, as well as in the early years after birth.

Findings from the local longitudinal cohort study (GUSTO – Growing Up in Singapore Towards healthy Outcomes) indicated that interventions should be targeted even earlier through antenatal care. GUSTO found that up to 40% of mothers reported feeling depressed or anxious during pregnancy. These negative feelings range from mild to more severe levels and are consistent with previous Singaporean reports.¹⁶ Alarming, both North American and GUSTO research have shown that high levels of stress, depressive symptoms and/or anxiety during pregnancy affects the child's brain development during the pre- and post-natal periods.

¹⁰ Uman L. S. (2011). Systematic reviews and meta-analyses. *Journal of the Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 20(1), 57–59. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3024725/>

¹¹ Barlow, J., Smailagic, N., Huband, N., Roloff, V., & Bennett, C. (2012). Group-based parent training programmes for improving parental psychosocial health. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 8, 1–197. <https://doi.org/10.4073/csr.2012.15>

¹² Cassells, R.C., Evans, G.W. (2017). Ethnic Variation in Poverty and Parenting Stress. In: Deater-Deckard, K., Panneton, R. (eds) *Parental Stress and Early Child Development*. Springer, Cham, 15–45. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-55376-4_2

¹³ Ward, K. P., & Lee, S. J. (2020). Mothers' and fathers' parenting stress, responsiveness, and child wellbeing among low-income families. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 116. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105218>

Barnett, M. (2008). Economic disadvantage in complex family systems: Expansion of family stress models. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 11, 145–161. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-008-0034-z>

¹⁴ Meaney M. J. (2018). Perinatal Maternal Depressive Symptoms as an Issue for Population Health. *The American journal of psychiatry*, 175(11), 1084–1093. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2018.17091031>

Tsotsi, S., Broekman, B. F. P., Sim, L. W., Shek, L. P., Tan, K. H., Chong, Y. S., Qiu, A., Chen, H. Y., Meaney, M. J., & Rifkin-Graboi, A. (2019). Maternal Anxiety, Parenting Stress, and Preschoolers' Behavior Problems: The Role of Child Self-Regulation. *Journal of developmental and behavioral pediatrics*, 40(9), 696–705. <https://doi.org/10.1097/DBP.00000000000000737>

Borchers, L. R., Dennis, E. L., King, L. S., Humphreys, K. L., & Gotlib, I. H. (2021). Prenatal and postnatal depressive symptoms, infant white matter, and toddler behavioral problems. *Journal of affective disorders*, 282, 465–471. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2020.12.075>

Neuenschwander, R., Hookenson, K., Brain, U., Grunau, R. E., Devlin, A. M., Weinberg, J., Diamond, A., & Oberlander, T. F. (2018). Children's stress regulation mediates the association between prenatal maternal mood and child executive functions for boys, but not girls. *Development and psychopathology*, 30(3), 953–969. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S095457941800041X>

Ross, K. M., Letourneau, N., Climie, E., Giesbrecht, G., & Dewey, D. (2020). Perinatal Maternal Anxiety and Depressive Symptoms and Child Executive Function and Attention at Two-years of Age. *Developmental neuropsychology*, 45(6), 380–395. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87565641.2020.1838525>

¹⁵ Arteche, A., Joermann, J., Harvey, A., Craske, M., Gotlib, I. H., Lehtonen, A., & Stein, A. (2011). The effects of postnatal maternal depression and anxiety on the processing of infant faces. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 133, 197–203. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2011.04.015>

¹⁶ Meaney M. J. (2018). Perinatal Maternal Depressive Symptoms as an Issue for Population Health. *The American journal of psychiatry*, 175(11), 1084–1093. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2018.17091031>

Thiagayson, P., Krishnaswamy, G., Lim, M. L., Sung, S. C., Haley, C. L., Fung, D. S., Allen, J. C., Jr, & Chen, H. (2013). Depression and anxiety in Singaporean high-risk pregnancies - prevalence and screening. *General hospital psychiatry*, 35(2), 112–116. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.genhosppsych.2012.11.006>

In addition, findings from S-PRESTO (Singapore Preconception Study of long-term maternal and child outcomes) show that poor maternal mental health persists following birth and influences the quality of parental care.¹⁷

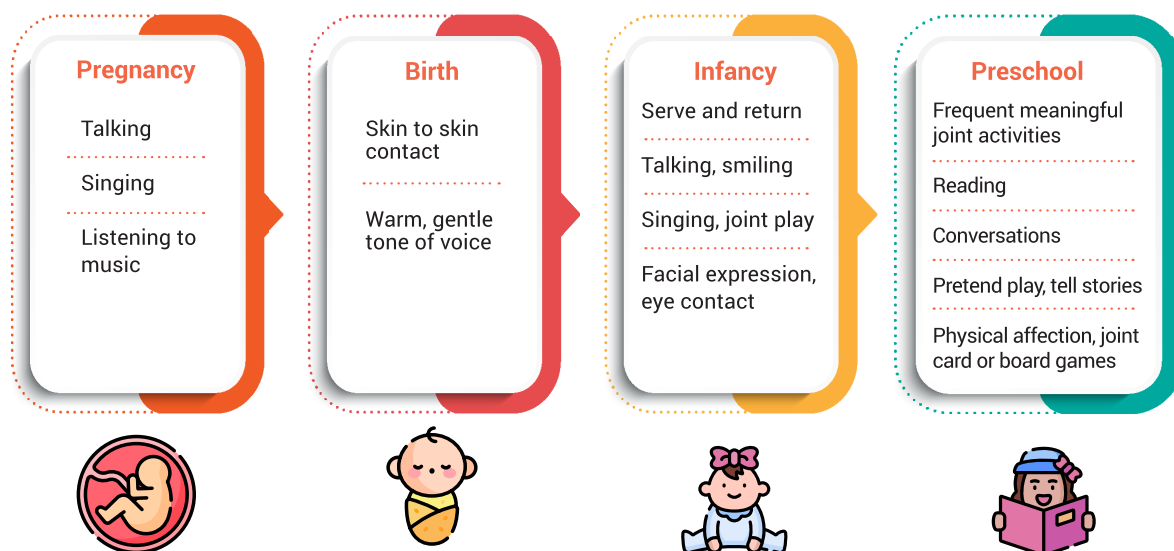
Fathers are equally important in providing a conducive environment for young infants during pregnancy and following birth of child.

“Fathers have become progressively more involved and integrated into the parenting roles.”¹⁸

Fathers’ involvement in caregiving has been linked to positive child mental and medical health outcomes, such as in providing both practical and emotional support.¹⁹ Similar to a mother, a father’s mental health problem can be pre-existent or occur with the onset of parenthood, reducing a father’s responsiveness when engaging with a young infant or child.²⁰ Paternal postpartum depression is estimated to occur in 10% of men between the first trimester and the first year after a baby’s birth, which is about half the rate of maternal postpartum depression globally (21% of mothers).²¹ Paediatricians need to find innovative ways to screen for paternal depression since fathers may not always attend his child’s medical visits, where mothers could typically be screened for maternal depression.

What can parents do?

While early interactions of fathers and mothers may take place through different context, the evidence is strong that early engagement by parents with young children needs to be frequent and meaningful in order to build an emotionally secure relationship with them. It should begin as early as the prenatal period and with both parents. For example, by the second trimester, the foetus begins to recognise sounds and learning occurs in utero. After birth, repeated skin-to-skin contact stimulates many physiological changes in both the parent and the newborn that establish bonding immediately. For both mothers and fathers, this skin-to-skin contact promotes the



¹⁷ Loo, E. X. L., Soh, S. E., Loy, S. L., Ng, S., Tint, M. T., Chan, S. Y., Huang, J. Y., Yap, F., Tan, K. H., Chern, B. S. M., Tan, H. H., Meaney, M. J., Kamani, N., Godfrey, K. M., Lee, Y. S., Chan, J. K. Y., Gluckman, P. D., Chong, Y. S., Shek, L. P., Eriksson, J. G., ... Cheng, Z. R. (2021). Cohort profile: Singapore Preconception Study of Long-Term Maternal and Child Outcomes (S-PRESTO). *European journal of epidemiology*, 36(1), 129–142. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10654-020-00697-2>

¹⁸ Fisher, S. D. (2016). Paternal Mental Health: Why Is It Relevant?. *American journal of lifestyle medicine*, 11(3), 200–211. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1559827616629895>

¹⁹ Seah, C. K., & Morawska, A. (2016). When mum is stressed, is dad just as stressed? Predictors of paternal stress in the first six months of having a baby. *Infant mental health journal*, 37(1), 45–55. <https://doi.org/10.1002/imhj.21546>

²⁰ Nakić Radoš, S. (2021). Parental Sensitivity and Responsiveness as Mediators Between Postpartum Mental Health and Bonding in Mothers and Fathers. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 12, 723418. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.723418>

²¹ Paulson, J. F., & Bazemore, S. D. (2010). Prenatal and postpartum depression in fathers and its association with maternal depression: a meta-analysis. *JAMA*, 303(19), 1961–1969. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2010.605>

O'hara, M.W. & Swain, A.M. (1996) Rates and risk of postpartum depression - a meta-analysis. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 8(1), 37-54, <https://doi.org/10.3109/09540269609037816>

release of oxytocin.²² This hormone plays a key role in bonding by countering stress responses and promotes healthy growth.²³ Figure 2 below lists the ways in which both parents can promote bonding with their young children in the first six years.

To further strengthen the parent-infant bonding, parents should engage in ‘serve-and-return’ interactions.²⁴ What this means is that when infants coo, cry or make facial expressions, they are seeking adults’ response through ‘serves’. This would prompt the adult to ‘return’ through eye contact, reassuring words, hugs, or play. When these connections and interactions are absent or infrequent over a sustained period, the young infant can feel stress and confusion, which impedes on their healthy brain development.²⁵

As the child enters preschool, shared book reading provides opportunities for numerous

‘serve-and-return’ experiences when parent and child review the book content together with questions, answers and comments. The GUSTO study showed that being read to by their parents for just 10 minutes a day markedly improved the children’s literacy skills at age four, especially among those of lower socioeconomic status.²⁶ In addition, it has been found that having meaningful conversations with your children would also strengthen bonding.²⁷ This finding is similar to a large OECD study of five-year-olds in England, the United States and Estonia, which showed that the more frequently parents read with their children, the more likely it was that the children showed better socio-emotional skills and prosocial skills.²⁸

Screen Time

It is important to note that excessive screen time for

children reduces opportunities for parent-child interaction. However, families face numerous challenges in today’s screen-rich home environments during mealtime, through hybrid work platforms and when commuting. Families’ increased screen time is increasingly implicated as interfering with parent-child interactions. The time that young children spend on screens (ie., mobile phones, tablets, television) tends to substitute for time best spent interacting with parents.²⁹ Furthermore, screen time for infants under two years is not recommended due to the potential adverse effects on cognitive and socioemotional development.³⁰ Screen time and device use by parents themselves should also be monitored as this may detract from time and attention given to children. Parents of newborns may underestimate their own device use and there is benefit to supporting new parents in choices about device use.

²² Vittner D, McGrath J, Robinson J, Lawhon G, Cusson R, Eisenfeld L, et al. (2018) Increase in oxytocin from skin-to-skin contact enhances development of parent–infant relationship. *Biological Research For Nursing*, 20, 54-62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1099800417735633>

²³ Moberg KU, Handlin L, Petersson M. (2020) Neuroendocrine mechanisms involved in the physiological effects caused by skin-to-skin contact – With a particular focus on the oxytocinergic system. *Infant Behavior and Development*, 61:101482. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infbeh.2020.101482>

²⁴ Shonkoff JP (2017) Breakthrough impacts: What science tells us about supporting early childhood development. *Young Children*, 72, 8-16. https://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/From_Best_Practices_to_Breakthrough_Impacts-3.pdf

²⁵ Bernier A, Calkins SD, Bell MA. (2016) Longitudinal associations between the quality of mother–infant interactions and brain development across infancy. *Child Development*, 87(4), 1159-1174. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12518>

Leblanc D, Geilh F, Beauchamp MH, Bernier A. (2022) Disorganized attachment behaviors in infancy as predictors of brain morphology and peer rejection in late childhood. *Cognitive, Affective, & Behavioral Neuroscience*, 22(4), 833-848. <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13415-022-00987-0>

²⁶ Sensaki S, Law E. Unpublished data. Singapore: Singapore Institute for Clinical Sciences.

²⁷ Romeo, R. R., Leonard, J. A., Robinson, S. T., West, M. R., Mackey, A. P., Rowe, M. L., & Gabrieli, J. D. E. (2018). Beyond the 30-Million-Word Gap: Children’s Conversational Exposure Is Associated With Language-Related Brain Function. *Psychological science*, 29(5), 700–710. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617742725>

²⁸ OECD. (2020) Early Learning and Child Well-being: A Study of Five-year-Olds in England, Estonia, and the United States. <https://doi.org/10.1787/3990407f-en>

²⁹ Wilkinson C, Low F, Gluckman P. (2021) Screen time and children: What do we know about the effects on emotional, social, and cognitive development? Auckland: Kōi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures.

Bernier A, Calkins SD, Bell MA. (2016) Longitudinal associations between the quality of mother–infant interactions and brain development across infancy. *Child Development*, 87(4), 1159-1174. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12518>

Leblanc D, Geilh F, Beauchamp MH, Bernier A. (2022) Disorganized attachment behaviors in infancy as predictors of brain morphology and peer rejection in late childhood. *Cognitive, Affective, & Behavioral Neuroscience*. <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13415-022-00987-0>.

³⁰ McCaleb M. (2020) How does the use of smartphones change for new mothers? A pre- and post-partum, match controlled observational design. University of Canterbury, Christchurch. https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10092/101323/McCaleb,%20Miriam_Master's%20Thesis.pdf?sequence=1

GUSTO findings have shown that screen time exposure in children aged between 1 and 2 years of age has been found to predict prominent deficits in executive functions at 8.5 years of age. Executive function skills are the attention-regulation skills that make it possible to stay focused, retain and work with information in our brains, resist distraction, consider the consequences of different behaviours, and plan for the future.³¹

Research has clearly demonstrated that early caregiving experiences have an impact on infant brain development and later child executive function skills, laying an important foundation for learning in school settings.³² Executive functioning skills in the early years predict a wide range of important outcomes,

including readiness for school, school performance and social competence in adolescence; better physical health; higher socioeconomic status and fewer drug-related problems and criminal convictions in adulthood.³³ Kindergarten students with poorer executive function skills and poorer social competence showed more difficulty in reading and math, and this gap in performance continues to widen until Primary Two and persists thereafter.³⁴ While we are not born with executive function skills, we have the potential to develop them slowly, beginning from infancy into early adulthood. Both positive (supportive caregiving and high-quality early education) and negative (stress, poverty, disadvantage) experiences

shape our development of executive function skills.

The period between two and six years of age is considered a “sensitive period” where the human brain grows rapidly and is especially susceptible to environmental influences and quality of early caregiving.³⁵

Sensitive, warm and nurturing caregiving behaviour fosters the development of children's self-regulatory or executive functioning skills by providing the child with a predictive, orderly, and stimulating environment.³⁶

³¹ Hughes, C. (2011). Changes and Challenges in 20 Years of Research Into the Development of Executive Functions. *Infant and Child Development*, 20(3), 251-271. <https://doi.org/10.1002/icd.736>

Jacques, S., and Marcovitch, S. (2010). Development of Executive Function Across the Life Span. In W. Overton (Ed.), *Handbook of Lifespan Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470880166.hlsd001013>

Meuwissen, A.S., and Zelazo, P.D. (2014). Hot and Cool Executive Function: Foundations for Learning and Healthy Development. *Zero to Three*, 35(2), 18-23.

³² Blair, C., and Raver, C.C. (2015). School Readiness and Self-Regulation: A Developmental Psychobiological Approach. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 66, 711-731. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010814-015221>

Fay-Stammach, T., Hawes, D. J., & Meredith, P. (2014). Parenting influences on executive function in early childhood: A review. *Child Development Perspectives*, 8, 258–264. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12095>

Kok, R., Thijssen, S., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., Jaddoe, V. W., Verhulst, F. C., White, T., et al. (2015). Normal variation in early parental sensitivity predicts child structural brain development. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 54, 824–831. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2015.07.009>.

³³ McClelland, M.M., Acock A.C., and Morrison, F.J. (2006). The Impact of Kindergarten Learning Related Skills on Academic Trajectories at the End of Elementary School. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 21(4), 471-490. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2006.09.003>

Moffitt, T.E., Arseneault, L., Belsky, D., Dickson, N., Hancox, R.J., Harrington, H., Houts, R., Poulton, R., Roberts, B.W., Ross, S., Sears, M.R., Thomson, W.M., and Caspi, A. (2011). A Gradient of Childhood Self-Control Predicts Health, Wealth, and Public Safety. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 108(7), 2693-2698. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1010076108>

³⁴ McClelland, M.M., Cameron, C.E., Connor, C.M., Farris, C.L., Jewkes, A.M., and Morrison, F.J. (2007). Links Between Behavioral Regulation and Preschoolers' Literacy, Vocabulary, and Math Skills. *Developmental Psychology*, 43(4), 947-959. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.43.4.947>

Hassinger-Das, B., Jordan, N.C., Glutting, J., Irwin, C., and Dyson, N. (2014). Domain-General Mediators of the Relation Between Kindergarten Number Sense and First-Grade Mathematics Achievement. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 118, 78-92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2013.09.008>

Zaitchik, D., Iqbal, Y., and Carey, S. (2014). The Effect of Executive Function on Biological Reasoning in Young Children: An Individual Differences Study. *Child Development*, 85(1), 160-75. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12145>

³⁵ Fox, N. A., Calkins, S. D., & Bell, M. A. (1994). Neural plasticity and development in the first two years of life: Evidence from cognitive and socioemotional domains of research. *Development and Psychopathology*, 6, 677–696. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579400004739>

Knickmeyer, R. C., Gouttard, S., Kang, C., Evans, D., Wilber, K., Smith, J. K., & Gilmore, J. H. (2008). A structural MRI study of human brain development from birth to 2 years. *The Journal of Neuroscience*, 28, 12176–12182. <https://doi.org/10.1523/JNEUROSCI.3479-08.2008>

³⁶ Carlson, S. M. (2003). Executive function in context: development, measurement, theory, and experience. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 68(3), 138–151. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5834.2003.06803012.x>

Schroeder, V. M., & Kelley, M. L. (2010). Family environment and parent-child relationships as related to executive functioning in children. *Early Child Development and Care*, 180, 1285–1298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430902981512>

Thus, early social relationships and healthy caregiving behaviour are important for children's development of executive functioning skills and have the potential to level the playing field by reducing social disparities in academic achievement and health.³⁸

Conclusion

In conclusion, the focus on parental mental well-being before pregnancy through to after birth of children is essential for effective long-term benefit across generations. Early interventions, including parenting programmes, need to focus on supporting young parents in providing warm, nurturing care for their children while reducing the stressors that

they may face (e.g., financial stressors). Promoting parent-child bonding in the early years has been shown to reduce parenting stress, enhance socio-emotional development, behavioural and cognitive development of children.³⁹ Thus, parents play a very significant role in a child's brain development. They are their children's first teachers and prepare them for increased independence by nurturing, protecting and guiding them.

Recommendations of parenting behaviours to enhance children's outcomes in early years



1. Engage frequently in 'serve-and-return' interactions e.g. show affection, respond to their cues, make conversations.



2. Encourage your child's language development e.g. nurture love for books, read together, speak in complete sentences.



3. Encourage their growing independence e.g. let them help with simple chores.



4. Affirm and praise positive behaviours more than punish unwanted behaviours, tell or show your children what they should do instead. Use discipline to guide and protect your children, rather than punishment to make them feel bad or guilty.



5. Help your children through the steps to solve problems when they are upset, when taking on new challenges, during disagreements with another child.



6. Enhance their executive functions through activities such as peekaboo, imitation games, simple role play, conversation and storytelling, complex imaginary play, movement games and board games that are appropriate for their age.



7. Take care of yourself physically, mentally, and emotionally. Reach out for family and community support quickly when you feel overwhelmed.



8. Be mindful about modelling good screen time management and avoid providing screen time for children below two years of age. For young children (two to four years old), join them and discuss what they want to watch on the screen to avoid passive ('babysitting'), sedentary screen time.

³⁸ Diamond A. (2013). Executive functions. *Annual review of psychology*, 64, 135–168. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-113011-143750>

O'Shaughnessy, T. E., Lane, K. L., Gresham, F. M., & Beebe-Frankenberger, M. E. (2003). Children Placed at Risk for Learning and Behavioral Difficulties: Implementing a School-Wide System of Early Identification and Intervention. *Remedial and Special Education*, 24(1), 27–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074193250302400103>

³⁹ de Cock, E. S., Henrichs, J., Vreeswijk, C. M., Maas, A. J., Rijk, C. H., & van Bakel, H. J. (2016). Continuous feelings of love? The parental bond from pregnancy to toddlerhood. *Journal of family psychology: journal of the Division of Family Psychology of the American Psychological Association (Division 43)*, 30(1), 125–134. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000138>

Mason, Z., Briggs, R., & Silver, E. (2011). Maternal attachment feelings mediate between maternal reports of depression, infant social–emotional development, and parenting stress. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, 29(4), 382–394. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02646838.2011.629994>

DID YOU KNOW?

Overall Singaporean mental well-being during the pandemic

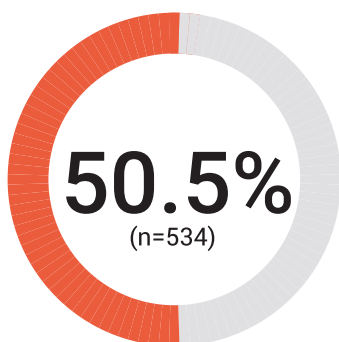


A total of 1,058 participants (majority of respondents were aged 21 to 49 years) were surveyed for the study.

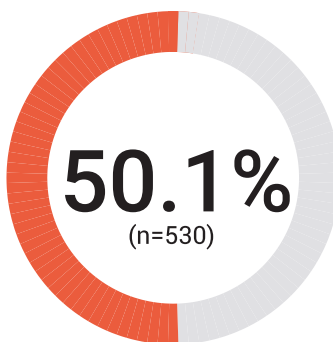
Respondents were asked whether they felt anxious due to thoughts or concerns (sources) related to the outbreak. The top three sources of stress are shown below.

Source: Ministry of Health, Singapore. (2020). COVID-19 Mental Wellness Taskforce Report.

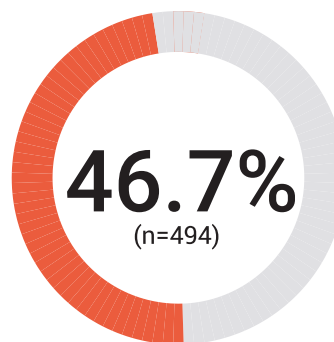
Top three sources of stress



Family members or friends might be infected with COVID-19



Financial loss, such as losing work opportunities or having to take unpaid leave

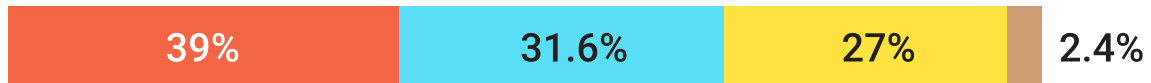


Unemployment

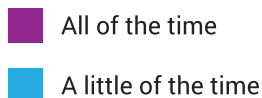
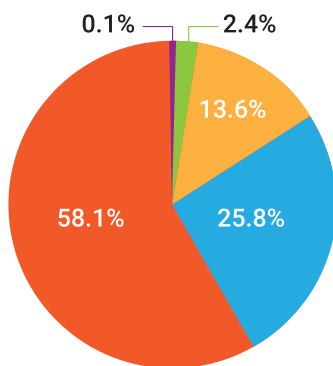
Source: Ministry of Health, Singapore. (2020). COVID-19 Mental Wellness Taskforce Report.

Emotional distress

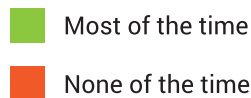
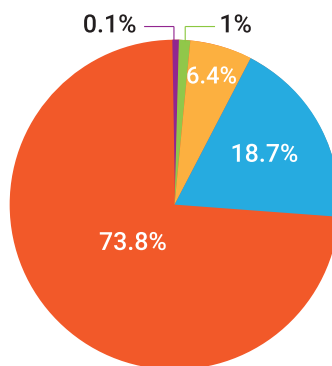
Emotional Distress Levels Experienced by Primary Caregivers (PCGs)



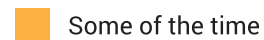
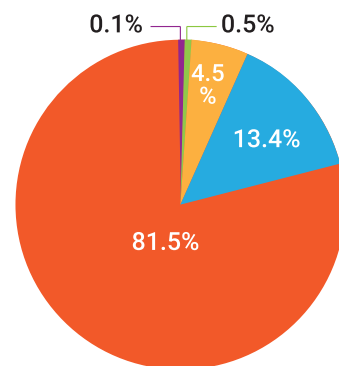
PCGs feel nervous



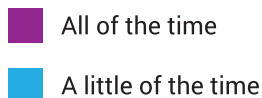
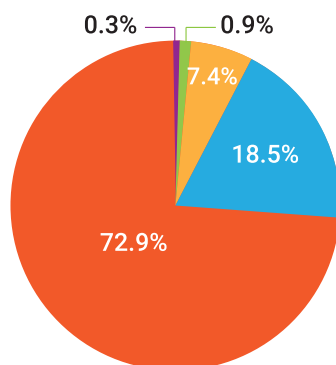
PCGs feel hopeless



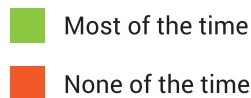
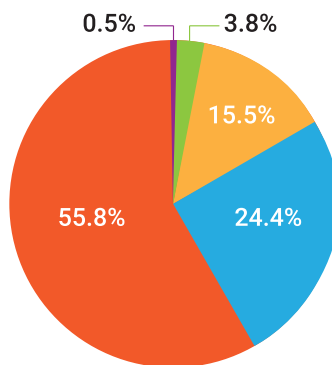
PCGs feel worthless



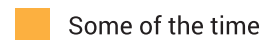
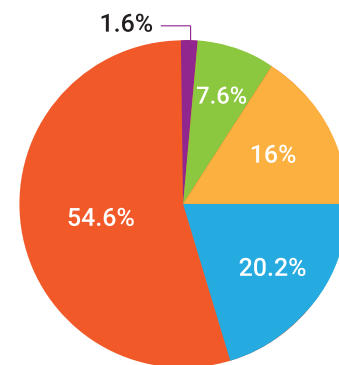
PCGs feel so sad nothing could cheer them up



PCGs feel restless or fidgety

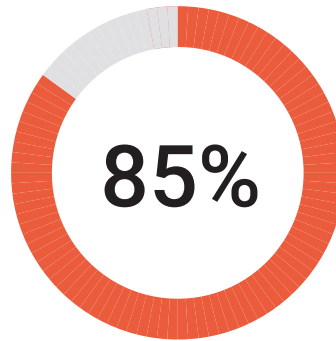
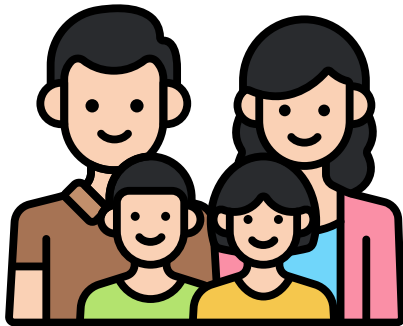


PCGs feel everything was an effort



Source: National University of Singapore, Singapore. (2020). Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study Research Update Issue 2.

Triple P (Positive Parenting Programme):

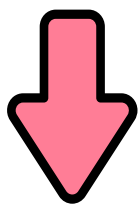


85% of parents endorsed the programme as being relevant to their parenting needs

To date, more than 30,000 parents have benefitted from the programme.

Source: Ministry of Social and Family Development, Singapore. (2022). Parenting: A Regional Approach to Service Delivery through Parent Support Providers.

Parents with secondary school-going children



31%

31% reduction in their emotional distress scores

22%

22% reduction in their child's problematic behavioural scores

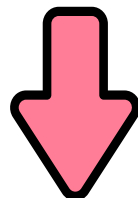


Parents with primary school-going children



15%

15% improvement in their parenting satisfaction and efficiency score



18%

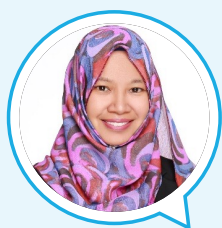
18% reduction in their child's problematic behavioural scores

Source: Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA), Singapore. (n.d.). Subsidies and Financial Assistance.

Every Child's Journey Begins with H.O.M.E

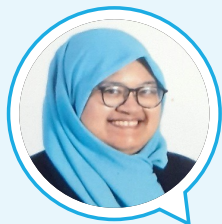


Reading @ the Gardens, Gardens by the Bay, October 2019



Azlinah Arif
Deputy Director
School Ready Department
Yayasan MENDAKI

Azlinah Arif is the Deputy Director of School Ready at Yayasan MENDAKI. She works with stakeholders and partners to champion the importance of early learning years and enabling better home-school partnerships. She has more than 20 years of experience in designing programmes, collaborative initiatives and engagement platforms to advance the needs of underserved families, youth, and children. She has a Bachelor's Degree in Economics and Political Science from the National University of Singapore and a Master of Business from Victoria University, Australia.



Syafiqah Sulaiman
Executive Officer
School Ready Department
Yayasan MENDAKI

Syafiqah Sulaiman is an Early Learning Executive Officer at Yayasan MENDAKI and she is a member of the KelasMateMatika (KMM) programme team. She assists in the engagement of partners and like-minded organisations to increase the awareness of KMM. She has a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology from the University of Wollongong. She has experience working with preschool aged children and students and enjoys interacting with them. She finds fulfilment in helping families and seeing happy faces of the beneficiaries. Also, she hopes that her beloved cats will grow old with her.

Family plays a very important role in nurturing a child. The family members' ability to create and sustain a conducive environment determines how a child develops socially and psychologically. Every moment, including the early stages of a child's life, matters as interactions during the formative years offer a critical window of opportunity to instil values, shape the trajectory of a child's holistic development, mould their character, and build a foundation for their future. For children to achieve their full potential, it is critical to address their essential needs across areas such as health nutrition, care and protection. They should also be protected from harm and be provided with a sense of security, opportunities for early learning and responsive caregiving – like talking, singing, and playing – with parents and caregivers who love them. Each child needs love, care, and proper support and services, regardless of who the parental figures are in their life – parents, grandparents, relatives or siblings, to nourish their growth and succeed in life.

When family members give time to create and forge memories together, engage in quality interactions, spark conversations on issues, motivate and inspire children to have dreams, children can show positive development. The investment in such relationships build strong social and emotional strengths that children will rely on throughout their lives. Children continuously need a good education, a pleasant environment for development and learning, and supportive services for their well-being to achieve



success in life. The provision of such conditions is made possible with the support from within the family and the community at large.

Parenting through H.O.M.E – Hope, Opportunities, Motivation, Environment

As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child. Parents need support in their parenting journey. Parenting requires a set of skills, and the journey of parenthood begins at home. Home is a place where family members can find **hope** especially in the darkest of days. Parents or caregivers can help to create **opportunities** to help children overcome challenges in life. With support and continuous **motivation** from their network of support, parents can continue to inspire their children to go out into the world to achieve greatness despite the ups and downs of life. Home provides an **environment** that is filled with love and care to help us conquer our dreams.

Having reliable caregivers, be it parents, grandparents or relatives, matter for children.

Consistent and responsive caregiving in an enriching environment can build and foster resilience and self-esteem in children. In his opening address at the 2022 Fostering Seminar, Minister for Family and Social Development, Mr Masagos Zulkifli Masagos Mohamad highlighted that families nurture resilience in children when they are showered with love and care.¹ He believed that when they become adults, they would be able to contribute to the community with care and love just like what their families had done for them. This in turn will strengthen our social cohesion.

The pandemic has brought upon waves of challenges for everyone, especially families. Parents are struggling to balance work, childcare, and self-care while keeping financial worries under control. To mitigate this, there are measures to support vulnerable segments of the society at both the national and community levels.² A major impact of the pandemic was that parents went through the loss or the reduction of a stable income which in turn led to the challenges of paying bills in a timely manner and being able to put food on the table for their families.³ Parents shared that some children found it challenging

¹ Ministry of Social and Family Development (2022). Opening Address by Mr Masagos Zulkifli, Minister for Social and Family Development, and Second Minister for Health at Fostering Seminar. <https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/Pages/Opening-Address-by-Mr-Masagos-Zulkifli-Minister-for-Social-and-Family-Development-for-Fostering-Seminar.aspx>

² Channel News Asia (2020). MSF to Strengthen Social Safety Nets Ensuring 'No Singaporean is Left Behind' amid COVID-19: Masagos Zulkifli. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/covid-19-msf-strengthen-social-safety-nets-masagos-zulkifli-631096>

³ Chen, X. (2021). Nutrition, Family Stress and Preschool Children's Behaviour Problems. Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study Research Brief, 3. https://fass.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2021/06/Research-Brief_3_Jun-2021.pdf.

to be motivated during the pandemic. They had to adjust to new routines such as learning from home, which affected their social interaction with friends and teachers. Parents recognised the need to support their young children. Parents offered to work alongside their children while they completed their homework when they were not in the mood to do so.

As one of the Focus Area 1 programmes under the M³ collaboration, KMM@CommunityCentre aims to equip parents with skills to mediate their child's learning in basic numeracy concepts and encourage parents to be more involved in their children's early childhood education. As parents learn these mediated learning skills, they become empowered and learn to appreciate their child's learning style. Having this knowledge could help parents to create meaningful conversations with school personnel, thus creating stronger home-school partnerships. The safe management measures set by the government to curb the spread of COVID-19 had a direct impact on how Yayasan MENDAKI organised and conducted the early learning programme. As the programme could not be conducted onsite, Yayasan MENDAKI promptly adjusted and conceptualised "eKMM", a programme which is delivered through an online video-conferencing platform. The capabilities of KMM facilitators are enhanced to equip them with a new set of digital skills to engage both parents and children during the delivery of eKMM sessions.

Families experience a steep learning curve when it comes to navigating online platforms especially for the child's learning during the pandemic. Home-based learning is one of the key measures that was put in place during the circuit breaker period in Singapore.⁴ The use of online video platforms had become a new norm. Parents have to learn basic digital skills, how to manage cyber-related risks in order to enable them to better navigate the Internet in their children's digital world and learn the features of the video conferencing platforms. These skills are useful for parents to equip themselves with the confidence to support home-based learning (HBL), a strategy designed to aid in the learning of students at home. Another prominent public education platform to promote learning through play, 'PlayFEST', was pivoted online and programme materials were delivered to the families' doorstep where they could safely participate in the activities from the comfort of their homes. Although the activities were conducted online, there were opportunities for families to bond during the learning process and for their children to develop their communication and social skills. More importantly, it raised the level of awareness in parents on the importance of play and its role in the holistic development of young children.

The development of early critical thinking and reasoning skills were encouraged through these activities which provided abovementioned programmes

are centred around the child for their healthy development. This child-centred approach is aligned with the results from a recent study on child-centredness activities.⁵ Tan and Rao concluded that having a child-centred approach in the early childhood education framework could be helpful in encouraging the child's school readiness. This highlights the importance of play on social and motor skills development in children, especially so in the home setting with their parents.

From the analysis of the pre and post perception surveys submitted by parents who attended eKMM in 2020-2021, it was reported that there was an increase in parents' confidence level in being their children's learning companions. They showed more confidence in assisting their children and were aware of the availability of all the resources they could find at home. Parents recognised the importance of early exposure to Mathematics and basic numeracy skills. The pursuit for learning was not hindered by the multi-faceted challenges that families faced during the pandemic. Mdm Solihah Yakinawati Binte Yahya, a KMM beneficiary, shared her experience of the programme, "My husband and I benefited from KMM because we got to bond as a family and other parents shared their stories which helped us to manage our children well".

Yayasan MENDAKI works with partners to curate learning opportunities through a series of developmental non-academic programmes to support a

⁴ Looi, C. (2020). Home-based learning in Singapore. Silver Lining for Learning. <https://silverliningforlearning.org/home-based-learning-in-singapore/>

⁵ Tan, C.T., & Rao, N. (2017). How Do Children Learn? Beliefs and Practices Reported by Kindergarten Teachers in Singapore. *Asia-Pacific journal of research in early childhood education*, 11, 81-112.

pre-schooler holistically and to nurture a strong foundation in them. These programmes will help to build 21st century skills such as collaboration, communication, and critical thinking in children and in turn contribute towards the child's better character development and readiness for school. Some examples of such developmental activities include coding, STEAM-related workshops, speech and drama activities, and learning journeys. Some of these programmes such as 'Junior Coding', 'Junior Scientist', and even virtual learning journeys were also made available online to ensure that there will not be any abrupt interruption to their learning.

Dr Mohamad Maliki, Second Minister for Education called for more consistent efforts to strengthen family bonds by having like-minded parents come together to exchange tips and parenting lessons with one another. He added that with the ever-growing support for parents, he hopes that children will grow into resilient and strong adults.⁶

Enhancing Collaboration

As an educational partner, Yayasan MENDAKI facilitates continuous learning at home and offers end-to-end educational support to the community at different stages of life by strengthening families with a focus on their capabilities and strengths. Collaborations with partners such as National Library Board (NLB) and Dyslexia

Association of Singapore (DAS) allowed us to share knowledge on the key strategies to support families in early childhood development and the knowledge gained could be utilised to design programmes and initiatives on the best practices to support parents with preschool-aged children. Yayasan MENDAKI will continue to work with our partners to champion for more upstream efforts so that young children can have a good start in life, especially for those from disadvantaged families.

Subject-matter experts and volunteers are community assets who champion the cause of education and lifelong learning. Together with Yayasan MENDAKI and other partners, knowledge and ideas are shared to build a better future for the community. Initiatives such as the School Ready Campaign, for example, promotes the importance of early learning and highlights the availability of a series of publications and resources that are developed for the targeted group. Valuable input from subject-matter experts and the identification of channels of engagement with the targeted group lead to better awareness in the community on the importance of early childhood and available resources. (Annex of identified publications by Yayasan MENDAKI)

In MENDAKI, we believe that a healthy ecosystem of support is needed to support and maximise young children's learning, and this begins at home. Parental involvement is crucial. The Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG LEADS) found that factors such as positive parental control (e.g., setting boundaries, enforcing rules) and parents acting as positive role models could help in facilitating a child's ability to exercise self-control in daily lives and regulate their behaviours.⁷ This can eventually lead to achieving better self-regulation as the child grows older. There should be aspirations and expectations of parents on their child's abilities by empowering parents to be their children's first teacher, nurturer, and partner. This is a key strategy that will help young children to have a strong foundation for their schooling years and for life. As an education partner in this journey, we hope to facilitate strong home-school-community partnerships to create and sustain a conducive learning and enriching home environment to support a child's healthy development and achieve our vision of building a community of success.



⁶ Ministry of Education (2022). Speech by Dr Maliki Osman, Second Minister for Education for Bapa Sepanjang Hayat "Dads' Role in Education" Forum at Lifelong Learning Institute. <https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/speeches/20220918-speech-by-dr-maliki-osman-second-minister-for-education-for-bapa-sepanjang-hayat-dads-role-in-education-forum-at-lifelong-learning-institute>

⁷ Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG LEADS), Centre for Family and Population Research, National University of Singapore. <https://fass.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/sgleads/>

Annex

1. One of School Ready's publications & learning resources: My Early Adventures



2. MENDAKI Baby PlayKit



Website:

<https://bit.ly/BabyPlayKit>

Video:

<https://bit.ly/BabyPlayKitVid>

3. PlayKit: A starter pack filled with activities to encourage bonding between parents and children aged 0-6 years old.



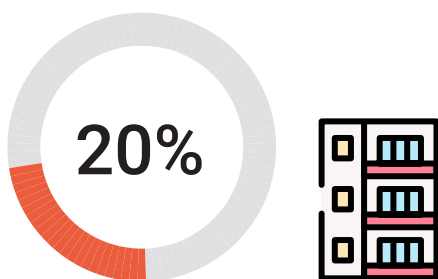
4. My Tinker Kit: contains three individual sets of educational games such as rainbow optics box, Strawbees sculptures and various cardboard building kits.



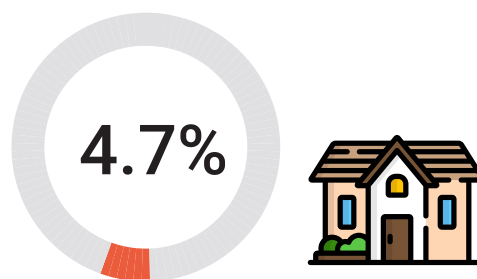
DID YOU KNOW?

Impact of COVID-19

Loss of employment

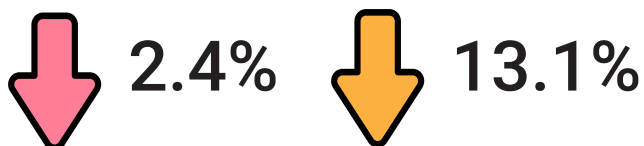


20% of those living in rental HDBs had someone in their households lost a job



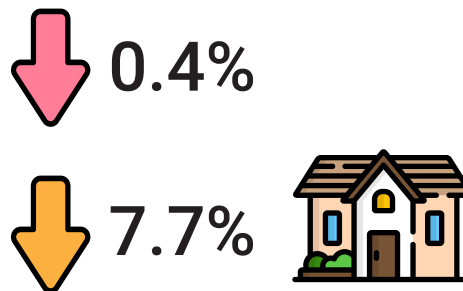
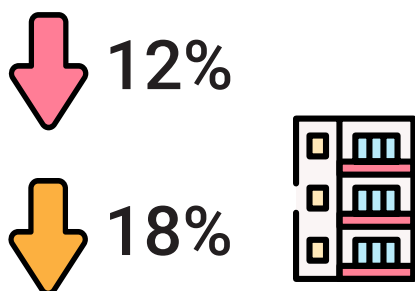
4.7% of those living condo and landed had someone in their households lost a job

Decrease in family income (overall)



2.4% of households had severe decrease in family income, and 13.1% had moderate decrease in income.

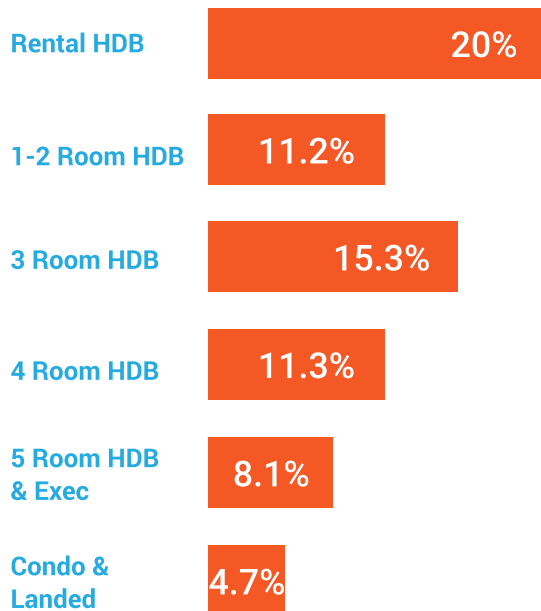
Decrease in family income (by housing type)



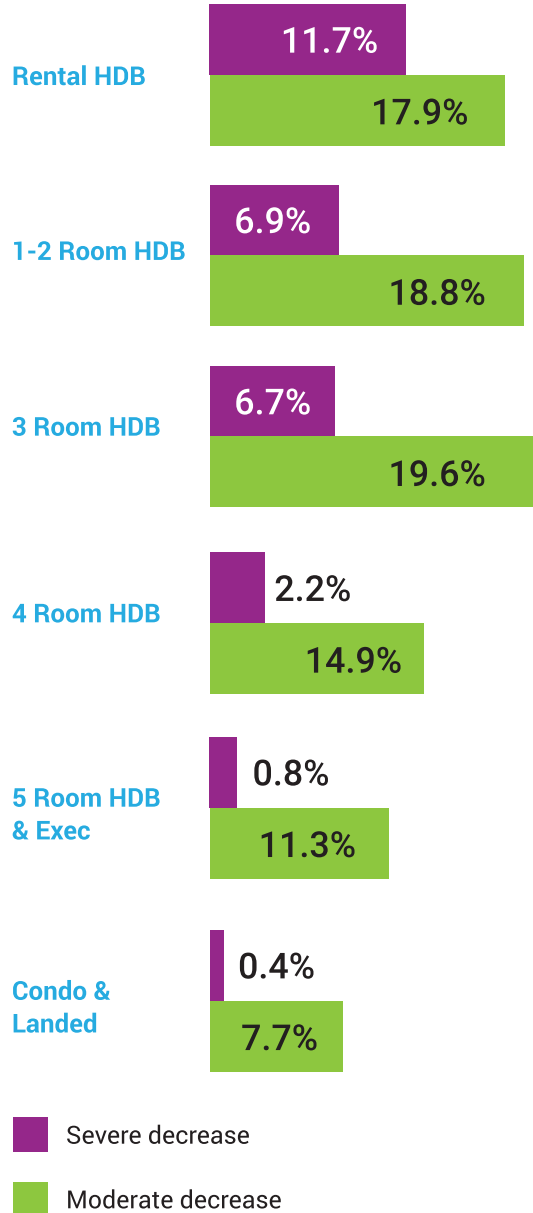
Severe decrease Moderate decrease

Source: National University of Singapore, Singapore. (2022). Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study Research Update Issue 5.

% of families who have at least one member facing employment loss during COVID-19

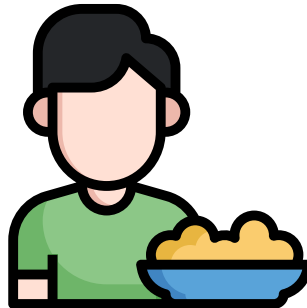
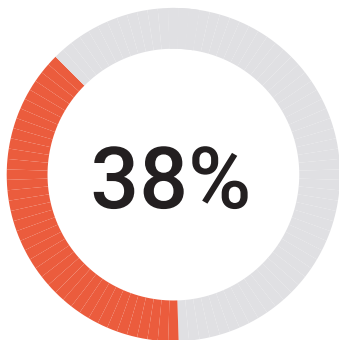


% of families who faced income loss during COVID-19

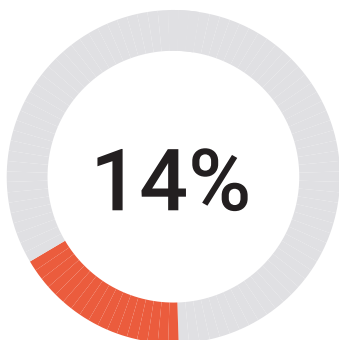


Source: National University of Singapore, Singapore. (2022) Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study Research Update Issue 5.

Food insecurity



Most children have sufficient food to eat, but about 38% of households in rented HDBs and 1-2 room flats reported not having enough food and did not have money to get more.



About 14% in rented HDB and 1-2 room flats reported child not eating enough food.

% of primary caregivers who reported that they faced food insecurity

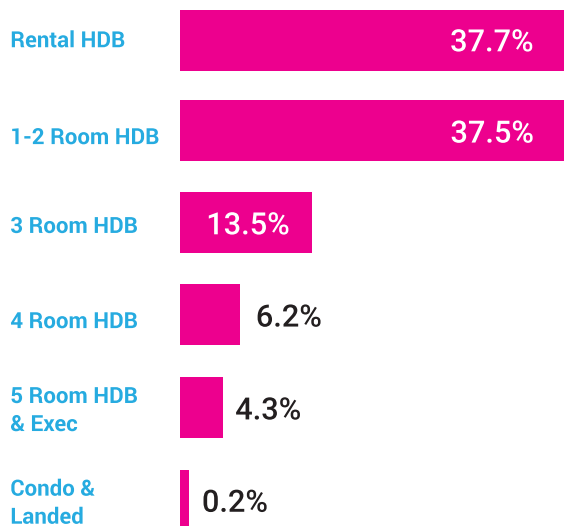
We worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more



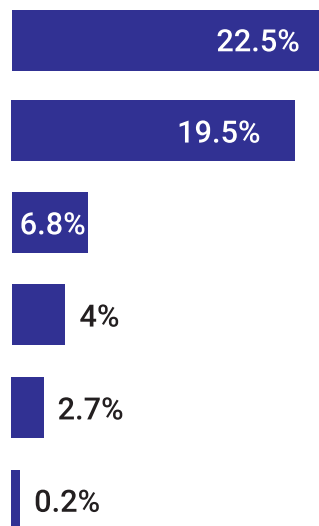
Rental HDB	33.2%
1-2 Room HDB	27%
3 Room HDB	10%
4 Room HDB	5.2%
5 Room HDB & Exec	3.7%
Condo & Landed	0.3%

Source: National University of Singapore, Singapore. (2021) Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study Research Update Issue 3.

The food that we bought was just not enough, and we didn't have money to get more.



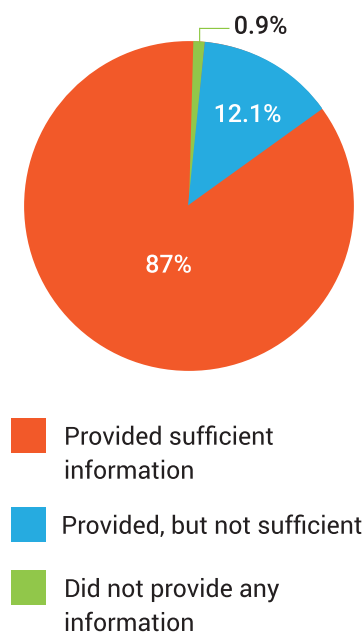
We couldn't afford to eat balanced meals.



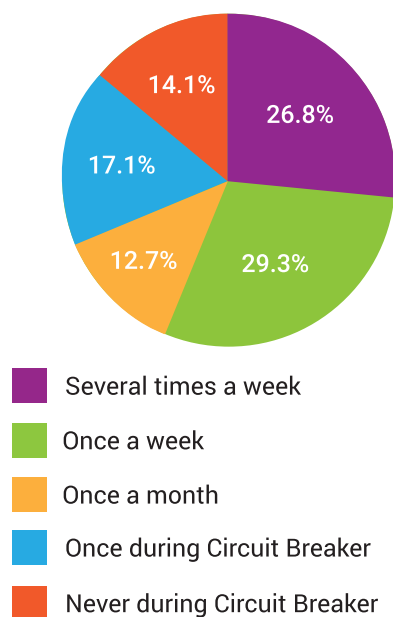
Source: National University of Singapore, Singapore. (2021) Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study Research Update Issue 3.

Home-Based Learning

Did child's school provide sufficient information about home-based learning?



How often did child and/or parents have regular contact with teachers?



Source: National University of Singapore, Singapore. (2022). Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study Research Update Issue 5.

Great Expectations: Importance of Positive Parental Expectations on Children's Development



Maybank Islamic-Yayasan MENDAKI Digital Headstart for Students laptop distribution ceremony, Auditorium at Woods Square, June 2022



Dr Ting Ming Hwa
Principal Research Specialist
Programme Evaluation Office
Yayasan MENDAKI

Dr Ting Ming Hwa is a Principal Research Specialist who oversees the evaluation of programmes run by M³ agencies. He has a diverse publication record ranging from the inter-generational transmission of criminality, the use of machine learning in predicting recidivism, geopolitical competition for rare earth elements to international relations theories.

Great Expectations can be described as a *bildungsroman* as it traces Pip's transition from "a common-labouring boy" to a gentleman with the help of an anonymous benefactor. The anonymous benefactor had great expectations of Pip in becoming a gentleman and he did eventually become one. Based on a prima facie reading of this text¹, it appears to show the existence of a positive link between having great expectations and a positive outcome, something that was also observed in the evaluation of the KelasMateMatika (KMM) programme.²

Overview of the KMM programme

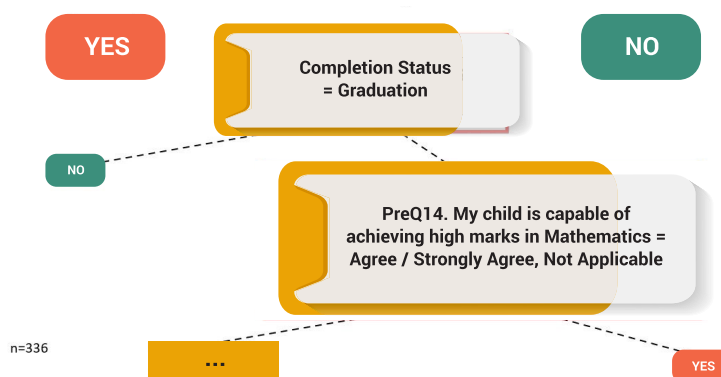
KMM is a parent and child programme that promotes children's learning of basic numeracy concepts through games and activities, which have been designed to nurture higher confidence, communication, and critical thinking skills in young children. The programme was piloted in 2018 at three community centres (Marsiling, Nee Soon Central and Pasir Ris East). It has since been expanded to eight M³@Townships³, targeting low-income Malay families with preschool children between the ages of four and six years old.⁴ KMM was introduced when it was identified that the mathematical performance of Malay students at the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) had room for improvement.

As part of the on-going efforts to ensure that M³ programmes are data-driven and evidence-based, the KMM programme was evaluated to ascertain if there were any links between this intervention and the likelihood of children being deemed school ready. In the current context, a child is deemed school-ready if he has no contact with early intervention programmes such as Learning Support Programme (LSP) and/or Learning Support Math (LSM) Programme. Prior to the start of the intervention, parents were asked to complete a pre-perception survey asking about their attitudes and perceptions on several questions ranging from their perceived importance of mathematics in daily life, their child's ability to understand mathematical concepts and achieve good grades in this subject, and the role of parents and teachers in promoting mathematical learning among pre-school children.

Data analysis

Recursive partitioning was used to analyse the pre-perception survey data for the cohort of students who started school in 2021 (n = 336). To minimise potential overfitting, 80% of the data was used for training and the remaining 20% for testing. The train/test split was used to increase the likelihood of the results being generalisable, an important consideration given the relatively small size of this dataset. The findings indicated that among students who registered for KMM, graduating from KMM (defined as having a 75 percent attendance rate) was most closely linked with a child's school readiness and that for those who did not graduate, high parental expectations of their children's mathematical abilities increased their likelihood of being school ready when they enter Primary 1.

Decision Tree for Predicting School Readiness



¹ It can be argued that whatever Pip lost in terms of wealth and social standing eventually was more than made up for by his personal moral and ethical growth and development. Perhaps parents should read *Great Expectations* to their children and reach their own conclusions. After all, research has shown that reading to children is beneficial to their development! For instance, see Niklas et al. (2016) and Gaiman (2013).

² Niklas, F., Cohnssen, C., & Tayler, C. (2016). The Sooner, the Better: Early Reading to Children. SAGE Open, 6(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244016672715>

Gaiman, N. (2013). Why our future depends on libraries, reading and daydreaming: The Reading Agency Lecture. The Guardian.

³ M³ is a collaborative effort between Muis, MENDAKI and MESRA to harness each other's strengths and resources.

⁴ Goh, Y.H. (2019). Mendaki Pairs with A*Star Unit to Help Kids Starting School, The Straits Times, <https://headtopics.com.sg/mendaki-pairs-with-a-star-unit-to-help-kids-starting-school-7039629>

As noted previously, the strongest predictor of a child's school readiness was the completion of KMM, meaning that children who did not complete the intervention (did not attend 75% of KMM sessions) were more likely to require learning support when they start school. In addition, if a child was unable to complete the intervention, and parents indicated that they had low expectations of their child's mathematical abilities in the pre-perception survey, then these children were more likely to require additional learning support in school. Conversely, parents who indicated that they had high expectations in their child's mathematical abilities, was linked with the child having a lower probability of needing additional learning support in school.

The relationship between parental expectations and children's cognitive and academic development.

As defined by Yamamoto, 'parental expectations' can be understood as, "realistic beliefs or judgments that parents have about their children's future achievement as reflected in course grades, highest

level of schooling attained, or college attendance". Parental expectations in this context are based not only on the types of resources available to support a certain level of achievement but also on the parent's assessment of their child's academic capabilities.⁵ In other words, if parents have a growth mindset and think that their children can match their expectations, it may set the foundation to promote a virtuous circle.

For instance, local research has shown that among low-income households, maternal support and expectations were positively associated with good academic performance.⁶ Lin's research into the specificity of parent ratings of children's numeracy skills noted that aggregated parent ratings showed strong association of their child's overall performance when undertaking numeracy tests.⁷ Indeed, there is a growing body of literature indicating positive associations between parental educational expectations and a child's academic achievement. Studies which examine the relationship between parental expectations and a child's positive future

academic performance could be traced back to the 1960s.⁸ For instance, Sy and Schulenberg found that parental expectations at entry into kindergarten predicted a child's reading and math proficiency upon entry into first grade.⁹ Furthermore, a recent meta-analysis conducted by Piquant and Ebeling reveals that positive parental expectations were linked with better academic achievements. The meta-analysis highlights the importance of transmitting "positive expectations to the offspring," which was found to have exerted a stronger effect than SES.¹⁰ Positive parental expectations play an important part in influencing a child's academic performance because these parents are the ones who are more likely to take a greater interest in their children's education, as well as ensuring a conducive home environment for learning.¹¹

It may also be that positive parental academic expectations can influence children's perceptions towards directed and intentional behaviours that allow them to persist and overcome problems when they are exposed to new and challenging concepts.¹² This is important as they could be expected to be exposed to more challenging materials as they continue their academic journey.¹³

5 Yamamoto, Y., & Holloway, S. D. (2010). Parental expectations and children's academic performance in sociocultural context. *Educational Psychology Review*, 22(3), 189–214. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-010-9121-z>

6 Cheang, C. J. Y., & Goh, E. C. L. (2019). Why some children from poor families do well-an in-depth analysis of positive deviance cases in Singapore. *International journal of qualitative studies on health and well-being*, 13(sup1), 1563431. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2018.1563431>

7 Lin, J., Napoli, A.R., Schmitt, S.A. & Purpura, D.J. (2021). The Relation between Parent Rating and Direct Assessments of Preschoolers' Numeracy Skills. *Learning and Instruction*, 71, 101375. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0959475219303263>

8 Douglas, J.W.B. (1969). *The Home and the School: A Study of Ability and Attainment in the Primary School*. Panther Modern Society.

9 Sy, S. R., & Schulenberg, J. E. (2005). Parent beliefs and children's achievement trajectories during the transition to school in Asian American and European American families. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 29(6), 505–515. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01650250500147329>

10 Pinquant, M. & Ebeling, M. (2020). Parental Educational Expectations and Academic Achievement in Children and Adolescents - a Meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 32, 463–480. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-019-09506-z>

11 Loughlin-Presnal, J., & Bierman, K. L. (2017). How do parent expectations promote child academic achievement in early elementary school? A test of three mediators. *Developmental psychology*, 53(9), 1694–1708. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000369>

12 Briley, D. A., Harden, K. P., & Tucker-Drob, E. M. (2014). Child characteristics and parental educational expectations: evidence for transmission with transaction. *Developmental psychology*, 50(12), 2614–2632. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038094>

13 Schneider, B., V. Keesler and L. Morlock. (2010). The effects of family on children's learning and socialisation. *The Nature of Learning: Using Research to Inspire Practice*, 251–284. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264086487-13-en>

Simpkins, S. D., Fredricks, J. A., & Eccles, J. S. (2012). Charting the Eccles' expectancy-value model from mothers' beliefs in childhood to youths' activities in adolescence. *Developmental psychology*, 48(4), 1019–1032. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027468>

However, what is clear in the current literature is that the link between educational expectations and academic achievement exists, even after controlling for family and individual characteristics.¹⁴ In sum, the presence of the positive effect of parental expectations on a child's subsequent academic achievement is supported by a large body of research work. The results of the current evaluation also highlighted that such a relationship also played a pivotal role in predicting whether children were deemed to be school ready.

Limitations of this evaluation

First, the model is intended to be used as a predictive tool to identify individuals who were less likely to be deemed school ready. The primary contribution this analysis makes is to help policymakers assess whether existing administrative data can help in identifying preschool children who may benefit from additional assistance. Claims of causation are neither made nor inferred. At most, it could be said that completing KMM is predictive of a child's school readiness amongst those who registered for KMM and graduated. This is

because no causal relationships can be established as latent variables such as children's existing attitudes to learning, might play a role in shaping a certain outcome but were not measured. Hence, even though the model identified how parental responses to other questions were associated with whether children were more or less likely to require learning support in school, the current analysis was intentional in not focusing on them. This is because the primary objective is to identify the key variables associated with predicting a child's school readiness so that they could be targeted in a more intentional manner, as opposed to adopting a more diffused approach of taking *all* variables into consideration concurrently. Such an approach also accounted for prevailing and inherent organisational resource limitations and explained why a more macro approach in identifying and addressing risk factors was adopted. In addition, the evaluation could also be strengthened by the inclusion of a control group consisting of children who did not register for KMM. Having a control group is important because it helps us to better isolate the effects of KMM on a child's school readiness, something that Ministry of Education is helping to facilitate.

Conclusion

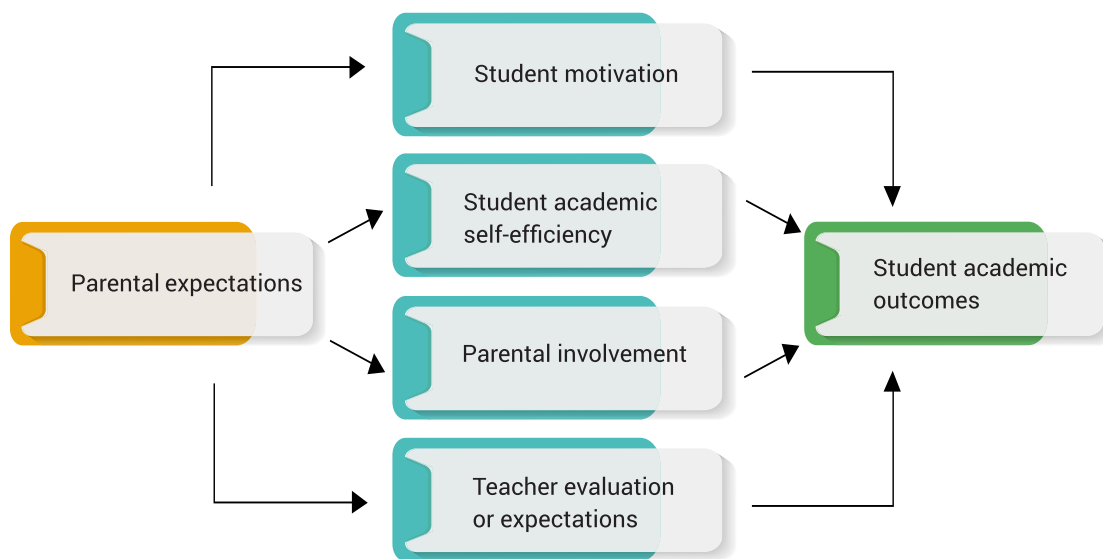
This evaluation study has highlighted the importance of having positive parental expectations of their children's ability to excel mathematically, and why it is important for parents to have a growth mindset. A growth mindset allows them to view their children's mathematical abilities as something that can be moulded, instead of being fixed. With this positive mindset, parents will then be more likely to devote attention to helping their children gain mastery as they perceive that their efforts can make a meaningful difference. Much research has been done in this area, and so can be confident that focusing on cultivating a growth mindset in parents is beneficial. After all, as noted by Henry Ford: "Whether you think you can or think you can't, you're right."

¹⁴ Alexander, K. L., Entwisle, D. R., & Bedinger, S. D. (1994). When expectations work: Race and socioeconomic differences in school performance. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 57(4), 283–299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2787156>



DID YOU KNOW?

Mediators between parental outcomes and students' academic outcomes



Source: Yamamoto, Y. & Holloway S.D. (2010). Parental Expectations and Children's Academic Performance in Sociocultural Context. *Educational Psychology Review*, 22, 189-214. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-010-9121-z>

4 mediators linked to high parental expectations

1. Child's internalization of parents' valuation of achievement

- Refers to the communicated values that parents' place on their child's achievement(s) which the child eventually internalizes.¹⁵
- A longitudinal study of 884 children aged 6 to 13 years when the study began demonstrated the long-lasting effect of parental expectations on children's expectations 5 years later even after controlling for demographic variables and children's previous achievement scores. Parental expectations also influenced their children's later achievement scores via the mediating effect of children's expectations.¹⁶

2. Child's higher competency beliefs

- Refers to conveying positive messages about their child's abilities and capabilities which in turn enhances student's competency beliefs and sense of efficacy about their academic trajectory.¹⁷

¹⁵ Haller, A.O., & Portes, A. (1973). Status Attainment Processes. *Sociology of Education*, 46(1), 51. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2112205>

¹⁶ Rutchick, A. M., Smyth, J. M., Lopoo, L. M., & Dusek, J. B. (2009). Great expectations: The biasing effects of reported child behavior problems on educational expectancies and subsequent academic achievement. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 28(3), 392–413. <https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2009.28.3.392>

¹⁷ Wigfield, A., Eccles, J. S., & Rodriguez, D. (1998). The development of children's motivation in school contexts. *Review of Research in Education*, 23, 73. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1167288>

- A study conducted by Benner and Mistry (2007) tested the mediating role of student competency beliefs among 522 youth aged 9 to 16 years old, most of whom were African Americans and Latinos from low-income families. Path analyses demonstrated that maternal expectations were associated with student's perceptions of their academic skills and ability to learn new concepts in math and reading.¹⁸

3. More intensive and effective parental involvement

- Refers to the greater parental involvement in children's academic activities, the extent and quality of help with homework, communication with the teacher, participation in school activities and facilitation of cognitively stimulating activities.¹⁹
- That, parents who have higher expectations about their child's educational attainment tend to be more engaged in achievement-related activities, including reading to their children, sending them to extracurricular lessons, and monitoring their academic progress.²⁰

4. More optimistic and positive teacher perceptions of child's capabilities

- Refers to teachers' perceptions and evaluations of the child. Teachers who perceive parents lack high expectations for their children may also raise their own expectations for those students and increase educational commitment to them.²¹
- Teachers that hold high academic expectations for a student are likely to provide a more positive and challenging learning environment and opportunities for that individual.²²



¹⁸ Benner, A. D., & Mistry, R. S. (2007), Congruence of mother and teacher educational expectations and low-income youth's academic competence, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.99.1.140>

¹⁹ Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., & Sandler, H. M. (1997), Why do parents become involved in their children's education?, *Review of Educational Research*, <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543067001003>

Sy, S., & Schulenberg, J. (2005), Parent beliefs and children's achievement trajectories during the transition to school in Asian American and European American families, *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01650250500147329>

²⁰ Grolnick, W. S., Benjet, C., Kurowski, C. O., & Apostoleris, N. H. (1997), Predictors of parent involvement in children's schooling, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.89.3.538>

Halle, T. G., Kurtz-Costes, B., & Mahoney, J. L. (1997), Family influences on school achievement in low-income, African American children, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.89.3.527>

Sy, S., & Schulenberg, J. (2005), Parent beliefs and children's achievement trajectories during the transition to school in Asian American and European American families, *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01650250500147329>

²¹ Bandura, A., Barbaranelli, C., Caprara, G. V., & Pastorelli, C. (1996), Multifaceted impact of self-efficacy beliefs on academic functioning, *Child Development*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1131888>

²² Weinstein, R. S. (2004), *Reaching higher the power of expectations in schooling*, Harvard University Press

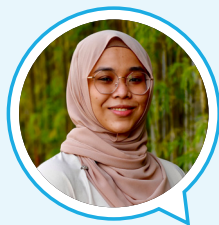
The Value of Social Networks in Shaping the Attitudes and Behaviours of Malay-Muslim Fathers



Amazing Read @ Heartlands, Pasir Ris East Community Club, October 2022



Dr Mohamad Shamsuri Bin Juhari
Research Fellow
Institute of Policy Studies



Sufia Maisarah Roslan
Research Assistant
Institute of Policy Studies

Dr Mohamad Shamsuri Juhari is a Research Fellow in the Society and Culture Department at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

Prior to his foray into the field of Research, Sham had acquired a wide range of work experiences in the education service, ranging from classroom teaching to senior management and leadership positions in various academic institutions. He has taught students across diverse backgrounds and abilities, from at-risk youths to those in the Gifted Education Programme. Sham has also designed and facilitated curriculum at the Secondary, International Baccalaureate Diploma, Undergraduate and Masters levels. Following a previous portfolio where he headed the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs, Sham's scope of research at IPS focuses on issues pertaining to the local Malay-Muslim community, specifically in relation to Identity, Family and Education. Sham received his PhD in Education from the University of Birmingham (UK). He also holds a BA and MA in Sociology from National University of Singapore (NUS) as well as a Post-Graduate Diploma in Education from National Institute of Education.

Sufia Maisarah Roslan was the Vice President (Language and Culture) in the NUS Malay Language Society. She is currently a Research Assistant at the IPS, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. She also has a deep interest in issues pertaining to the Malay community in Singapore.

At the inaugural *Bapa Sepanjang Hayat* education forum organised by the Centre for Fathering (CFF) on 18 September 2022, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Dr Mohamad Maliki Osman emphasised the importance of fathers' involvement in their children's daily activities. He mentioned this is especially crucial in the age of the Internet and social media where children are exposed to countless influences and information and would require constant guidance growing up.¹

However, our recent study at IPS tells us that factors influencing fathering practices require greater examination. Specifically, findings from this research project focusing on "Parenting Challenges Faced by Malay-Muslim Fathers in Singapore" reveal that social networks play a crucial role in moulding attitudes and behaviours of fathers from this ethnic group.²

Chua and Ng reported that social networks serve as sources of influence and information that shape individuals' worldview.

Our study on Malay fathers extends these findings to indicate that a father's membership to low quality networks will render him less effective in nurturing his children.³



In addition, the research provides evidence to show that interactions with their surrounding social networks heavily impacted the way Malay-Muslim men understood and internalised their identities and perceived expectations as a parent.

In the context of this study, social networks refer to groups of individuals that Malay-Muslim fathers often turn to for support and guidance. Making up the sampling group for this study were fathers from across income brackets and education levels. For most of these respondents, the social networks that they accessed were typically made up of family and friends. Members of such networks would usually include close relatives such as parents, parents-in-law, spouses as well as friends who were also fathers. The study also includes respondents whose networks provided opportunities to interact with professionals – such as educators, counsellors, healthcare specialists as well as *asatizah*.

Our study finds that the quality of social networks has been instrumental in influencing fathering practices.

Better-quality networks are social circles that have allowed their members to value-add their own parenting knowledge.

On the other hand, low-quality networks are the ones which deterred members from wanting to develop more positive parenting traits and subsequently upgrading themselves into becoming better fathers. During the interviews, multiple respondents acknowledged that their learning process took place naturally as they inadvertently observed and interacted with those closest to them. In discussing this, many admitted that it is important for them to be surrounded by individuals who can provide them with additional parenting knowledge and assistance.⁴

"The blind leading the blind"

Some respondents provided feedback that in the case of fathers whose social networks were "low or limited in quality", the lack of value-added fathering knowledge had developed into a case of "the blind leading the blind." A few even admitted that they had implemented

¹ Irwan, H. (2022). Golongan bapa pelajar cara untuk main peranan lebih aktif dalam pendidikan anak. Berita Harian. <https://berita.mediacorp.sg/singapura/golongan-bapa-pelajar-cara-untuk-main-peranan-lebih-aktif-dalam-pendidikan-anak-691721>

² Juhari, M.S. (2022). Knowledge, attitude & practice: An exploratory investigation of parenting challenges facing Malay-Muslim fathers in Singapore. Fathers.com.sg. <https://fathers.com.sg/malay-muslim-fathers-study/>

³ Chua, V & Ng, Irene Y.H. (2015). Unequal returns to social capital: The study of Malays in Singapore through a network lens. Asian Ethnicity, 16(4): 480–497. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2015.1004874>

⁴ Similarly, other respondents acknowledged that for one to be a "good father", the individual must "mix around with the right people".

parenting practices upon the instruction of “their more knowledgeable” elders or peers despite suspecting these to be “not always beneficial” in the nurturing of their children. For example, a respondent narrated that he was advised by healthcare professionals who attended to his newborn that only babies above six months old could physiologically digest plain water. However, his parents contradicted such instructions and told him that it was fine to feed babies under six months plain water as they had done so with him without causing any harm.

Some fathers in the study also recounted on how others refused to accept and adopt positive parenting attitudes and practices advocated by specialised non-profit agencies. This was due to a stigma towards any form of help-seeking behaviour, thereby discouraging Malay-Muslim fathers from adhering to the advice given by such agencies. A few respondents readily admitted that the influence of their social circles was so strong that they would be uncomfortable seeking readily available assistance on family matters from professional counsellors and would rather defer to the advice given by their own social networks. According to an interviewee, his reluctance stems from his network-projected view that professional counselling is “a waste of time”. Another respondent emphasised that such a perception becomes hardened when the individual’s ego and misplaced pride is thrown into the mix.

Economic background and education level

One of the factors that determined the quality of a father’s parenting skills is economic background.

Respondents from the lower-income group acknowledged that their social circles were limited, and this might not be in their favour when it came to opportunities at enhancing their knowledge on fathering. In contrast, the study finds that the social networks of respondents with higher income backgrounds typically extended to include experts and professionals from various fields – placing these fathers in a position to receive more value-added advice on parenting issues. This was apparent when a respondent who is a high-income earner, elaborated on how he was able to confide and seek advice from friends in his networks when it came to selecting a school for his child, based on each school’s programmes.

In the same vein, the research tells us that a father’s education level may be a factor that decides the quality of his social networks.

The parenting (or lack of parenting) knowledge received from his network can positively change or negatively harden his attitude on being a father.

For instance, when asked for his opinion on what is needed for an individual to become a better father, a respondent who is a Vocational and Industrial Training Board graduate lamented that it all depends on the father’s access to parenting knowledge. He opined that those who are highly educated will have a better chance at acquiring fathering knowledge from the people around him thus the likelihood of him becoming a better father. Nevertheless,

another respondent, a degree holder, felt that what is more important is a father’s openness to receiving parenting knowledge from those around him.

Loss of communication skills

The research findings also indicate that low or limited quality networks posed a challenge to Malay-Muslim fathers developing skills that are relevant for establishing healthy and open communication with their children. During the interviews, a few fathers described how their own fathers, supported by consensus shown by others in their social circle, had inculcated in them what the latter deemed to be “traditional fatherly behaviours”. These behaviours include projecting a cold and stern demeanour to exude the persona of a strict disciplinarian. Unfortunately, such traits often led to instances where communication “blind spots” occur, resulting in the father’s overestimation of his ability to communicate effectively and subsequently understand the needs of his children. For instance, it was revealed that the benchmark used by some fathers to gauge their effectiveness as communicators was in their misguided perception that their children had always acquiesced to their advice and instructions. One father proudly announced what he felt to be strength in his competency to communicate by virtue of his daughter always abiding by his commands. However, the picture is very different when delving into the interview responses of the adult children in the sampling group. The study discovered that many of these children did not share the view that their fathers were good communicators. In fact, they revealed that growing up, they did

not have enough trust in their fathers to approach the latter for advice when dealing with deeply interpersonal matters such as romantic relationships. These children highlighted that they turned more to their mothers to fill the role of a trusted confidante.

Upon analysis, these are factors that create emotional distance between the father and his child. Over time, the gulf becomes wider as the parent remains unaware of or are unable to narrow the gulf between the two. The proverbial generation gap then begins to develop.

Negative gender ideologies

Social networks also influence how fathers allocate gender roles in the family. When respondents become entrenched in negative beliefs propagated by their networks, a cycle of gender-biased expectations would arise within their families. For instance, while fathers in the study expressed that they desired to be more involved in the nurturing of their children, many nevertheless agreed that the tasks relating to childcare and managing the household were better off in the hands of mothers. In this respect, most respondents viewed their role in the family as breadwinners first and foremost, following what they believe to be societal expectations espoused by their networks. This is similar to most other societies where cultural norms also dictate that fathers act as secondary caregivers in the household.⁵ This set of beliefs was also made clear in the study with some respondents admitting that they still preferred the traditional roles of income-earner father and stay-at-home

mother. Unfortunately, while they would often strive their best in providing financially for their loved ones, they left behind “gaps” in childcare responsibilities, which they then expected their wives to fulfil. This is at the expense of the latter who themselves might be holding full-time jobs. Such beliefs differed when compared with other fathers in the group who embraced role diversity and a more gender-equitable household. As such, while our findings indicate that most fathers have been accepting towards changing societal dynamics such as dual-income households, traditional beliefs negatively reinforced by their social networks still dictated the kind of roles that they take up in the family and the expectations that women to take up the main load of child-rearing and handling of the household continue to persist.

Recommendations

Our study has indicated that more can be done to further enhance the quality of Malay-Muslim fathers’ social networks. This in turn will positively impact their parenting practices.

While national initiatives such as *Dads for Life* promote the message that fathers must be more actively involved in their children’s lives, the message might come across as too generic. More can be tailored for those from the Malay-Muslim community especially younger fathers. As this group is still learning and growing into their role as heads of their families, it will be much easier for them to adapt and adopt new approaches to becoming more effective fathers.

For example, younger Malay-Muslim fathers are more susceptible to social media messaging that encourages father-child bonding. In fact, some interviewees suggested utilising social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube to spread parenting advice and tips. Links to these online posts can then be disseminated via group messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram.

One respondent further suggested that a media “hotline” specifically for Malay-Muslim fathers be made available so that these parents can contact experts directly and ask about specific issues related to fathering.

Another respondent highlighted the need for more media representation portraying loving and responsible Malay-Muslim fathers in television and radio programmes so that these can become exemplars in encouraging parents to be more involved in their children’s lives.

Other suggestions include engaging respected experts such as *asatizah* and relevant professionals into making themselves more approachable, personable, and subsequently “getting down” to the level of the layperson. In fact, a good mark of achievement for these resource persons could be their ability to get Malay-Muslim fathers to accept them as part of their accessed networks, thereby

⁵ Lim, A. (2021). Confucian Masculinity: State Advocacy of Active Fatherhood in Singapore. *Men and Masculinities*, 24(1), 46–63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X19867389>

enhancing the quality of the latter's social circles.

These recommendations should be initiated while awaiting plans for the establishment of a Parenting School that will provide for a more holistic approach in disseminating parenting knowledge for Malay/Muslim parents. Such an institution follows the recommendations voiced by several Malay Muslim Organisations since 2012.⁶

Conclusion

While this discussion has yet to involve other factors such as the role of Islam in shaping the quality of Muslim fathers, it has nevertheless shown the importance of a father's involvement in his child's development. Not only will it serve to nurture and prepare a young life for a successful future,

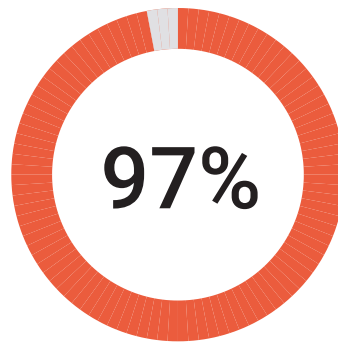
it will also pave the way for how the next generation will raise their children. While other aspects will play a role in determining how Malay-Muslim fathers effectively carry out their parenting roles, this study ultimately tells us that enhancing the quality of these fathers' social networks will not only benefit our Singaporean ethnic community but also our larger society.



⁶ Association of Muslim Professionals. (2012). Social Panel Strategy and Recommendations at a Glance. 3rd Convention Journal, 67-84. https://www.amp.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/7-Section-4_Social.pdf

Impact of fathers on the lives of their children

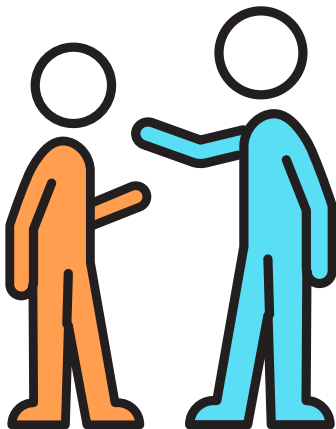
Public perception on the importance of a father's role in nurturing his child



97% of Singaporeans are of the view that a father plays an important role in his child's life.

Source: Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, Singapore. (2009). Singapore Fatherhood Public Perception Survey.

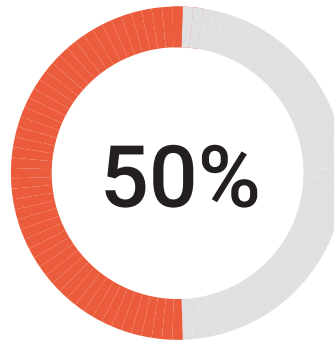
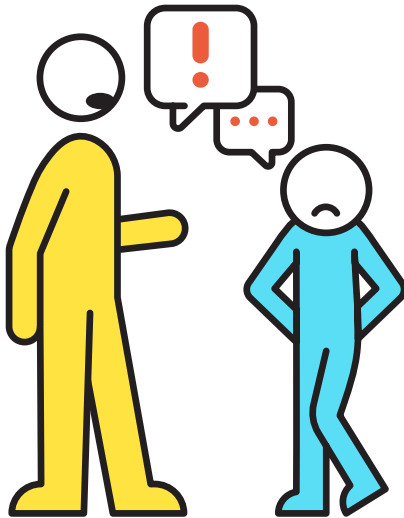
The importance of a father's involvement during adolescence



The involvement of fathers in their children's lives has a profound impact on the latter's self-esteem, sense of adequacy, interpersonal relations and attitudes towards schooling, especially during the age of adolescence.

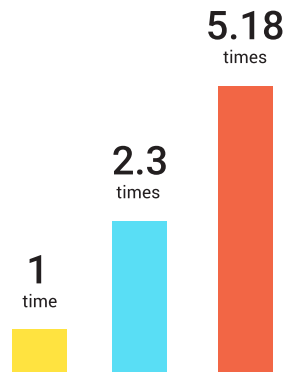
Source: Ang, Rebecca P. (2006.) Effects of Parenting Style on Personal and Social Variables for Asian Adolescents. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry.

The relationship between failed parenting and juvenile delinquency



Half of our young offenders were from divorced, single or reconstituted families and were reported as having **had poor relationships with their fathers.**

Source: Ministry of Social and Family Development and Singapore Prisons Service, Singapore. (2013) Juvenile Delinquents Study.



Children whose parents committed drug offences are 5.18 times as likely to be convicted of an offence themselves, compared with 2.3 times for children whose parents committed non-drug-related offences.

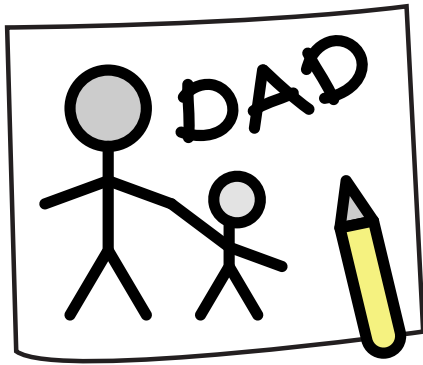
Source: Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) and the National Council of Social Service (NCSS). (2020). Understanding the Intergenerational Transmission of Criminality in Singapore. MSF and NCSS Occasional Paper.



Children whose parents had committed drug offences have comparatively worse life outcomes than those whose parents had committed non-drug offences.

Source: Tan, T. (2021). Singapore Landmark Study Finds Children of Convicted Offenders More Likely to Get into Trouble with the Law, The Straits Times, Singapore.

Implications of positive fathering within the Malay-Muslim Community (MMC)



In Malay families, research has found that the paternal parenting style is more influential than the maternal parenting style in deciding adolescent outcomes. This tells us of the importance of a Malay fathers' involvement in his children's lives.

Source: Ang, Rebecca P. (2006.) Effects of Parenting Style on Personal and Social Variables for Asian Adolescents. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 76(4), 503-511.



A Malay / Muslim Father's Role in His Children's Education



Mohammad Zahrin Abdullah with his daughter using a 3D pen to design various accessories for her statue, March 2022



Mohammad Zahrin Bin Abdullah
Chairman of Education Committee
Bapa Sepanjang Hayat

Mohammad Zahrin Abdullah has previously been posted to different posts in the Yayasan MENDAKI family for 13 years. Equipped with a Degree in Accounting and Finance and a Master's Degree in Business Administration, Zahrin has contributed to many Yayasan MENDAKI projects over the years including E.L.L.Y., Backyard Science and KEWL. Zahrin is also Bapa Sepanjang Hayat's Chairman of the Education Committee where he envisions fathers being involved in their children's education. Walking the talk, Zahrin involves Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) during his interactions with his two girls to get them hooked on learning.

Are fathers really that impactful?

The Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) conducted a Singapore Fatherhood Public Perception Survey in 2009. The study found that 97% of Singaporeans agree that fathers have a huge impact on the lives of their children. A more significant finding was when asked if fathers and mothers should share the responsibilities of bringing up children, 99% of respondents agreed.¹

The impact on the child's educational ability came up as the fifth-most influential factor that fathers have on their children. From here we can observe that there is a general sentiment amongst Singaporeans that fathers are indeed important and have a role to play.

When surveyed on a father's roles and responsibilities, 46% of respondents mentioned that fathers should play the role of the sole breadwinner and 18% of respondents mentioned that fathers should assist in their child's learning and education.² There is a need to provide fathers with the necessary tools to nurture and guide their children during their developmental years. However, the concept of learning and education should not be constrained to academic activities alone but should encompass a wide range of pursuits to nurture the holistic development of their children. This would mean that fathers would also need to consider the social, emotional, physical, mental, and intellectual growth of their child.

These findings were corroborated in a study conducted in 2013 by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) and the Singapore Prison Services (SPS) on criminal offences committed by youths aged 18 and below. In that study, it was found that half of the young offenders had a family background of separated parents, fragmented family structures or reconstituted families and the most worrying factor was that they were reported to have had poor relationships with their fathers.

More in-depth research on Malay fathers have shown that there are several attributes and aspects that make the roles and responsibilities of Malay fathers rather unique when compared with other ethnic groups. A study of paternal involvement among Malay-Muslim fathers

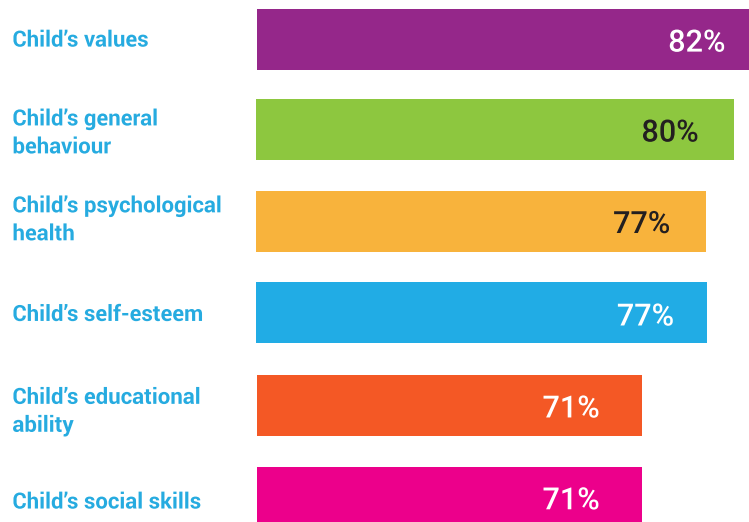
in Malaysia, highlighted that the father's educational qualifications, marital equality, and the number of children in the family affected the fathers' quality of involvement in their children's lives³.

The implications of these findings relating to the community at large is that the children's behaviour tend to reflect that of the parents. The best way to break the cycle would be educating the fathers on their responsibility to do so with the hope that the fathers inculcate better habits and not merely depend on a "do as I say, not as I do" mentality.

The definition of education

Education should not be limited to the academics. As John Dewey, American philosopher,

Fathers' Influence on the Following Aspects of Their Children



Base: n = 2,220

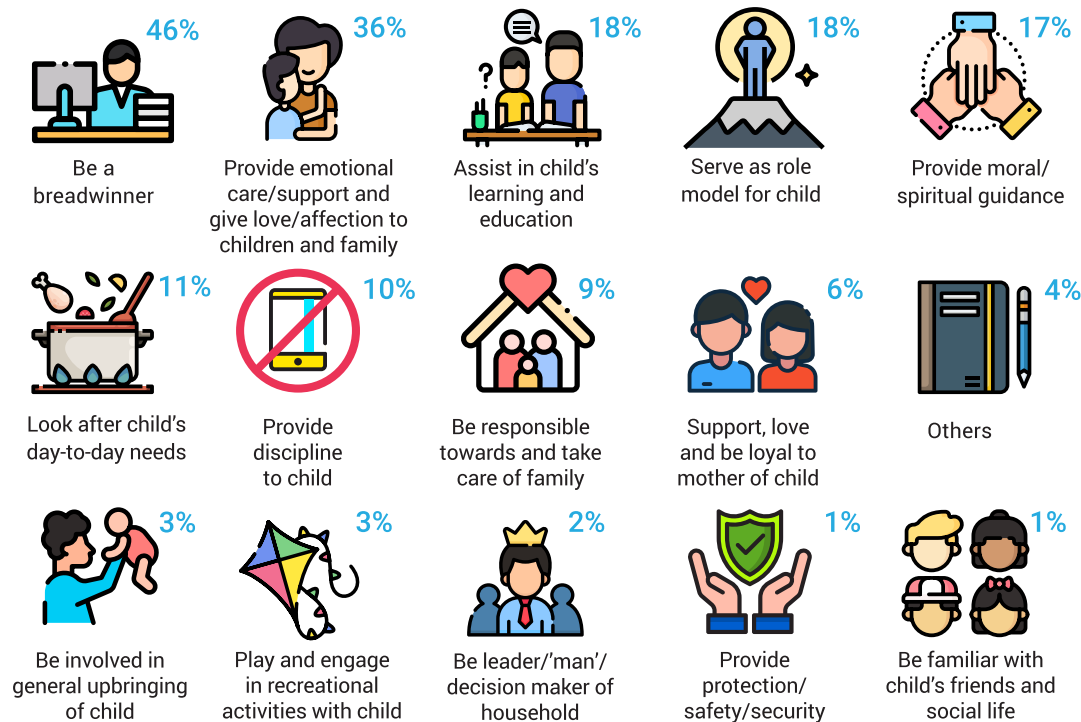
Source: Fatherhood Public Perception Survey 2009, MCYS.

¹ Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, Singapore. (2009). Singapore Fatherhood Public Perception Survey. <https://dadsforlife.sg/research/singapore-fatherhood-public-perception-survey-shows-that-singapore-dads-want-to-be-active-fathers/>

² Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, Singapore. (2009). Singapore Fatherhood Public Perception Survey. <https://dadsforlife.sg/research/singapore-fatherhood-public-perception-survey-shows-that-singapore-dads-want-to-be-active-fathers/>

³ Juhari, R., Yaacob, S., & Talib, M. (2010). Contributions of self, contextual and child characteristics on father involvement among Muslims in Malaysia. Proceedings from International Conference on Fatherhood in the 21st Century Asia: Research, Interventions, and Policies, Singapore.

Definition of a father's roles and responsibilities



Source: Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports. (2009). Fatherhood Public Perception Survey.

psychologist, and educational reformer once said, "Education is the development of all those capacities in the individual which will enable him to control his environment and fulfil his responsibilities".⁴

As such, the father's role is more than just ensuring that his child does well academically. This would also involve social skills such as interacting with others and may even extend to hobbies like fishing where soft skills like patience and even analytical and critical thinking skills may be developed. At *Bapa Sepanjang Hayat*, we believe that fathers should get involved in activities with their children where there are teachable moments for both. Children who have learnt to ride a bike from their father may internalise the acquired skill as a gift they would always remember.

Unknowningly, the child has also learnt to persevere through falling and getting back up again when learning how to ride a bike.

Knowledge transfer need not be linear or hierarchical - fathers can also learn from their children. In programmes where the child knows more than the father, the learning dynamics is a bit different. In 2020, MENDAKI SENSE ran a STEM programme where the father and his child (aged between 9 and 16 years) were paired up to build up a robot car from scratch and partake in a race with other participants.

It was observed that despite the lack of coding or IT skills that the fathers may have, they were not only enthusiastic about wanting

their child's robot car to do well in the race but also to make up for their lack of tech know-how with tenacious handyman skills such as drilling, gluing, screwing, and soldering despite not being adept in them either.

The children had a better foundation in the understanding of coding and programming than their fathers did due to their schools' focus on STEM learning which exposed them to coding at a young age. However, they had little to no knowledge of handyman skills. This collaborative learning between father and child sparked moments of inspirations where fathers were left impressed by how much their child knows

⁴ Koch, Donald F. (ed.) (1991). Lectures on Ethics, 1900 - 1901: John Dewey. Southern Illinois University Press.

about a robot car, despite never building one from scratch before. From the child's perspective, having their fathers referring to them for their knowledge was indeed surreal. The pairs that did well during the race tend to be those with fathers who were willing to learn something new and children who were willing to share what they know. This was opposed to pairs where fathers took the lead without asking for feedback or input from their children who tended to be passive throughout the course, not offering their ideas as they were not asked for them. As such knowledge sharing between father and child can be seen as a precursor to success.

This form of engagement can be replicated in other activities as well, as long there is a willingness to share and learn for both parties. Fathers need to look at "let's learn something together" activities as a platform where their child can learn life skills that are not taught in the classroom. Perhaps by engaging in such activities, fathers can witness the true potential of their children.

Bapa Sepanjang Hayat currently offers both STEM and non-STEM programmes where both father and child can take part to not only learn together but also learn from each other.

How Islam shapes the father's role

Dr Mohamad Shamsuri Juhari conducted a study in 2021 to identify the socio-cultural challenges preventing Singaporean Malay-Muslim fathers from carrying out their parenting duties effectively. The study was commissioned by the Centre for Fathering, AMP Singapore (Association of Muslim



Robotics with Dads, WIS@Changi, Dec 2022

Professionals), PPIS (Persatuan Pemudi Islam Singapura, or the Singapore Muslim Women's Association) and the Lutheran Community Care Services.

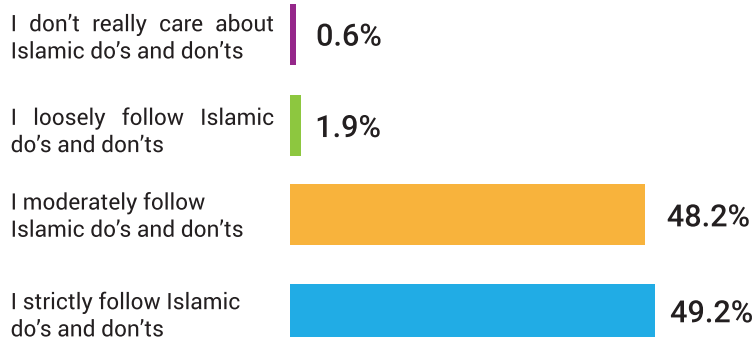
Out of the 528 respondents, 97.4% perceive themselves as moderately or strictly following Islamic dos and don'ts. In addition, 96.1% somewhat agree to strongly agree that they involve their children in religious activities or events⁵.

One of the key findings derived from the study was that Malay-Muslim fathers see Islam as a framework and moral guide on

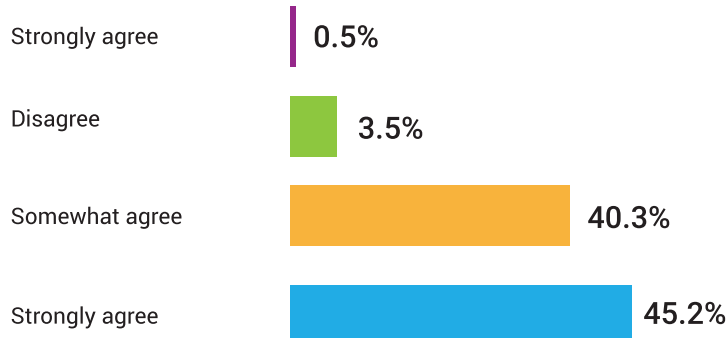
how to effectively fulfil their role as parents. This includes the belief that following the tenets of the faith meticulously will enable them to lead successful lives in this world and in the hereafter. However, they articulated different levels of understanding on how the tenets of faith are to be adhered to. By agreeing that they involve their children in religious activities and events the debate of quantity versus quality of the involvement arises. However, many are unaware of what quality time with their loved ones entail. They may also be more focused on the quantity rather than the quality of

⁵ Juhari, M.S. (2022). Knowledge, Attitude & Practice: An exploratory mixed-method investigation of socio-cultural challenges to effective parenting experienced by Malay-Muslim fathers in Singapore. Centre for Fathering. <https://fathers.com.sg/wp-content/uploads/MM-Fathering-Project-Report-version-22-Feb.pdf>

How do you best describe yourself as Muslims?



I involve my children in religious activities/events



time spent. Moreover, these fathers tend not to proactively seek out ways where they can spend productive time with their children. In short, Islam acts as both an intrinsic and extrinsic force on how fathers perform their parental role.

The family unit

The role of fathers should not be viewed in isolation but, also in relation to the role of mothers. The second half of the twentieth century has seen an unprecedented entry of women into the labour market. They however have managed to balance their roles as nurturers to their children.

In doing so, it signals that fathers too can be involved in the day-to-day parenting activities. It could be by actively participating in choosing the right storybooks for the child to read, bringing them to the library and discussing about the book that the child has read or is reading. Helping with homework and attending parent-teacher meetings are usually tasks undertaken by mothers but, fathers could easily get involved as well.

Referencing from the Fatherhood Public Perception Survey, 76% of respondents agreed that their wife (or the child's biological mother, if the parents were separated) is an important

influence or source of help to them. Interestingly, a second female role model, the child's paternal grandmother, ranked second in influence.⁶

The reality is that fathers' involvement is not on par with the level of mother's involvement in the children's upbringing. This is the fact that attitudes towards what "fatherhood" really means have changed over the generations. This shift in mindset is crucial for young fathers to relearn what they have known a father's role to be - from past and personal observations during their upbringing.

Although there may be differences in how fathers and mothers involve themselves in their children's lives, when fathers and mothers are both actively involved in the child rearing process, the child benefits. A positive parenting model can help to build and strengthen emotional bridges between the parents and the child. Seeing a collaborative effort from both parents encourage the child to value the family unit too.

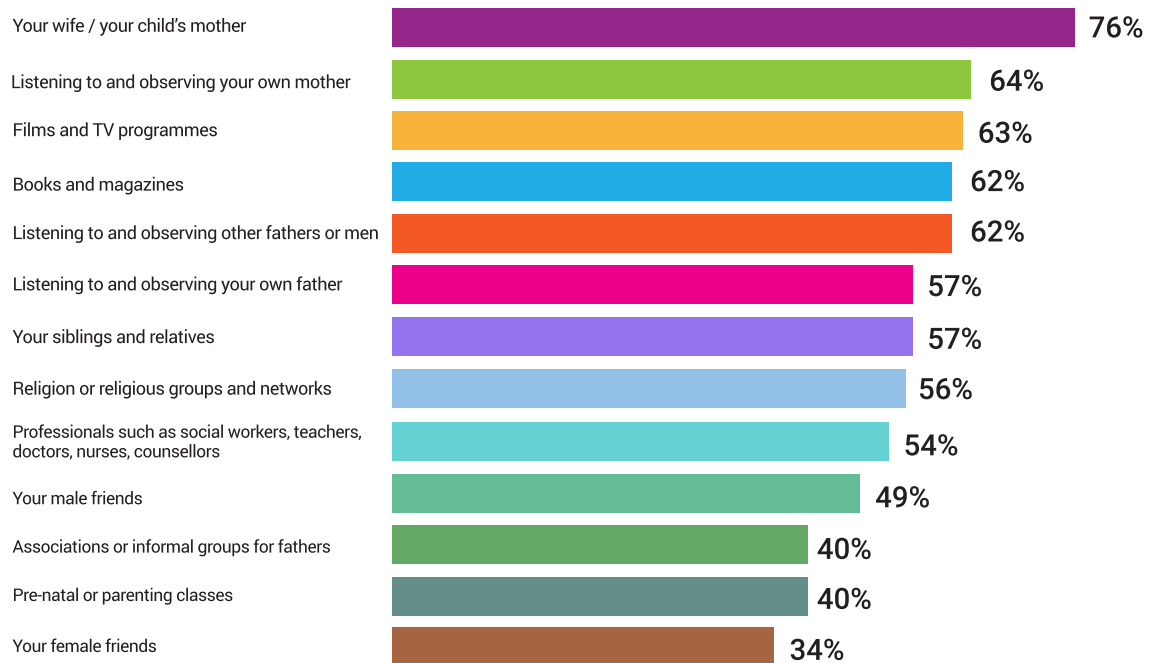
Different education pathways

The Ministry of Education (MOE) has constantly reviewed the Singapore's education system, and this has led to a restructuring of post-secondary education pathways.⁷ Today there are multiple pathways to obtain a diploma or degree from tertiary institutions such as polytechnics and universities. With the ever-growing list of private and overseas options, the various paths may confuse the average Malay-Muslim Singaporean father

⁶ Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, Singapore. (2009). Singapore Fatherhood Public Perception Survey. <https://dadsforlife.sg/research/singapore-fatherhood-public-perception-survey-shows-that-singapore-dads-want-to-be-active-fathers/>

⁷ Ministry of Education, Singapore. (2021). Multiple Pathways, New Opportunities. <https://www.moe.gov.sg/microsites/cos2021/multiple-pathways.html>

Important influence/source of help for fathers



Base: Fathers with children aged 15 years and below (n=39)

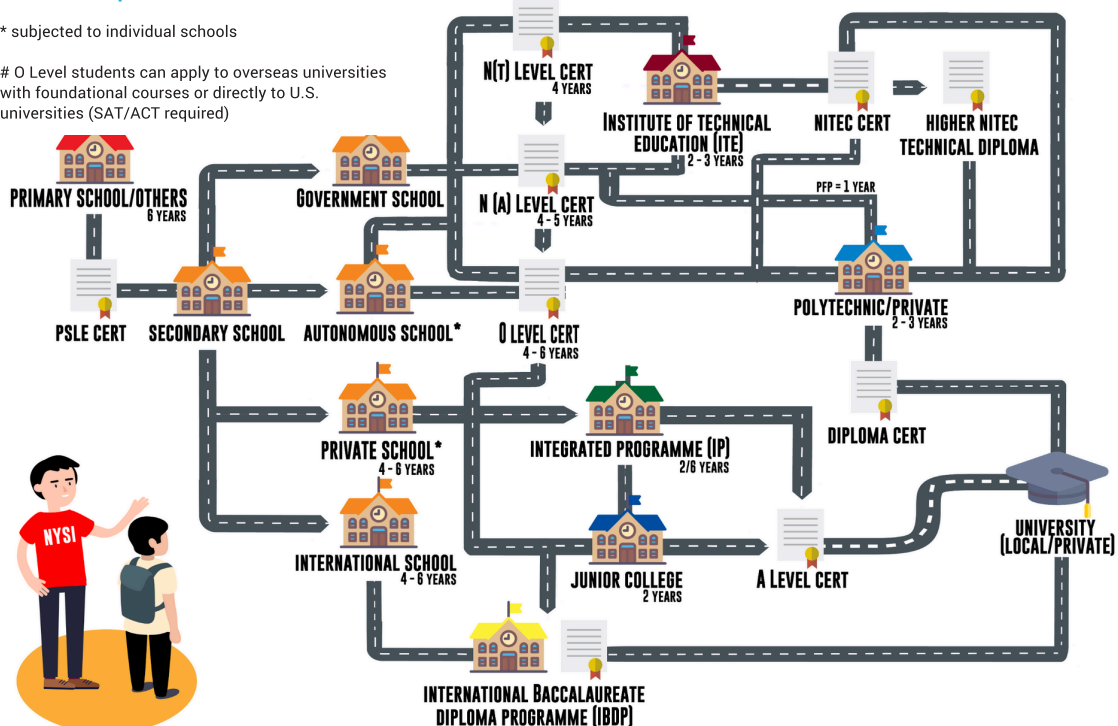
Source: Fatherhood Public Perception Survey 2009

* Responses from those without religion were excluded (n=304)

Question: Thinking about yourself as a father, in terms of how you feel and what you do, what has been an important influence or source of help for you? As I read the following list, please tell me “yes” if this was an important influence or source of help and “no” if it was not.

* subjected to individual schools

O Level students can apply to overseas universities with foundational courses or directly to U.S. universities (SAT/ACT required)



Source: National Youth Sports Institute. (2022). Education Pathway. <https://www.nysi.org.sg/athlete-life-management/education-pathway>

in choosing the “right” pathway. But should he be the sole decision-maker in this choice or merely affirm the child’s interest in choosing his or her own pathway?

The latest change in the educational landscape is the revision in the PSLE system which was implemented in 2021. Many parents were unsure on how to assess the wider scoring bands known as “Achievement levels” (AL).

Fathers would fare better in this situation if they were to research and accept the rationale behind the revision in the PSLE system:

1) The revised PSLE scheme is designed to better reflect the child’s achievement level in the subject. There is no passing grade.

2) There is a reduced focus of examinations in schools. With the removal of mid-year exams for both primary and secondary levels by 2023, there will be a shift towards holistic development, in an effort to move away from the overemphasis of grades.

At the secondary level, there are 58 schools that have embarked on the subject-based banding (SBB). SBB in secondary schools allowed students to take English Language, Mathematics, Science, and Mother Tongue Language at a more demanding level when they enter Secondary 1, based on their performance in these subjects at the PSLE. The successful pilot done in 2020 gave MOE the confidence that full SBB in secondary schools can be implemented from 2024. Under Full SBB, there will no longer be separate Express, Normal (Academic), and Normal (Technical) courses.

These changes would affect the post-secondary level where a review of the opportunities and pathways in applied education would be undertaken. This was shared in the Committee of Supply speech by Dr Mohamad Maliki Osman, Second Minister for Education, where he said:

“First, we recognise our students’ diverse interests and support them in exploring different options”.¹⁰

The key takeaway for fathers from these new different education pathways would be not to focus on a pre-determined path, such as obtaining a university degree, but to focus on the child’s interests and aspirations instead. We often tend to impose our goals on our children in the hope that they can achieve them. We do our best to navigate for them a route to success based on our own experiences. At certain crossroads, our child may have a different definition of success that is different from ours. As fathers, we need to realise that even though we only want the best for our child, they ultimately will have to take charge and figure out life on their own.



⁹ Ministry of Education. (2020). What is full SBB? <https://www.moe.gov.sg/microsites/psle-fsbb/full-subject-based-banding/about-full-sbb.html>

¹⁰ Maliki, O. (2021). MOE Committee of Supply Debate Response. <https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/speeches/20210303-moe-fy2021-committee-of-supply-debateresponse-by-second-minister-for-education-dr-maliki-osman>

DID YOU KNOW?



The Centre for Fathering launched Eat with your Family Day (EWYFD) in 2003 and it is held on the last Friday of each school term.¹¹ EWYFD seeks to encourage organisations to allow employees to leave work early at 5pm to enjoy a meal with their children and families.

At the “Eat With Your Family Day is Made For Families” virtual event on 19 November 2021, Ms Indranee Rajah, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office, said, “Eat With Your Family Day is an important reminder to make time for our families... Family-centric companies are much more likely to have a happier and more productive workforce, find it easier to recruit and retain and have a positive work culture.”¹²

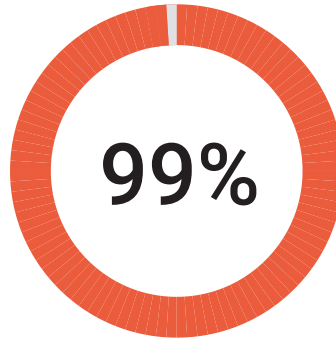
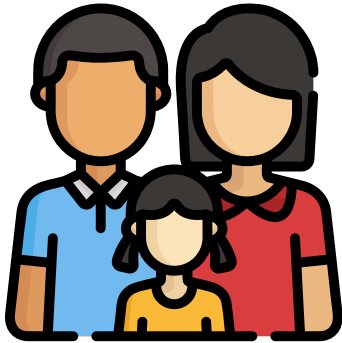
The 2021 Marriage and Parenthood Survey was conducted amongst 2,848 single and 3,017 married Singapore residents, aged 21 to 45 years old, to understand public attitudes and perceptions towards marriage and parenthood.¹³

¹¹ Centre for Fathering Ltd. (n.d.). Eat With Your Family Day. <https://fathers.com.sg/ewyfd/>

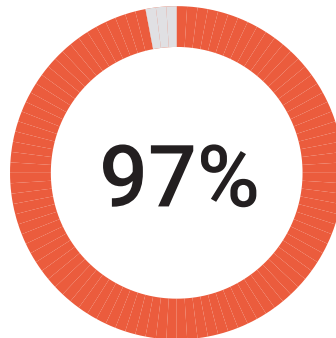
¹² Centre for Fathering Ltd. (n.d.). Annual Report 2021. <https://fathers.com.sg/wp-content/uploads/CFF-Annual-Report-2021.pdf>

¹³ Prime Minister's Office. (2022). Marriage and parenthood survey 2021: Strong aspirations among Singaporeans to start families, flexible work arrangements preferred. <https://www.strategygroup.gov.sg/media-centre/press-releases/marriage-and-parenthood-survey-2021/>

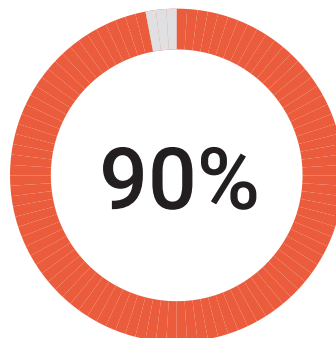
The key findings show that:



99% of married respondents agreed that fathers and mothers were equally important as caregivers for children.



At least 97% of all respondents agreed that paternity leave allows fathers to play a bigger role in the newborn's life.



90% of married respondents agreed that the availability of flexible work arrangements would make or would have made it easier for them to start a family.

Mind the Gap – the Impact of Socio-economic Status on Academic Performance



Learning Festival (Education), Kampung Admiralty, October 2022



Dr Sylvia Chong
Associate Professor
Singapore University of
Social Sciences

Dr Sylvia Chong is an Associate Professor with the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS). At SUSS she is the principal investigator for several institutional research projects. Her research interests are inter-disciplinary in nature and include both substantive and methodological approaches. The areas of interest include *Quality Management in Higher Education* (Educational Accountability, Teaching & Learning Quality), *Beliefs, identity and epistemology* (Self-efficacy - educators & learners; Beliefs about teaching and learning), *Evaluation* (Instrument development and validation; issues in tool development & administration; quantitative analysis & reasoning, multilevel modelling; qualitative coding & category systems) and *Learning analytics* (deciphering learning trends and patterns from educational data).rare earth elements to international relations theories.

At the heart of Freire's 1968 classic text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is how he challenged and categorised wealth disparity - "the haves and have nots". Fundamental in his beliefs is the need to create a level of equity in education by providing equal access.¹ The discrepancy in socio-economic status (SES) forms gaps in wealth, education, and opportunities, leading to further social categorisations.² A significant gap in education disparities is between students from differing economic statuses³. Behind these differing socio-economic status and education disparities are the impacts on students' mental and emotional disposition, cognitive development, and academic performance.

If the social and economic consequences of low academic performing communities are not addressed, they will put a strain on government resources. A 2012 paper on the at-risk communities of Pinellas County in U.S. identified 5% of its total population as low-income, to which the lower socio-economic variables and patterns such as lower educational attainment are correlated. Yet, this 5% tallied an estimated annual USD 2.3 billion potential lost in revenue. Employment opportunities are limited, and this translates to lower wages. Aside from lower or lost wages, low educational attainment is also associated with higher crime rates and healthcare



bills. On the other hand, improvement in human capital in terms of cognitive skills translates to GDP per capita gains. An educated population that contributes to sustainable economies are less dependent on public aid and are less vulnerable to economic downturns. A country's economic growth is highly dependent on an educated and skilled workforce.⁴

Over the past decades, the correlation between family SES and academic achievement in school-age children has been well documented. Research indicates that children from low-SES households and communities develop academic skills slower than children from higher SES groups.⁵ For instance, low SES in childhood is related to poor cognitive development, language, memory, socioemotional processing, and consequently poor income and health in adulthood.

It is thus very important, first, to recognise and acknowledge the gaps. Several studies explored models that seek to identify variables of students' academic achievement. Academic achievement, and its relationship with socio-economic background, is one of the key variables in this area of educational research. A recent collaborative study between Yayasan MENDAKI and SUSS applied cluster analysis to profile socio-economically disadvantaged students and their impact on their academic achievement.⁶ The evaluation of cluster profiles showed that Cluster 1 comprised students from relatively higher SES standing among all clusters, in which they lived in better residences (for e.g., larger houses and non-rental blocks), with better financial background (for e.g., higher average PCI and majority parents are employed) and these students also have a lower-class absenteeism rate. These factors were associated

¹ Freire, P. (2020). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Toward a Sociology of Education, (pp. 374-386). Routledge.

² Cho, S., Crenshaw, K. W., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis. *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society*, 38(4), 785-810. <https://doi.org/10.1086/669608>

³ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2012). *Equity and quality in education: Supporting disadvantaged students and schools*.

⁴ Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners. (2012). *The Economic Impact of Poverty*. https://icma.org/sites/default/files/305927_EconomicImpactReport.pdf

⁵ Morgan, P. L., Farkas, G., Hillemeier, M. M., & Maczuga, S. (2009). Risk Factors for Learning-Related Behavior Problems at 24 Months of Age: Population-Based Estimates. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 37(3), 401-413. <https://doi.org/10.1007%2Fs10802-008-9279-8>

⁶ Li, J., & Chong, S. (2022). Cluster analysis to profile socioeconomically disadvantaged students and their impact on academic performance. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, 9(3), 405-414. <https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.93.12060>

with a higher academic performance in their academic achievements (see Figure 1). Cluster 1 had the highest percentages of “improved” students and lowest percentages of “worsened” students for both Literacy and Numeracy academic results.⁷ Households with lower SES will have less access to learning materials and experiences, including books, computers, stimulating toys, skill-building lessons. Children’s initial reading and numeracy competencies are correlated with the home environment, number of books owned, and parent distress.⁸

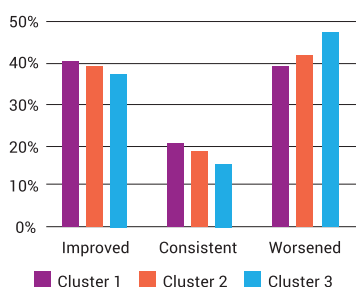
Research continues to link lower SES to lower academic achievement and slower rates of academic progress as compared with higher SES communities. The success rate of low-income students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines is much lower than that of students who do not come from underrepresented backgrounds.⁹ According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2014), individuals within the top family income quartile are eight times more likely to obtain a bachelor’s degree by age 24 as compared to individuals from the lowest family income quartile.

It is important to work and aim towards closing this gap. Voices will need to be amplified, and continued action and support are required. Further research is

Academic Performance - Literacy



Academic Performance - Numeracy



required to inform and provide opportunities for evidenced-based action and informed decisions. The literature has identified various approaches to close this gap.

Strengthening preschool education and early interventions

Preschool provides the foundation for children’s emotional, social, and cognitive development. Research shows that children who graduate from preschool have improved academic readiness, lower incarceration rates, and higher earnings. The Yayasan MENDAKI-SUSS study also identified participation in the lower primary Learning Support Programme (LSP) and Learning Support in Math (LSM) programmes as early indicators of continued lower academic performance and this weak

foundation, if not addressed early, will continue to have an impact on the students’ academic performance. A study by Schoenfeld and Stipek looked at Maths performance and found that students with a poor Maths underperformance in preschool were still lagging when they reached grade 8 (equivalent to secondary two in Singapore).¹⁰ The findings of these studies suggest that having a weak foundation have strong and lasting impact on students’ future performance. It is therefore important to close this gap as early as possible.

Focusing on the children’s development during their early education years can prevent gaps in learning and future problems.¹¹ This will also require quick actions to address learning gaps and ensure smooth and continued educational pathways for all learners.

⁷ Li, J., & Chong, S. (2022). Cluster analysis to profile socioeconomically disadvantaged students and their impact on academic performance. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, 9(3), 405–414. <https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.93.12060>

⁸ Buckingham, J., Wheldall, K., & Beaman-Wheldall, R. (2013). Why poor children are more likely to become poor readers: The school years. *Australian Journal of Education*, 57(3), 190-213. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944113495500>

⁹ Doerschuk, P., Bahrim, C., Daniel, J., Kruger, J., Mann, J., & Martin, C. (2016). Closing the Gaps and Filling the STEM Pipeline: A Multidisciplinary Approach. *Journal of Science Education and Technology*, 25(4), 682-695. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10956-016-9622-8>

¹⁰ Schoenfeld A. H. & Stipek D. (2011). Math Matters: Children’s Mathematical Journeys Start Early [Conference report]. <https://prek-math-te.stanford.edu/system/files/media/document/2017/Math%20Matters%20Full%20Report.pdf>

¹¹ Magasa N. (2021). Why a solid foundation is important for a learner’s education. *Albertyn Record*. <https://albertynrecord.co.za/290803/why-a-solid-foundation-is-important-for-a-learners-education-5/>

Over a longer term, educational systems will need to strengthen learner and foster environments that will support every individual to reach their full potential. These learning environments can provide learners with experiences that are within their zone of proximal development (ZPD). ZPD, the space between the student's existing knowledge or skills and his potential level, is a key construct in Lev Vygotsky's theory of learning and development.¹⁵ Meaningful learning can occur by encouraging and advancing the learners' higher order skills.

In March 2022, Singapore's Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) introduced key initiatives to enhance access to quality and affordable preschools, especially for low-income families, and raise the quality of early childhood professionals and programmes. "These initiatives build on continuing efforts to give every child a good start in life and to uplift the early childhood profession".¹⁶

A key initiative in enhancing the access for children from low-income families is the KidSTART programme. The Ministry announced that the KidSTART programme which provides upstream support to lower-income families with young children up to six years old in the home, community and preschool settings will be expanded nationwide to benefit more families.¹⁷

Enhancing parent and family involvement

Family has a central role in a child's development and growth. Research has shown that parents and family involvement in school have a positive association with students' academic outcomes.¹⁸ This positive involvement contributes to a student's socioemotional and cognitive development. That is, students with highly involved parents had better academic performance and higher test scores in all the subjects than students with parents who were not involved.¹⁹

Several interviewees in the Yayasan MENDAKI-SUSS study highlighted the feeling of being encouraged and supported when their parents were highly involved. One interviewee in the study commented that it was important to their parents that they completed their education as this may lead to employment. Their parents explicitly expressed the importance of getting an education.

However, many parents and families often face different challenges when supporting their children through school. To overcome some of these challenges, parental or family involvement programmes and

assistance schemes can be developed to promote and enhance parent and family involvement. Schools as well as community organisations such as Yayasan MENDAKI can help parents to identify various strategies of engaging with their children as well as how to build a more inclusive school-home collaboration. It is also important for these programmes to communicate and dialogue with parents and families in their preferred language and style of communication for these programmes and schemes to be used efficaciously. This will support parents and families as empowered participants in their children's education, thereby contributing to students' success in school.

Broadening definitions of achievements beyond academic attainments

Academic results and attainment are standard measures of progression and success in a public education system. The education field is littered with a range of academic benchmarks — such as passing grades, achievement tests, and national benchmarks. There is a pressing need to reorient and embrace a wider definition of achievement going beyond traditional academic measures to include skills, habits, and competencies that will

¹⁵ Mat, H., & Yusoff, N. A. N. (2019). The Effect of Edutainment on Higher Order Thinking Skills among Year Five Students. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 8(4), 55–65. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v8-i4/6435>

¹⁶ Ministry of Social and Family Development, Singapore. (2022). Raising Quality Of Preschools And More Support For Children From Low-Income Families To Be Expanded Nationwide. <https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/Pages/Raising-Quality-Of-Preschools-And-More-Support-For-Children-From-Low-Income-Families-To-Be-Expanded-Nationwide.aspx>

¹⁷ Ministry of Social and Family Development, Singapore. (2022). Raising Quality Of Preschools And More Support For Children From Low-Income Families To Be Expanded Nationwide. <https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/Pages/Raising-Quality-Of-Preschools-And-More-Support-For-Children-From-Low-Income-Families-To-Be-Expanded-Nationwide.aspx>

¹⁸ Kim, S. W. (2020). Meta-Analysis of Parental Involvement and Achievement in East Asian Countries. *Education and Urban Society*, 52(2), 312-337. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124519842654>

¹⁹ Catalano, H., & Catalano, C. (2014). The importance of the school-family relationship in the child's intellectual and social development. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 128, 406-414. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.03.179>

enable students to thrive in their future lives. Students' individual strengths and weaknesses must also be taken into consideration. For example, student success can be seen in terms of outcomes such as persistence and increase in self-efficacy. Redefining student success and achievements will require family and schools to change. It will also require the wider society to accept and support these broader definitions of success in life.

Success and achievements come in diverse forms and a single yardstick measure should not be used. Quoting Mr Chan Chun Seng, the Minister for Education in his speech at SUSS 2022 graduation:

“First, the conventional meaning of broadening the definition of success is looking beyond success in academic performance. And indeed, we need to do much more in this aspect. We should do more to celebrate the success of your respective achievements in the fields of academics, sports, the arts, and other arenas. All of us are gifted in different ways. In life, success is when we are able to do justice to our blessings and to bring to fruition our talents in order to benefit not just ourselves and our families, but also society as a whole.”²⁰

In addressing this gap as well as educational disadvantages of the students with low SES, a

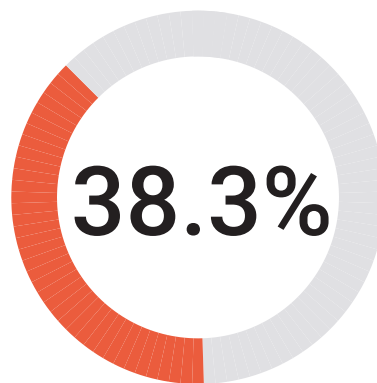
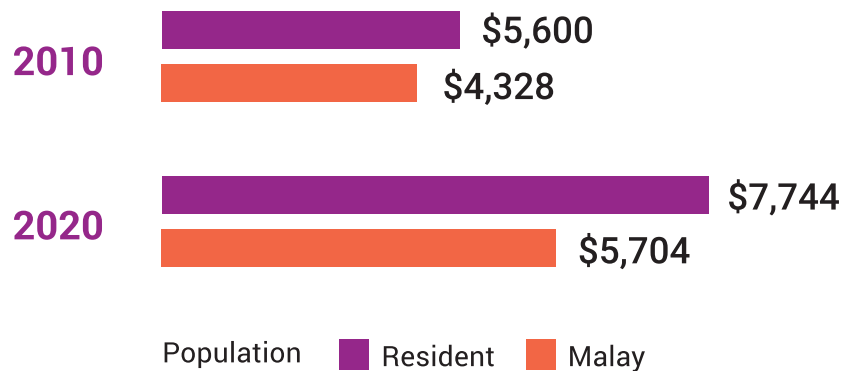
paradigm shift around achievement is needed to change the mindsets of educators, parents, students, and other stakeholders. Evidence from research can be a source that policymakers and social changers can tap on to design policies and interventions that are customised to the needs of these students. Additional research could help clarify what types of interventions and investments would be most beneficial in closing this gap. This should also include the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as teachers and community support groups, to obtain more insights about the efficacy of systematic interventions to mitigate educational inequalities for students in lower income group.



²⁰ Ministry of Education, Singapore. (2022). Speech by Minister Chan Chun Sing at Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) Convocation 2022 [Speech transcript]. <https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/speeches/20221005-speech-by-minister-chan-chun-sing-at-singapore-university-of-social-sciences-convocation-2022-at-block-a-the-grand-hall>

DID YOU KNOW?

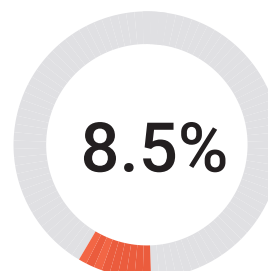
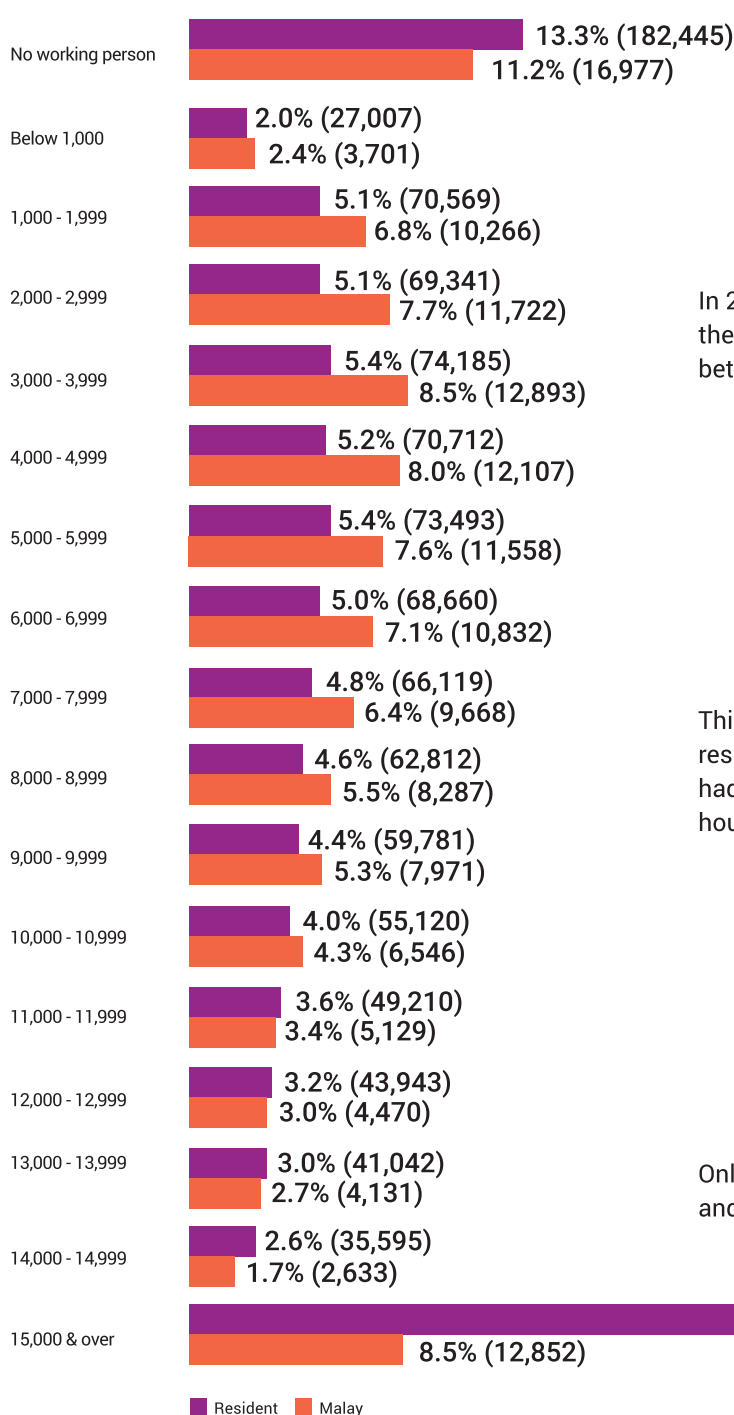
Median monthly household income from work, among resident and Malay populations



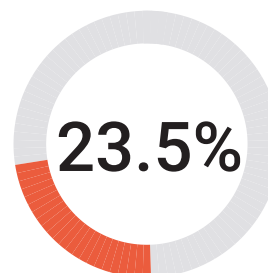
In 2020, resident households saw a 38.3% increase in median monthly household incomes from work (including Employer CPF Contributions) from \$5,600 in 2010, while Malay households saw a 31.7% increase from \$4,328 in 2010. As of 2020, the median monthly household incomes among Resident and Malay households were \$7,744 and \$5,704 respectively.

Source: Department of Statistics Singapore. (2021). Singapore Census of Population 2020, Statistical Release 2: Households, Geographic Distribution, Transport and Difficulty in Basic Activities.

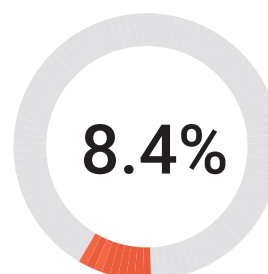
Monthly household income among resident and Malay populations (2020)



In 2020, the household income of the majority of the Malays was between \$3,000 and \$3,999 (8.5%).



This was in contrast to the resident population where majority had \$15,000 and over as their household income (23.5%).



Only 8.4% of the Malays had \$15,000 and over for their household income.

Source: Department of Statistics Singapore. (2021). Singapore Census of Population 2020, Statistical Release 2: Households, Geographic Distribution, Transport and Difficulty in Basic Activities.

Cost of Living – Negotiations and Challenges



School holiday cycling trip for Yayasan MENDAKI beneficiaries, Marina Bay, December 2021



Nur Nadiah Zailani
Research Officer
Yayasan MENDAKI

Nur Nadiah Zailani is a Research Officer at Yayasan MENDAKI. Nadiah was previously a tutor and researcher in Maynooth University of Ireland. She completed her Master's Degree in Applied Social Research at Trinity College Dublin. With a Bachelor's Degree in Occupational Therapy, she has also previously gained experience as an occupational therapist working with the elderly, adults and children in Singapore. Her research interests include family systems, child development, work-life balance, technology, mental health, and socio-economic well-being of the society.

*Names used in this article are aliases

The cost of living in Singapore remains a pertinent issue among families especially with the rise in inflation amidst Covid-19 pandemic and the current international conflicts. The government recently rolled out a S\$1.5 billion support package to provide further relief for all Singaporean households, with more support for lower to middle-income groups.¹ The S\$1.5 billion support package includes a cost-of-living (COL) Special Payment of up to \$500 cash for 2.5 million adult Singaporeans. The new support package also includes CDC vouchers, public transport subsidies, revised income criteria for Ministry of Education (MOE) financial assistance schemes, and increased bursary quanta for full-time Institute of Technical Education (ITE) students in the year 2023.² A further \$1.4 billion boost to the support package for households was also introduced to offset the impact of the upcoming goods and services tax (GST) hike and higher inflation.³ The boost acts to offset the impact of the GST increase for most Singaporean households through cash payouts for at least five years, and for lower-income households for about 10 years. While the government's efforts are commendable, can such measures support families in the long run?

Mdm Aisha*, a mother of a four-year-old and seven-year-old children and who is expecting a third child, shared how she had recently started working in a hospital after being a stay-at-home mother for four years. She commented on the need for her to earn some income and cover the expenses required to support her children alongside her husband. This move to enter the workforce was borne out of necessity as her husband's income alone could not sustain the amount required to pay off their housing loans. However, while her income supplements their family needs, she further shared on the occasional ad hoc jobs that her husband had to undertake to ensure that there was enough money to tide over family expenses. Nonetheless, she mentioned how taking on ad hoc jobs were challenging as attention is needed in the caring for their young dependent children. The tenacity showed by Mdm Aisha*, and her husband is impressive. Mdm Aisha* shared how the economic pressures of the high cost of living in Singapore pushed them to be a dual-income family unit.

Experiences faced by Mdm Aisha*, and her husband Mr Muhammad Noor*, is common. In a study of 5,000 families with Singaporean children, as of December 2020, "about 1 in 3

of those (families) living in HDB rental flats do not have enough to cover expenses. Around 38% of households in rented HDB flats have fallen behind in paying bills, and 28% of them had borrowed money from others in the past year."⁴ Additionally, 24.1% of families living in owned 1 to 2-room HDBs were reported not having enough money to cover expenses. These numbers may increase as real wage growth, though noted to be strong, has also been dampened by higher inflation.⁵ How would children's development be affected with the increase in financial strain experienced by families during the inflationary periods?

In a local panel research study, which looks at the achievement gaps of young Singaporean children before entering school, Yeung and Chen found that primary caregivers in lower-income families reported facing a higher level of economic pressure.⁶ Yeung and Chen highlighted that even after accounting for various factors, family income still has a significant impact on children's numeracy scores. This trend is also observed internationally with Australian children's cognitive skills being reported to be significantly associated with family income, though it is also worthy to note that it does not influence non-cognitive skills of children.⁷ Yeung and Chen

¹ Ministry of Finance. (2022). \$1.5 billion Support Package to Provide Further Relief for All Singaporean Households with more support for Lower- to Middle-Income Groups. <https://www.mof.gov.sg/news-publications/press-releases/1.5-billion-support-package-to-provide-further-relief-for-all-singaporean-households-with-more-support-for-lower-to-middle-income-groups>

² Ministry of Education. (2022). More Than 10,000 Students to Benefit from Revised Income Criteria for MOE Financial Assistance Schemes and Increased ITE Bursary Quanta. <https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/press-releases/20221014-more-than-10000-students-to-benefit-from-revised-income-criteria-for-moe-financial-assistance-schemes-and-increased-ite-bursary-quanta>

³ Goh, H.Y. (2022). Assurance Package to help households offset GST hike to get \$1.4b boost, will now total \$8b. The Straits Times. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/assurance-package-to-help-households-offset-gst-hike-to-get-14b-boost-will-now-total-8b>

⁴ National University of Singapore. (2020). Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study Research Update Issue 3 [Data set]. https://fass.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2021/01/003a-Research-Update-3_Online_26012021_opt.pdf

⁵ Ministry of Manpower. (2022). Strong Total Wage Growth in 2021. <https://www.mom.gov.sg/newsroom/press-releases/2022/0530-strong-total-wage-growth-in-2021>

⁶ Yeung, W.J., & Chen, X. (2021). Achievement Gaps before School in Singapore: Family Socioeconomic Status, Parenting and Young Children's Delay of Gratification (Research Brief Issue 2). Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study. https://fass.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2021/06/Research-Brief_2_Jun-2021.pdf

⁷ Khanam, R., & Nghiem, S. (2016). Family Income and Child Cognitive and Noncognitive Development in Australia: Does Money Matter?. *Demography*, 53(3), 597-621. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-016-0466-x>

added how parental education also showed a direct impact on children's numeracy scores, and that "primary caregiver's verbal, cognitive and self-regulatory abilities, family modelling, positive parental control (e.g., limit-setting), paternal involvement and organised home environment play essential roles in facilitating children to regulate their behaviours internally, and eventually achieve self-regulation as they age". They concluded that significant achievement gaps among young Singaporean children across parental education and family income were evident. This is concerning as it suggests that there are widening disparities in the community.

During the interview, Mr Muhammad Noor* reflected on the increasing need to familiarise with the ever-evolving education system. In his reflections, Mr Muhammad Noor* emphasises the importance of pursuing both secular and religious education to better able to traverse the modern society. He also mentioned how there is a certain level of stress in managing children. Like Mr Muhammad Noor*, out of 5,000 families with Singaporean children, 58.4% of primary caregivers agreed that "being a parent was harder than they thought it would be". Additionally, 12% stated that raising their children had been challenging.⁸ In their joint conversation, Mdm Aisha* emphasised the importance for

family members to encourage one another, and the need for both parents to communicate, understand each other, and make plans together to handle challenging situations more effectively.

Their experiences reflect parental concerns over the ability to support the family's livelihood and their children's development. Such concerns can be partially explained by the Family Stress Model (FSM). The FSM proposes that socio-economic status (SES) and family support are vital predictors of children's health. In a 2021 survey conducted in Canada with 803 parents of toddlers, Nohr Dawydiuk's findings indicated that socio-economic status and access to family support were significantly associated with children's health.⁹ Chelsea and colleagues further supported such notions when they found that economic hardships and increase in financial strain affected children's development aged between 5 and 7 years in their study of 343 families in the United States.¹⁰ They reported on how these factors had a direct, negative association with the development of delay of gratification, which refers to the child's ability and inclination to choose "larger later" over "smaller sooner" rewards. Delay of gratification is usually associated with self-regulation. It is important to note that the

ability of young children to delay gratification predicted positive outcomes in later life, such as better social and behavioural development, academic success, health, and wealth.¹¹

In relation to Singapore children's delay of gratification, Chen reported that "a child's ability to delay gratification was not related to family income, but it was related to family economic stress indicated by whether the family usually makes ends meet. Lower family economic stress, that is, a greater ability to make ends meet, was associated with the child's greater ability to delay gratification. This result suggests that when the family manages their finance and plans future expenses, their children can learn to inhibit immediate gratification for better future consequences".¹² Chen's suggestions for families to have a financial plan for the future can be used as one strategy that families can adopt. However, this may not be entirely applicable to families who do not have enough or just have enough to cover immediate expenses. With limited resources and purchasing power to cover living costs, addressing familial necessities takes precedence. Indeed, the Investment Model states that families with greater economic resources can make significant investments in the development of their children, whereas more disadvantaged families must invest in more immediate family needs.¹³

⁸ National University of Singapore. (2020). Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study Research Update Issue 2 [Data set]. https://fass.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2020/09/Research-Update_Issue-2_July-2020_opt.pdf

⁹ Nohr Dawydiuk, N. (2021). Child Health, SES and Family Supports: An Application of the Family Stress Model among Toddlers in Canada [Doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia]. <https://open.library.ubc.ca/media/stream/pdf/24/1.0396931/4>

¹⁰ Duran, C. A., Cottone, E., Ruzek, E. A., Mashburn, A. J., & Grissmer, D. W. (2020). Family Stress Processes and Children's Self-Regulation. *Child Development*, 91(2), 577-595. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13202>

¹¹ Moffitt, T. E., Arseneault, L., Belsky, D., Dickson, N., Hancox, R. J., Harrington, H., ... & Caspi, A. (2011). A gradient of childhood self-control predicts health, wealth, and public safety. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 108(7), 2693-2698. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1010076108>

Ursache, A., Blair, C., & Raver, C. C. (2012). The Promotion of Self-Regulation as a Means of Enhancing School Readiness and Early Achievement in Children at Risk for School Failure. *Child Development Perspectives*, 6(2), 122-128. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-8606.2011.00209.x>

¹² Chen, L. (2021). Can the Kids Wait? Family Environment Influences Singapore Young Children's Delay of Gratification (Research Brief Issue 4). Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study. https://fass.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2021/06/Research-Brief_4_Jun-2021.pdf

¹³ Bradley, R. H., & Corwyn, R. F. (2002). Socioeconomic Status and Child Development. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53(1), 371-399. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.53.100901.135233>

In their study on lifetime income and housing affordability in Singapore, Abeysinghe and Gu reported how “despite the substantial growth of the economy, the lower income quantile has seen a drop in their real lifetime income”.¹⁴ There are also worrying trends of growing divergence between the starting salary for the ITE, polytechnic, and university graduates. In his address to mitigate the issue, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong stated that the government will do its part to reduce the material gaps in wages and incomes between different types of work, and that companies should recognise the value of different types of work, redesign their business processes and jobs, and pay their workers well.¹⁵ Additionally, the National Wages Council has called on employers to raise salaries for employees.¹⁶ The Association of Small and Medium Enterprises welcomed the suggestion, and the Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF) responded that this should be supported by productivity growth.¹⁷ While SNEF mentioned about productivity growth, they also highlighted how “SNEF recognises that higher inflation has impacted lower-wage workers disproportionately. ...the significantly higher recommendation in terms of wage increases for lower wage workers is a deliberate move to uplift the wages of lower wage workers.

It may even result in employers deviating from the principle of linking wages to productivity for lower wage workers.”¹⁸ SNEF is aware of the challenges lower-wage workers faced and the possible considerations required during periods of high inflation. Hence, whether business owners and employers would take on the recognition of valuing different types of work, redesign their business processes and jobs to accommodate employees’ daily struggles, and pay workers well, are areas for review that would require joined-up thinking with government agencies and policymakers. For example, in his narrative of the challenges he faced in the logistics of sending and fetching his wife and children to and from school and work, Mr Muhammad Noor* shared how conversations with his superior have eased his burdens with the acceptance of slight late arrival to work.

Despite sharing her family’s concerns over housing loan payments, Mdm Aisha* also shared how the family enjoyed spending time with each other. These included engaging in activities such as visiting the science centre, playing at the playground, partaking in artistic activities, and conversing with each other. Family time also offered her the opportunity to teach her children the concept of delayed gratification (e.g., waiting

for requested item) when the opportunity calls for it. However, she also mentioned that she had limited time to spend with her children after she started working. Both parents and children would usually be tired on weekdays when they returned home. Mdm Aisha* shared she would then need to cook dinner, do household chores, and help her children with homework. She mentioned how the family can only engage in leisure-time activities over the weekends.

Nonetheless, Mdm Aisha* highlighted how Yayasan MENDAKI’s e-Kelas MateMatika (eKMM) programme has provided her with insights and skills on how to teach her children mathematics in a home environment, and that learning with other parents are enjoyable. Yayasan MENDAKI also referred her to the Positive Parenting Programme (Triple P) for her to attain techniques to promote her children’s psychological, social, and emotional competence.¹⁹ In addition, Yayasan MENDAKI also organised children’s public speaking classes during the school holidays to help her children cultivate better communication skills and confidence. Her child who is currently in Primary 1 also attend MENDAKI tuition programme. She suggested how community organisations could organise platforms to encourage

¹⁴ Abeysinghe, T., & Gu, J. (2011). Lifetime income and housing affordability in Singapore. *Urban Studies*, 48(9), 1875-1891. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43081822>

¹⁵ Ang, P. (2022). Singapore’s economy does not sufficiently value those doing ‘hands-on and heart work’: DPM Wong. *The Straits Times*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/need-to-bridge-gap-in-how-head-work-and-other-types-of-work-are-valued-dpm-wong>

¹⁶ Chor, K.Y. (2022). Employers should raise salaries in ‘fair and sustainable’ way amid inflation, uncertainties: NWC. *The Straits Times*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/business/employers-should-raise-salaries-in-fair-and-sustainable-way-amid-inflation-uncertainties-nwc>

¹⁷ Chor, K.Y. and Chong, C. (2022). Businesses welcome wage guidelines but say pay hikes should be backed by productivity boost. *The Straits Times*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/business/businesses-welcome-wage-guidelines-but-say-pay-hikes-should-be-backed-by-productivity-boost>

¹⁸ Singapore National Employers Federation. (2022). Media Statement by the Singapore National Employers Federation on the National Wages Council 2022/23 Guidelines. https://snef.org.sg/snef_news/media-statement-by-the-singapore-national-employers-federation-on-the-national-wages-council-2022-23-guidelines/

¹⁹ Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2016). Factsheet On Positive Parenting Programme (Triple P) Pilot. [https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/Pages/Factsheet-on-Positive-Parenting-Programme-\(Triple-P\)-Pilot.aspx](https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/Pages/Factsheet-on-Positive-Parenting-Programme-(Triple-P)-Pilot.aspx)

physical interactions and social events for families. She gave examples such as a preference for physical KMM sessions over online classes, viewing of outdoor live performances together, and games and activities for the whole family. Her suggestions indicated a need for socialisation opportunities not just for the children but for parents themselves as well to facilitate the well-being of the family.

Economic hardships and pressures are recorded to influence family functioning and children's well-being. Pressures such as unmet material needs (e.g., lack of food or clothing) and the inability to pay bills and make ends meet may place parents at an increased risk for emotional distress and conflict between parents, which in turn disrupt supportive parenting that are key in facilitating children's development and wellbeing. Such economic stress depletes psychological and relational resources of parents. In such a state, parents may resort to

parenting practices that are not beneficial, such as inconsistent or harsh disciplinary practices, might monitor their children less frequently, or may withdraw their support and affection. Indeed, these kinds of parenting practices are linked to externalising problem in childhood and adolescence, adolescent drinking problems, increase in conduct disorders, problems with pre-schoolers' literacy and mathematics performance, internalising symptoms and even poor physical health.²⁰

Hence, it is important for agencies to render support through the easing of economic strain of families in addition to the provision of parental social support, which was also documented to be associated with less parenting stress, more effective parenting, and positive child outcomes.²¹ Agencies should also ensure the establishment of household food security, good family

relations and the cultivation of parental positive control skills when engaging beneficiaries where these were reported to contribute to Singaporean children's development.²² At an individual level, parents are encouraged to be mindful of the stressors they face and seek help, engage in warm and supportive behaviors when engaging with their children, gain positive control skills, and be mindful of their own self-discipline and self-regulatory behaviours in the household and when interacting with their children. As we face a higher cost of living due to rising inflation, it is of utmost importance that we work together to overcome challenges, as stated in a Malay proverb – *Bersatu Kita Teguh, Berceraai Kita Roboh*.

20 Neppl, T. K., Senia, J. M., & Donnellan, M. B. (2016). Effects of economic hardship: Testing the family stress model over time. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 30(1), 12–21. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000168>

Ponnet, K. (2014). Financial stress, parent functioning and adolescent problem behavior: An actor–partner interdependence approach to family stress processes in low-, middle-, and high-income families. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 43(10), 1752–1769. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-014-0159-y>

Hardaway, C. R., & Cornelius, M. D. (2014). Economic hardship and adolescent problem drinking: Family processes as mediating influences. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 43(7), 1191–1202. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-013-0063-x>

Shaw, D. S., & Shelleby, E. C. (2014). Early-starting conduct problems: Intersection of conduct problems and poverty. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 10, 503–528. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-032813-153650>

Iruka, I. U., LaForett, D. R., & Odom, E. C. (2012). Examining the validity of the family investment and stress models and relationship to children's school readiness across five cultural groups. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 26(3), 359–370. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028290>

Zhang, X. (2014). Family income, parental education and internalizing and externalizing psychopathology among 2–3-year-old Chinese children: The mediator effect of parent–child conflict. *International Journal Of Psychology*, 49(1), 30–37. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12013>

McCurdy, K., Gorman, K. S., & Metallinos-Katsaras, E. (2010). From poverty to food insecurity and child overweight: A family stress approach. *Child Development Perspectives*, 4(2), 144–151. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-8606.2010.00133.x>

21 McConnell, D., Breitzkreuz, R., & Savage, A. (2011). From financial hardship to child difficulties: Main and moderating effects of perceived social support. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 37(5), 679–691. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2214.2010.01185.x>

Chen, X. (2021). Nutrition, Family Stress and Preschool Children's Behaviour Problems (Research Brief Issue 3). Singapore Longitudinal EArly Development Study. https://fass.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2021/06/Research-Brief_3_Jun-2021.pdf

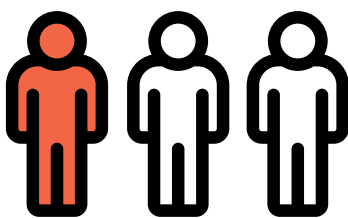
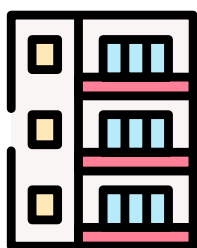
22 Chen, L. (2021). Can the Kids Wait? Family Environment Influences Singapore Young Children's Delay of Gratification (Research Brief Issue 4). Singapore Longitudinal EArly Development Study. https://fass.nus.edu.sg/cfpr/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2021/06/Research-Brief_4_Jun-2021.pdf

Nievar, M. A., Moske, A. K., Johnson, D. J., & Chen, Q. (2014). Parenting practices in preschool leading to later cognitive competence: A family stress model. *Early Education and Development*, 25(3), 318–337. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2013.788426>

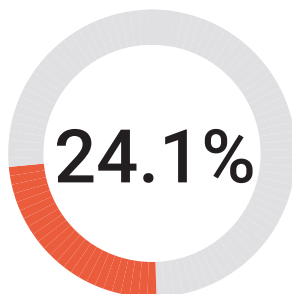
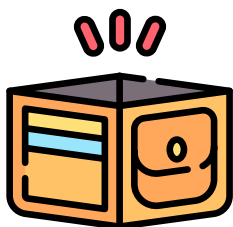
DID YOU KNOW?

Financial strain

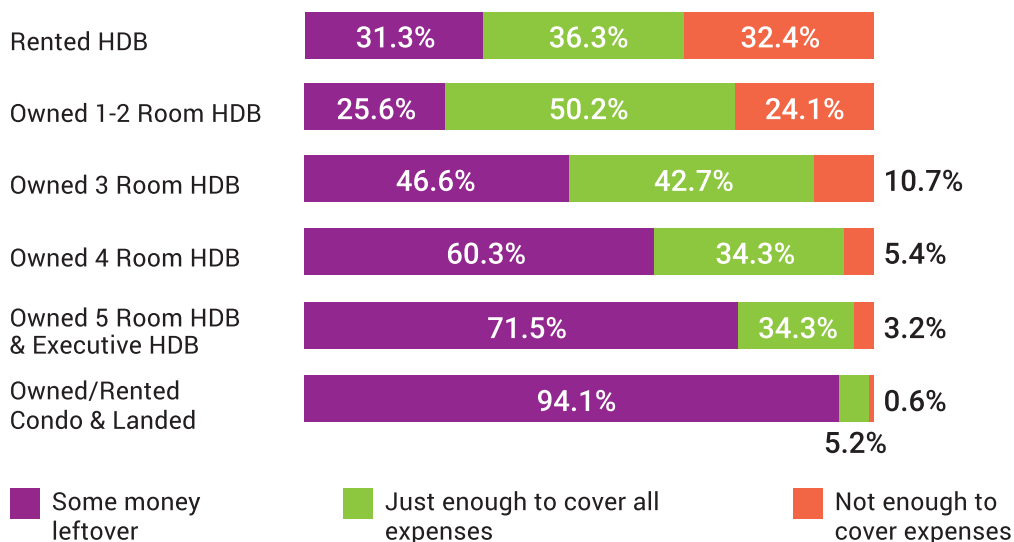
% of households that can make ends meet at the end of the month, by housing type



About 1 in 3 of those living in HDB rental flats do not have enough to cover expenses.

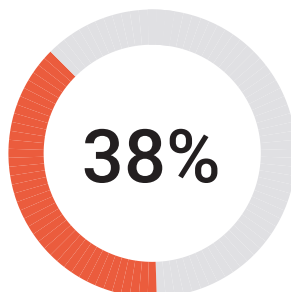


24.1% of families living in owned 1 to 2-room HDBs were reported not having enough money to cover expenses.

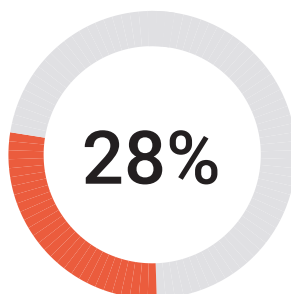
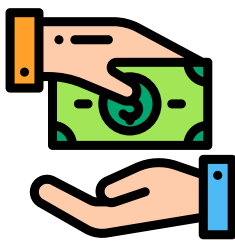


Source: National University of Singapore, Singapore. (2020). Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study Research Update Issue 3.

% of households who experienced these situations in the past year, by housing type



Around 38% of households in rented HDB flats have fallen behind in paying bills.

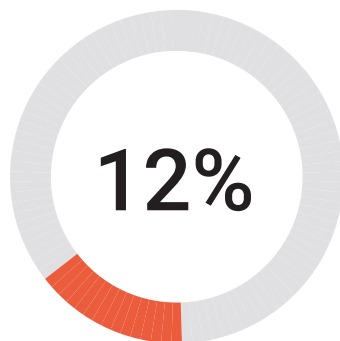


28% of them had ever borrowed money from others in the past year.

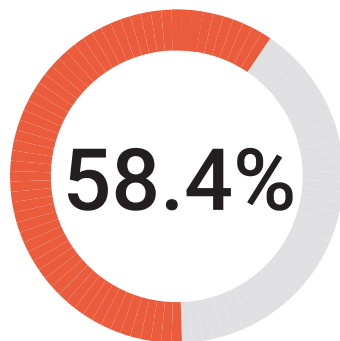
	Fallen behind in paying bills	Borrowed money from friends/relatives
Rented HDB	37.9%	27.9%
Owned 1-2 Room HDB	30.1%	20.6%
Owned 3 Room HDB	15.1%	10.9%
Owned 4 Room HDB	0.1%	4.1%
Owned 5 Room HDB & Executive HDB	6.9%	2.8%
Owned/Rented Condo & Landed	0.3%	0.4%

Source: National University of Singapore, Singapore. (2020). Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study Research Update Issue 3.

Parenting stress



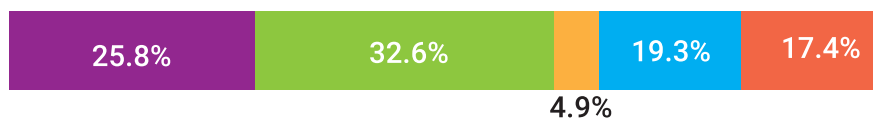
12% of Primary Caregivers reported that raising their children had been quite a bit or a lot of trouble.



58.4% of Primary Caregivers reported that it was somewhat true or completely true that being a parent was harder than they thought it would be.

Source: National University of Singapore, Singapore. (2020). Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study Research Update Issue 2.

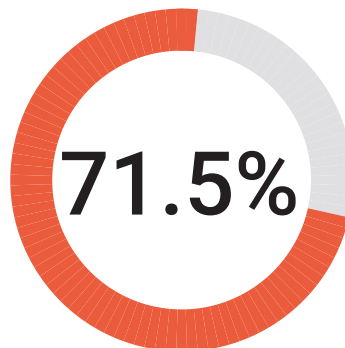
Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be



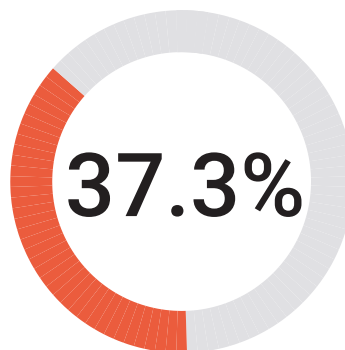
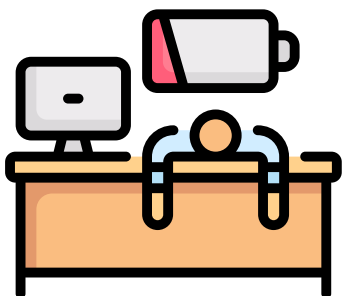
Completely true Somewhat true Neutral A little true Not true at all

Source: National University of Singapore, Singapore. (2020). Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study Research Update Issue 2.

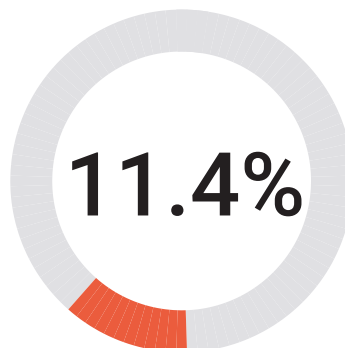
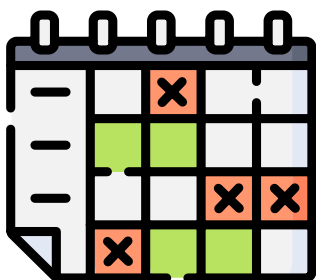
Working hours of primary caregivers



The majority (71.5%) of primary caregivers reported to be currently working an average of 40 hours per week.



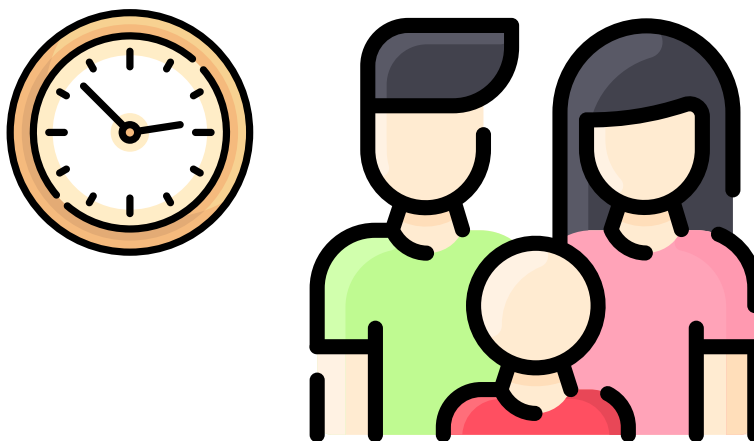
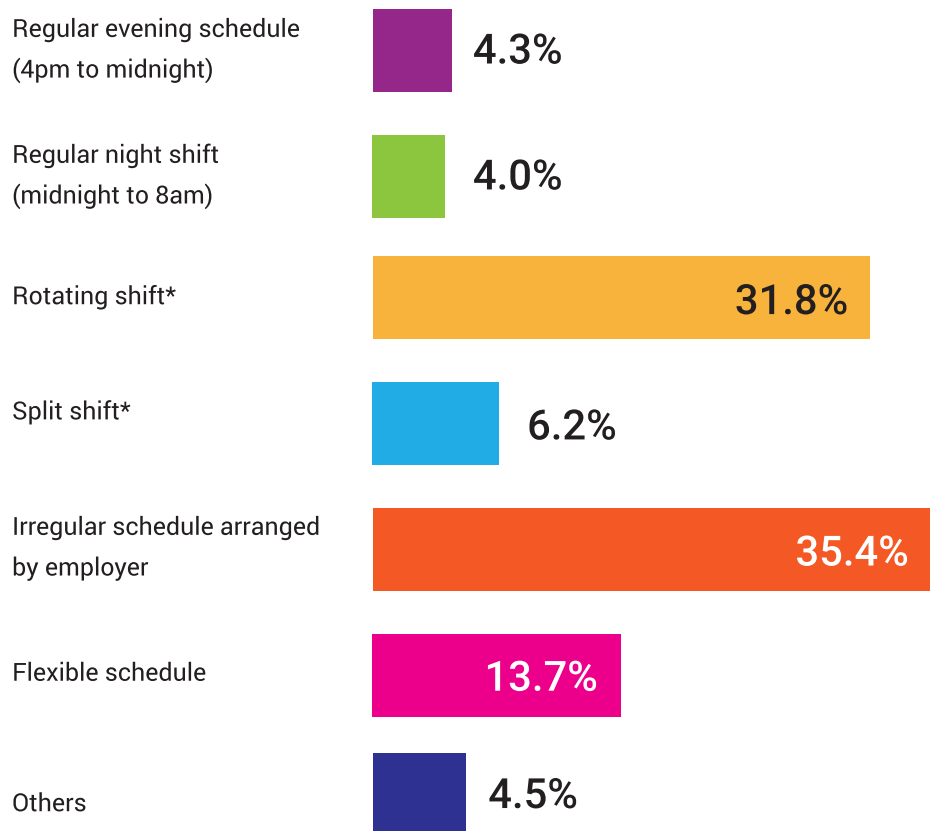
More than one-third (37.3%) of working primary caregivers work more than 44 hours a week.



11.4% of working primary caregivers work irregular hours.

Source: National University of Singapore, Singapore. (2020). Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study Research Update Issue 3.

Irregular work schedule of working primary caregivers

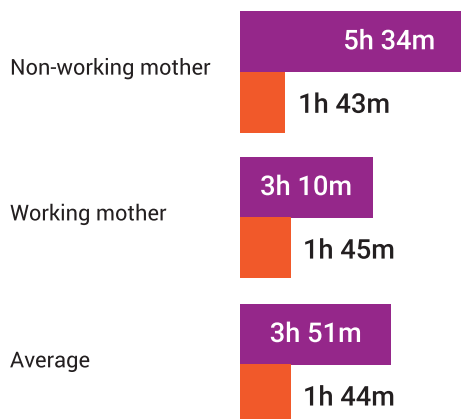


* **Rotating shift:** changes periodically from days to evenings or nights **Split shift:** one consisting of two distinct periods each day

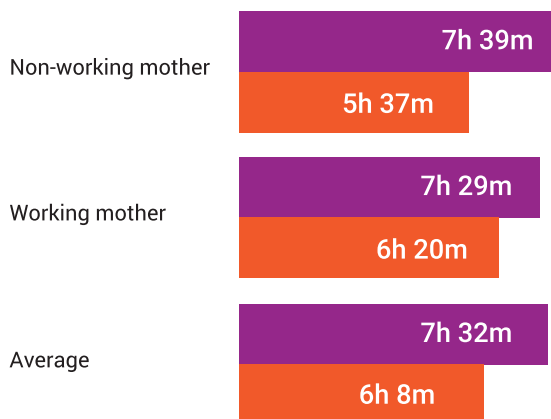
Source: National University of Singapore, Singapore. (2020). Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study Research Update Issue 2.

Time a child is engaged* with the parents by mother's working status

Weekday



Weekend



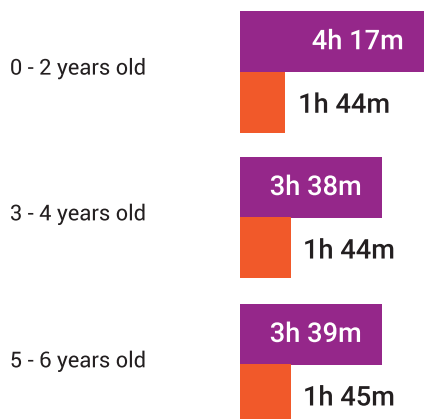
■ Mother ■ Father

* Time a child is directly interacting with the parents

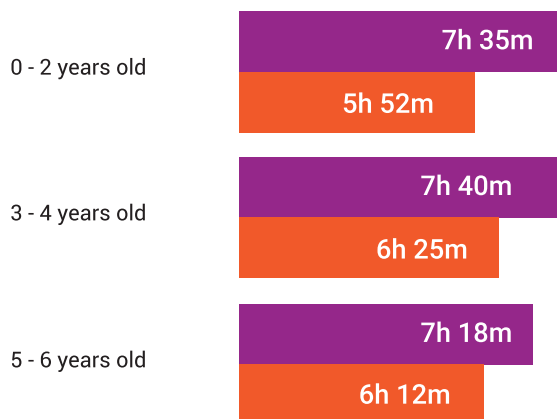
Source: National University of Singapore, Singapore. (2020). Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study Research Update Issue 2.

Time a child is engaged* with the parents by children's age group

Weekday



Weekend

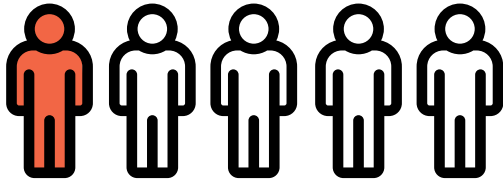


■ Mother ■ Father

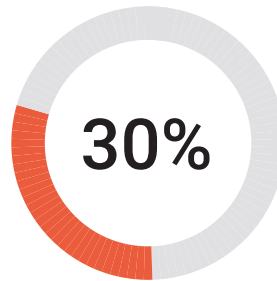
* Time a child is directly interacting with the parents

Source: National University of Singapore, Singapore. (2020). Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study Research Update Issue 2.

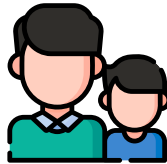
Parents' education



1 in 5 children have parents with a secondary education or lower.



About 30% have parents with post-secondary education, almost half of the parents have a Bachelor or equivalent degree or higher.

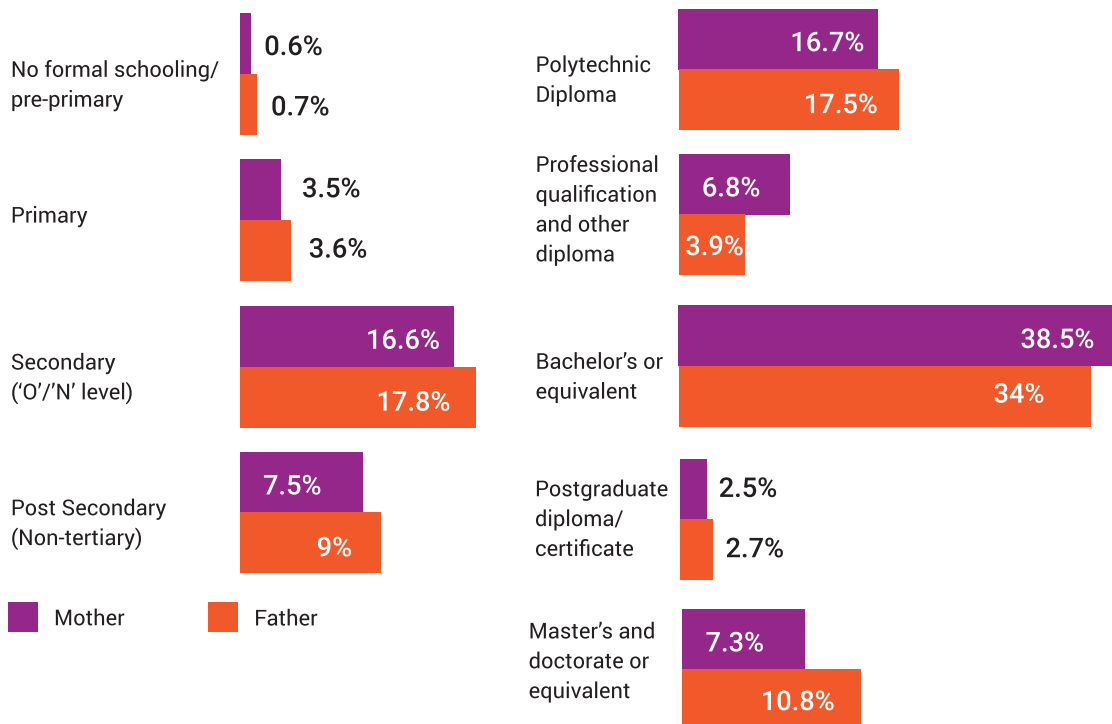


97%



72%

97% fathers and 72% mothers are currently working.



Source: National University of Singapore, Singapore. (2020). Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study Research Update Issue 1.

Gender Roles and Malay/Muslim Women's Lifelong Learning in Singapore



Learning Festival (Education), Kampung Admiralty, October 2022



Rabi'ah Ghazali
Master's degree
in Adult Learning
Singapore University
of Social Sciences

Rabi'ah Ghazali is an aspiring lifelong learner with an academic background in the Social Sciences and Education. She completed this research study as part of a capstone-like project for the Master of Adult Learning at the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS), in collaboration with the Future Ready Department of Yayasan MENDAKI. She also has a Bachelor of Arts (Hons.) in Geography from University College London, a Postgraduate Diploma in Education from the National Institute of Education (an institution of the Nanyang Technological University), and a Master of Arts in Muslim World Issues from the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (an institution of the International Islamic University of Malaysia). Professionally, she has worked as a teacher with Ministry of Education (MOE) at the Secondary and JC levels, an environmental educator in an international conservation organisation, and a policy developer in a statutory board. Her research interest is in education, socio-economic and socio-cultural issues faced by the Malay-Muslim community in Singapore.

*Names used in this article are aliases

Introduction

Lifelong learning (LLL) is highly emphasised in Singapore, primarily driven by the SkillsFuture initiative. At its heart, SkillsFuture is meant to ensure Singaporeans can continue to be employed and stay employable even with the economic changes and disruptions expected in the future, including the loss of routine jobs to automation and computerisation.¹ Indeed, LLL has become even more important due to the economic disruptions caused by COVID19.² However, there are concerns about the low participation rate of Malay/Muslims in LLL.³ In the absence of more comprehensive data, the use of the SkillsFuture Credit (SFC) is taken here as a proxy indicator for participation.⁴ From the launch of the SFC scheme in 2016, up to 2020, about 83,000 members of

the Malay community had used their credits.⁵ Comparing this to the SkillsFuture-eligible sub-population – Malays aged 25 and above – we find an estimated usage rate of only 24%.⁶ At the national level, around 688,000 Singaporeans overall were reported to have used their credits, or around 27% of the eligible population.⁷ The participation of Malay women in SkillsFuture learning activities is of particular concern. While there are no publicly available figures on this, we can expect it to be lower than the national average as well, due to their relatively lower labour force participation rates (LFPR). Based on latest available figures from the Sample Household Survey 2018, the LFPR was 48.5% for Malay women, compared to 56.6% for all Singaporean women.⁸

If not properly addressed, the community's low rates of participation in LLL may cause them to be left behind even further as Singapore's economic transformation accelerates.

For one, a study in 2017 estimated that about 66% of Malay workers in Singapore were susceptible to automation and computerisation because of the over-concentration in medium-skilled jobs that rely on routine tasks.⁹

What could be some reasons behind this low participation level, particularly amongst women, and what can policymakers do to address this?

1 Committee on the Future Economy. (2017). Report of the Committee on the Future Economy: Pioneers of the next generation. https://www.mti.gov.sg/-/media/MTI/Resources/Publications/Report-of-the-Committee-on-the-Future-Economy/CFE_Full-Report.pdf

2 Tan, L. (2020). Change mindset towards skills training in Covid-19 and beyond: SkillsFuture Forum 2020 panel. Business Times. <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/companies-markets/skillsfuture-forum-2020/change-mindset-towards-skills-training-in-covid-19-and>

3 Theseira, W.E. & Nabilah Isa. (2017). The impact of automation on the Malay/Muslim community. The Karyawan, 12(2), 9-14. https://issuu.com/amp_singapore/docs/karyawan_vol_12_iss_2

Nadzirah Samsudin. (2018). Report on the closed-door discussions on the use of SkillsFuture and the employability of the Malay-Muslim community. *IPS Update Issue February 2018*. <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/news/newsletter/report-on-the-closed-door-discussion-on-the-use-of-skillsfuture-and-employability-of-the-malay-muslim-community>

Juhari, M.S. (2021). Helping Singapore's Malay-Muslim community beyond the pandemic. Today Online. <https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/helping-Singapore-malay-muslim-community-beyond-covid-19-pandemic>

4 The SkillsFuture Credit policy aims to encourage individuals to take ownership of their skills development and lifelong learning. Introduced in 2015, all Singaporeans aged 25 and above receive an opening credit of \$500. To further encourage Singaporeans to take timely action to reskill and upskill to seize opportunities in the future economy, a one-off SkillsFuture Credit top-up of \$500 was provided to every Singapore Citizen aged 25 years and above as at 31 December 2020. Additionally, a one-off SkillsFuture Credit of \$500 was provided to every Singapore Citizen (SC) aged 40 to 60 (inclusive) as at 31 December 2020 (SkillsFuture, 2022).

5 Yayasan MENDAKI. (2020). Mendaki-IPS Policy Dialogue 2020 [Video file]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y09JlLhLk>

6 Department of Statistics Singapore. (2021a). Census of Population 2020, Statistical Release 1: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion. <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/cop2020/sr1/cop2020sr1.pdf>

7 Ang, J. (2021). 540,000 Singaporeans benefited from SkillsFuture initiatives in 2020. The Straits Times. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/540000-singaporeans-benefited-from-skillsfuture-initiatives-in-2020-skillsfuture-singapore>

8 Housing and Development Board (2021). Sample Household Survey: Labour Force Participation Rate for HDB Resident Population, by Ethnic Group and Flat Type. https://data.gov.sg/dataset/labour-force-participation-rate-for-hdb-population-by-ethnic-group-and-flat-type?view_id=f911423f-26eb-444b-a04d-45e6cce74e48&resource_id=70c7887bb274-4b73-ada8-1e86818e454c

9 Theseira, W.E. & Isa, N. (2017). The impact of automation on the Malay/Muslim community. The Karyawan, 12(2), 9-14. https://issuu.com/amp_singapore/docs/karyawan_vol_12_iss_2

A study I recently carried out in collaboration with Yayasan MENDAKI provided some insights.¹⁰ The study explored the attitudes and perspectives of Malay-Muslim women towards LLL and how these are influenced by their lived experiences, socio-cultural worldviews and values. In-depth interviews were conducted with three women who were recently engaged by Yayasan MENDAKI to upskill and re-enter the workforce via the Back-to-Work Women programme (BWW). BWW aimed to assist women to re-enter the workforce by providing them with the opportunity to re-skill themselves and helping them with job placements. The programme was targeted at non-PMET¹¹ women who had left the job-market and had been unemployed for six months or more.¹² Given the qualitative research methodology adopted, and the small sample size, the findings are not meant to be generalisable across the whole population of Singapore Malay/Muslim women. Nonetheless, the insights could help build a better understanding amongst policymakers on the perspectives and worldview of Malay/Muslim women on LLL.

The study has three key findings. Firstly, all the women recognised the importance of upskilling and/or retraining for various reasons, but particularly for continued employment and to enhance their

income-earning potential. Secondly, Islam, and its emphasis on learning, plays a role in encouraging LLL. Finally, despite their enthusiasm for learning, all of them faced some barriers in doing so. The section below focuses on one set of barriers: gender norms and family roles.

A brief look at the definition of LLL would be useful at this point. An authoritative recent definition, by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), reads as follows,

“...the integration of learning and living, covering learning activities for people of all ages (children, young people, adults and the elderly, girls and boys, women and men) in all life-wide contexts (family, school, community, workplace and so on) and through a variety of modalities (formal, non-formal and informal), which, together, meet a wide range of learning needs and demands”.¹³

This is a comprehensive and inclusive definition that indicates who LLL is for (people at various life stages), the various sites where learning can take place (beyond just formal institutions), the various modalities it can take (beyond just formal forms of learning) and for what purposes (to meet a wide range of needs, beyond just for employability). It is also consistent with the UIL's long-held vision of LLL as a

distinctively humanistic endeavour; that is, LLL is meant to develop a complete person who is both empowered to work towards self-fulfilment and to contribute to his or her community's development.¹⁴

However, LLL has been interpreted in different ways, especially when it comes to policy implementation. Singapore's version of LLL, as delivered through the SkillsFuture initiative, seems to lean mostly towards the skills growth model, with its strong economic orientation and an emphasis on the value of learning for achieving economic outcomes.¹⁵ This strong economic orientation is particularly one that is of concern, because it may hinder the achievement of other potential benefits of LLL, such as personal fulfilment and social development. Some of the findings described below bear out this point.

Research findings

One of the key insights from the study is related to the constraining effect of gender norms within Malay-Muslim families on the women's choices to engage in learning. Admittedly, this may not be entirely unique to the Malay-Muslim community; there is evidence that traditional gender norms still hold sway in the broader Singapore society too.

¹⁰ Ghazali, R. (2022). Exploring Singaporean Malay-Muslim women's attitudes and perspectives on Lifelong Learning. [Unpublished Manuscript]. Singapore University of Social Sciences.

¹¹ PMET refers to those in jobs classified as Professionals, Managers, Executives and Technicians. Broadly speaking, these can be considered as white-collar roles, while non-PMETs are blue-collar roles (Ministry of Manpower, 2015).

¹² Yayasan MENDAKI. (n.d.). Women At Work (W@W). <https://www.mendaki.org.sg/programmes/women-at-work/>

¹³ UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. (2022). Lifelong Learning. <https://www UIL.unesco.org/en/unesco-institute/mandate/lifelong-learning>

¹⁴ Elfert, M. (2015). UNESCO, the Faure Report, the Delors Report, and the political utopia of lifelong learning. *European Journal of Education*, 50(1), 88-100. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12104>

¹⁵ Tan, C. (2017). Lifelong learning through the SkillsFuture movement in Singapore: challenges and prospects. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 36(3), 278-291. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2016.1241833>

It was reported that in 2017, 78% of prime working-age women outside the labour force in Singapore were not working because of family responsibilities, including being a caregiver.¹⁶

The key difference is the use of religious precepts to justify the gender norms, though some scholars have also argued that such patriarchal practices do not necessarily represent the true teachings of Islam.¹⁷

All the participants found their learning endeavours somewhat constrained by family and/or maternal obligations.¹⁸ Nini*, a mother of three young children, decided not to participate in any of the BWW activities as she was their main caregiver. Her husband was the sole breadwinner, and though his job as a ride-share driver potentially gave him some flexibility in working hours, times were bad, and he needed to “go all out” to earn for the family. Her husband, the only person she consults on her learning decisions, had thus advised her not to take on any courses that are longer than half a day. Another participant, Natasha*, was a single mother

of two teens. She was only able to start to pursue learning recently, taking on BWW and other WSQ courses, as her children are now more independent. However, her time devoted to learning was still constrained as she had to work to support the family as the sole breadwinner. She also felt obliged to continue giving attention to her children and cook for them despite her busy schedule. The third participant, Khadijah*, had the most autonomy. As she had a small household of three, including an adult son and her husband, she had less caregiving and household duties. Still, when she was previously working full-time, she was not able to participate in learning activities as her evenings and weekends were for family, including fulfilling weekend wedding invitations. Only when she became unemployed, last year, did she feel freer to participate in various courses such as Yayasan MENDAKI’s BWW.

The participants tended to prioritise learning for employment and to enhance their income-earning potential when pursuing LLL activities. Other purposes for learning, such as to build and strengthen social networks, or for self-fulfilment, were given less

emphasis. This has a lot to do with SkillsFuture’s skills growth orientation, and how subsidies and credits are correspondingly designed to support that. For example, Nini* was keen to learn sewing or painting, out of interest and not for income-earning purposes but held back as she found it hard to identify such courses which are SFC-eligible.

Indeed, the effect of gender norms in constraining the LLL activities of women has been observed in other developed countries using the skills growth model. As Leathwood argues, while on the one hand, women’s unpaid labour in the home, family and community tends to be unrecognised and undervalued, on the other, they are also often denied access to affordable and good-quality childcare.¹⁹ This in turn limits their access to education and training. They are thus often trapped in low-paid and low-status jobs, with little prospect of reaping the promise of career progression through LLL. This is the situation faced by Khadijah*, who though just a few years away from the statutory retirement age, still must undergo retraining in order to transit to a low-paying job in the security field. However, she also now has to contend with physical constraints because of her age. Natasha*, too,

¹⁶ Hingorani, S. (2018). Commentary: The unequal, unnoticed life of a female worker. Channel News Asia. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/gender-equality-equal-pay-singapore-work-cpf-life-savings-794466>

¹⁷ Abukari, A. (2014). Education of Women in Islam: A Critical Islamic Interpretation of the Quran. *Religious Education*, 109(1), 4-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2014.868203>

Irwan, N. (2018). What Is the Role of a Woman in Islam? *Muslim.sg*. <https://muslim.sg/articles/what-is-the-role-of-a-woman-in-islam>

¹⁸ Pseudonyms are used in place of real names to protect the participants’ identities.

¹⁹ Leathwood, C. (2006). Gendered constructions of lifelong learning and the learner in the UK policy context. In B. Francis & C. Leathwood (Eds.), *Gender and lifelong learning: Critical feminist engagements* (pp. 176-183). Routledge.

²⁰ Leathwood, C. (2006). Gendered constructions of lifelong learning and the learner in the UK policy context. In B. Francis & C. Leathwood (Eds.), *Gender and lifelong learning: Critical feminist engagements* (pp. 176-183). Routledge.

²¹ Blackmore, J. (2006). Unprotected participation in lifelong learning and the politics of hope. *Gender and Lifelong Learning: Critical Feminist Engagements* (pp. 9-27). Routledge.

had to sacrifice her ambitions for many years to raise her children as a single mother, only to have to go through various forms of training programmes to seek new employment opportunities.

Privileging certain forms of learning over others could have a particularly negative impact on women. Studies across various contexts have found that women tend to “find their knowledge and prior learning invalidated, or belittled, by the dissecting discursive knives that delineate between ‘formal and informal’ knowledge, ‘academic and vocational’, ‘community and individual’, ‘public and private’”²⁰. This could mean that the soft skills they developed through caregiving activities at home, for example, are not valued in the workplace. They are also deprived of opportunities to develop social capital, a potentially valuable resource.²¹ For example, participation in informal courses, in areas such as baking or even religious learning, could help the women develop strong social networks with other like-minded individuals who could then be important sources of information and motivation as they navigate the challenges of parenthood and employment together.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

Malay/Muslim women in the study do see value in LLL. However, what holds them back are the various barriers and challenges they face in learning.

This suggests that in order to get them to be more fully engaged in LLL, just communicating the value of learning is not sufficient.

More effort needs to be taken to help dismantle the barriers they face and to extend support for them to overcome the challenges.

Put differently, since the benefits of learning for them are uncertain, the authorities should take a larger share of the risks and costs from learning.

In the case of young mothers like Nini*, for example, perhaps more could be done to assist them with childcare needs on days that she needs to go for training. The training could be broken down into bite-sized, self-paced components to make it easier for the women to fit in between their childcare, domestic, and work-related duties.

Lingering traditional beliefs on women’s role in the family, which have a constraining effect on learning participation, also needs to be tackled. Encouragingly, at the national level, steps have recently been taken to do so with the publication of the Singapore Women’s White Paper.²² This 25-point action plan mentions efforts to establish flexible work arrangements as a workplace norm, provide support for women re-entering the workforce, and

ease the caregiving load of women, among others. The way forward could be for Malay/Muslim religious and community leaders to work together with other champions at the national level to communicate and implement these recommendations in culturally sensitive ways. Since women in the study recognised how Islam encourages learning amongst all its adherents, regardless of gender, this could be a good starting point for conversations on LLL in the community.

Finally, the study highlighted the shortcomings of the skills growth model, driven by pragmatist beliefs, and having an excessive focus on one purpose of learning to the detriment of other purposes. In the true, humanistic spirit of LLL, and for the sake of the women’s well-being, policy makers should look into ways to recognise, value, and encourage other forms of learning too.

²² SG Together & Celebrating SG Women. (2022). The white paper on Singapore women’s development: Towards a fairer and more inclusive society. <https://www.reach.gov.sg/-/media/REACH/Reach-Files/Singapore-Women-Development/White-Paper/White-Paper-on-Singapore-Womens-Development.ashx>

DID YOU KNOW?

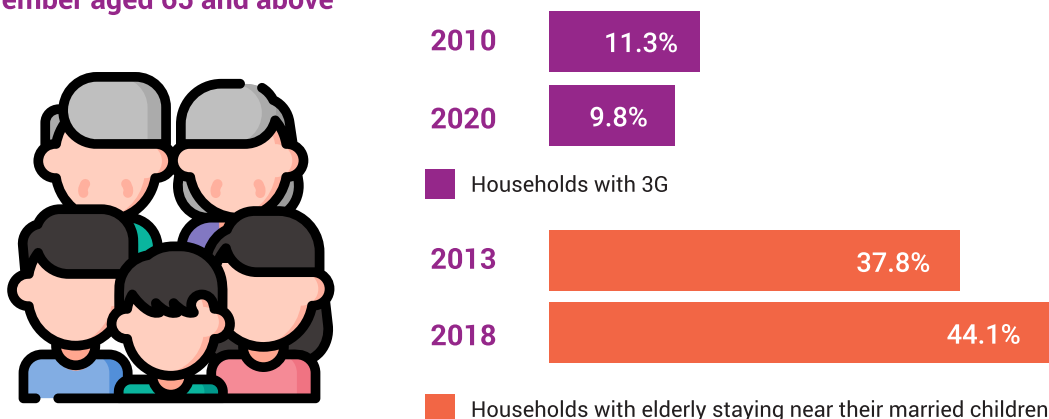
Proportion of economically inactive Malay female residents

	Resident			Malay		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Economically Active	1,246,136 (74.9%)	1,097,349 (61.1%)	2,343,485 (67.7%)	164,573 (76.1%)	123,459 (53.4%)	288,032 (64.3%)
Economically Inactive	417,424 (25.1%)	698,185 (38.9%)	1,115,608 (32.3%)	51,790 (23.9%)	107,925 (46.6%)	159,715 (35.7%)
Total	1,663,560 (100%)	1,795,534 (100%)	3,459,093 (100%)	216,363 (100%)	231,384 (100%)	519,416 (100%)

Source: Department of Statistics Singapore. (2020). Singapore Census of Population 2020, Statistical Release 2: Households, Geographic Distribution, Transport and Difficulty in Basic Activities.

3G Households

Majority were couple-based households and more than three-fourth had an elderly member aged 65 and above



The proportion of households with three or more generations (“3G households”) decreased from 11.3% in 2010 to 9.8% in 2020. While the proportion of 3G households have decreased, the HDB’s Sample Household Survey 2018 found that more elderly residents (i.e. resident population aged 65 and above) are living near their married children (i.e. in the same block, in a nearby block or in the same estate)

Source: Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2022). Families and Households in Singapore, 2010 – 2020. Statistics Series Paper No. 1/2022.

Society and Infrastructures to Support Working Mothers



KelasMateMatika Graduation Ceremony cum PlayFest 2022, ITE College West, December 2022



Nurshafiqah Sapiee
Executive Officer
Perform in School
Yayasan MENDAKI

Nurshafiqah Sapiee is an Education Executive in Yayasan MENDAKI. Nurshafiqah has a deep interest in language, sociology and psychology and the intersections between them. She is a keen observer of the world around and beyond her, and desires to truly understand what makes people tick. She is grateful to have found a supportive partner to navigate the swells and troughs of parenthood together with. And are both blessed with an adorable little one.



Introduction

As a new mother, the transition to work has not been easy. In the few months since I returned to work, family members, friends, and colleagues have shared their past and present challenges as a working mother. The experiences they shared are diverse yet the

challenges they face are so similar in nature; the sleepless nights, the sudden 180 degrees change of life as they knew it, the constant worries, the sheer exhaustion, the juggling of the multitude of things in a span of 24 hours, 7 days a week, — that it was easy to empathise with one another's challenging journey of motherhood.

In today's world, society expects both men and women to contribute equally to society and the economy. Hence women are being called to juggle both parenthood and their careers. Women are not only expected to contribute to the population count and give birth, but they are also expected to be an active contributor to the community and economy¹. Yet, despite the call for more women to enter the workforce, the common workplace is often not created with a mother in mind and lacks inclusivity for working mothers.

The needs of working mothers in Singapore are still far behind in the list of priorities in Singapore's work environment. In August this year, MP Louis Ng spoke in parliament of the laments and challenges nursing mothers faced, especially the lack of pumping facilities in public spaces, including workspaces². Mothers have had to resort to pump in unsanitary and undignified places like the toilets or storerooms.

In a local study, Ong and colleagues reported how the most important reason for working mothers to stop breastfeeding was attributable to work and that more breastfeeding-friendly initiatives need to be put in place at workplaces to encourage working mothers to continue breastfeeding upon returning to work.³

Additionally, a local survey of about 970 respondents conducted by the Breastfeeding Mothers' Support Group (BMSG) Singapore found that eight in 10 working mothers said one of the things they need most is a lactation room.⁴ In the same survey, two-thirds of nursing mothers surveyed said they do not have time to pump while at work. The time constraint caused them to stop pumping breast milk, completely. This prompted Mr Louis Ng (Nee Soon GRC) to propose that lactation breaks be legislated during the Committee Supply Debate this year.

It is also important to note that Singapore is one of the few countries that do not provide paid lactation breaks out of 97 countries surveyed. 73 per cent of the 97 countries had laws for such breaks.⁵ Many women in the BMSG survey cited the stress of having to work while

pumping, or the lack of facilities whittles the milk supply. Such challenges present an insurmountable hurdle for mothers to enter the workforce as they would be discouraged to head back to work, knowing there are no safe spaces at the workplace or allocated time for them to take lactation breaks.

This not only adds to the psychological burden of those who have had to unfairly "choose" between having a career and having children. However, to manage the rising cost of living in Singapore, dual-income families have become a norm. A study conducted by Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in 2021 revealed that married couples with two children aged between 7 and 18 years will need at least S\$6,426 a month to meet their household's basic needs.⁶ With Singapore's medium salary at \$4680, this means that both couples need to work to support their families.⁷

When my maternity leave was over, and I had to return to work, the guilt I felt was immense. Unwilling to add weight to our ageing parents' shoulders, and with no other viable means of childcare support, returning to work means leaving my infant to the care of strangers at the infant care centre. I still struggle with

¹ UN Women. (2018). Facts and Figures: Economic Empowerment. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures>

² Ng, L. (2022). Committee of Supply 2022 debate, Day 3: Louis Ng on parent care leave, breastfeeding breaks [Video]. Channel News Asia. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/watch/committee-supply-2022-debate-day-3-louis-ng-parent-care-leave-breastfeeding-breaks-2539321>

³ Ong, G., Yap, M., Li, F. L., & Choo, T. B. (2005). Impact of working status on breastfeeding in Singapore: evidence from the National Breastfeeding Survey 2001. *The European Journal of Public Health*, 15(4), 424-430. <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/cki030>

⁴ Teng, A. (2022). Provide more lactation rooms and paid nursing breaks for working mothers. *The Straits Times*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/provide-more-lactation-rooms-and-paid-nursing-breaks-for-working-mothers-says-louis-ng>

⁵ International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN). (2020). State of Maternity Protection in 97 countries. <https://www.ibfan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Maternity-Protection-in-97-countries.pdf>

⁶ Low, Y.J. (2021). Parents with 2 children need to earn about S\$5,800 to \$6,400 monthly for basic standard of living: Study. *Today Online*. <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/parents-2-children-need-earn-about-s5800-6400-monthly-basic-standard-living-study>

⁷ Ministry of Manpower. (2022). Summary Table Income. <https://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Income-Summary-Table.aspx>

the guilt even to this day, as a mother to a 9-month-old. And I am not alone in feeling this way. Mum guilt is the feeling of guilt, doubt, anxiety, or uncertainty by mothers who worry they have fallen short. A survey conducted by Focus on the Family Singapore on 800 mothers found that 4 out of 5 mothers in Singapore experienced this mum guilt.⁸ When these feelings of guilt are left unaddressed, it festers and can lead to more negative behaviours such as self-harm and depression. As mothers are increasingly expected to do more and more and are stretched thin, the sheer physical exhaustion and the psychological impact affects her ability to take on day to day challenges.

I am grateful for the support of my husband with whom I share the load from the days' responsibilities. Despite my grievances over having to leave my child at the infant care, I consider myself one of the lucky ones who has managed to secure a spot there. A few friends of mine have difficulties securing an infant care slot for their infant despite contacting numerous centres. Even though there are childcare facilities for infants and toddlers to cater to working mothers, the centres are inadequate and slots insufficient to meet the increasing demand for childcare support. It is worrying to see the government

highlighting the shortage of pre-school places for infants up to four years old, despite adding almost 50,000 childcare and kindergarten places in young estates.⁹ Those like my friends who struggle to find placement for their children have had to source for other alternative solutions that were not ideal; some had to take no-pay leave which cause a substantial dent to their family finances, others employ live-in foreign helpers to take care of their child while they were at work which affect their privacy at home.

Securing a place for my child at the infant care centre, albeit a weight off my shoulders, introduces another challenge when the centre becomes a hot bed for illnesses. During the pandemic in particular, infant care centres take the brunt of infections as children with low immunity and no means of protection against viruses and illnesses, mingle together in a confined space for hours each day. My child's centre has seen two Covid-19 outbreaks within a span of four months, with my child being constantly reinfected from bouts of flu viruses that have gone around in his centre. While we understand that it is impossible to prevent infections in such contagious places, the constant worry that my child will fall ill from his classmates,

takes a toll on me and my husband. And when my child does get ill, it throws a spanner on an already demanding daily routine, particularly challenging when we, as primary caregivers, have been infected.

However, with the pandemic, there is now a greater understanding of business continuity measures, and the realisation that remote work is often possible. The impact of flexible working arrangements on work life balance has been heavily documented in research.¹⁰ This has resulted in a positive shift in government's stance on flexible working arrangements. In 2020, Manpower Minister Ms Josephine Teo pledged that the government will support flexible work arrangements to help working parents balance work and family commitments.¹¹ This has allowed some respite for parents, especially working mothers, who takes on multiple roles. However, many local companies are still resistant to take this leap, preferring to remain at a default work from office arrangements, citing lower productivity and inability to trust their charges.¹²

Many companies and organisations remain unsympathetic to the plight of working mothers and would consider them a liability rather than an asset.¹³ Though there

⁸ Tai, J. (2019). 4 in 5 women in Singapore experienced mum guilt says survey. The Straits Times. <https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/4-in-5-singaporean-women-experience-mum-guilt-says-survey>

⁹ Low, Y. J. & Goh, C. (2022). The Big Read: The pre-school conundrum - why shortage of places persists in some estates despite millions invested. *Channel News Asia*. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/pre-school-childcare-shortage-places-estates-big-read-2786461>

¹⁰ Castrillon, C. (2022). Why Flexible Work Boosts Employee Productivity. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolinecastrillon/2022/03/23/why-flexible-work-boosts-employee-productivity/?sh=4b451d046e4b>

Shifrin, N. V., & Michel, J. S. (2022). Flexible work arrangements and employee health: A meta-analytic review. *Work & Stress*, 36(1), 60-85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2021.1936287>

Mullins, L. B., Charbonneau, É., & Riccucci, N. M. (2021). The effects of family responsibilities discrimination on public employees' satisfaction and turnover intentions: Can flexible work arrangements help?. *Review of Public Personnel Administration*. 41(2), 384-410. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0734371X19894035>

¹¹ Teng, A. (2022). Budget debate: Flexible work arrangements key to help working parents manage responsibilities. The Straits Times. <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/parliament-flexible-work-arrangements-key-to-help-working-parents-manage-responsibilities>

¹² Mathews, M., Phoa, F., Hou, M., & Lim, E. (2022). Attitudes towards Work and Workplace Arrangements Amidst COVID-19 in Singapore. *IPS Working Papers No. 45*. https://kyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/working-paper-45_attitudes-towards-work-and-workplace-arrangements-amidst-covid-19-in-singapore.pdf

¹³ Hingorani, S. (2019). Why are Mothers Penalised at Work. *AWARE*. <https://www.aware.org.sg/2019/05/why-are-mothers-penalised-at-work/>

have been significant changes made in policies, they remain insufficient to allay the challenges of parenthood. It is necessary to understand that the true cost of juggling parenthood and careers are not in the school fees of childcare; it is in the hours lost each morning to get everyone ready to get to where they need to. It is in the constant rush and frenzy and having to head to the washroom just trying to catch your breath for that few minutes while you relieve yourself. It is in missing numerous workdays due to colds and fevers, particularly during the pandemic. It is in seeking the understanding of your co-workers because your child woke up with a fever and could not go to school. It is the guilt of not seeing your children enough, yet unable to find some me-time to get your head straight. It is in rushing to get back home from work despite spending half of your monthly on taxi rides, just so that the child will not be the last one getting picked up from school.

But it is not just the infrastructure and policies that are inadequate for parents and working mums. Several segments of society remain unmoved by the challenges faced by parents. A recent debate on social media sparked when a restaurant remarked that they will kick customers with crying children out of their restaurant. This prompted two schools of thought; one for and the other against the establishment.

In the working world, hostile attitudes towards working mothers are not few and far between. I have heard of many stories from friends and family members of hostile bosses and

colleagues who are unempathetic and give their working mother colleagues a hard time due to their circumstances. Some organisational leaders and company CEOs consider working mothers a liability than an asset; their need to juggle motherhood and their careers is seen as inefficiency. In a study conducted by Indeed in 2022, women say they receive judgement from supervisors and colleagues when leaving early to fetch their children from childcare centres or when there is a child-related emergency.¹⁶

Some parents also say they tend to be afraid of being penalised in their performance if they took advantage of family-friendly policies offered.

For Singapore to achieve a higher birth rate and for women to become active members of society, there needs to be a more nuanced reassessment of what it means to embody the phrase, “It takes a village to raise a child”. Offices, organisations, civil society, and individuals need to start creating a better working environment for working mothers. Leaders and upper management must not be afraid to break through and make flexible systemic structures that are punishing for parents and to look into creating a better and more inclusive environment for everyone to be able to give their level best.

As important, or even more so, as a society, we need to become empathetic to the challenges faced by parents. If there is a call for mothers to return to the workforce, society must create

1) a conducive working environment for them and 2) a society more empathetic to the struggles and challenges of mothers. It is high time that we engage our workplaces, managers, and leaders to pave the way for working mothers. It takes a concerted effort by the entire society to create an environment where a woman feels equally valued and supported in carrying out her many responsibilities.

¹⁶ Indeed. (2022). As Moms Return to the Office, Companies Need to Demonstrate Empathy. <https://www.indeed.com/lead/as-moms-return-to-the-office-companies-need-to-demonstrate-empathy>

DID YOU KNOW?

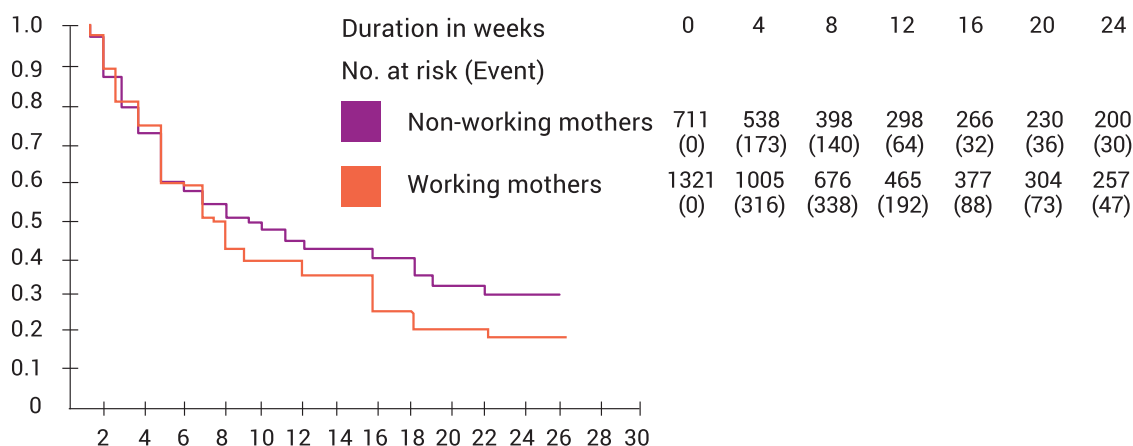
Rate of breastfeeding

Exclusive Breastfeeding (% of mothers)



Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore. (2020). National Breastfeeding Survey.

Probability of breastfeeding for working and non-working mothers



Source: Ong, G., Yap, M., Li, F. L., & Choo, T. B. (2005). Impact of working status on breastfeeding in Singapore: evidence from the National Breastfeeding Survey 2001. *The European Journal of Public Health*, 15(4), 424-430. <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/cki030>

Number of places and fees of care centres in Singapore

As at end of	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Class A (Infant care)						
Total number of centres	471	512	578	629	661	702
Total number of places	7,017	7,628	8,969	9,695	10,454	11,552
Total enrolment	4,250	4,776	5,364	6,292	7,365	8,935
Average full day fees	\$1,476	\$1,499	\$1,516	\$1,442	\$1,457	\$1,451
Median full day fees	\$1,357	\$1,357	\$1,364	\$1,275	\$1,275	\$1,275
Class B (Child care)						
Total number of centres	1,324	1,389	1,479	1,532	1,542	1,578
Total number of places	128,207	139,359	156,950	166,235	170,932	178,939
Total enrolment	101,905	109,542	118,296	124,549	130,062	138,966
Average full day fees	\$1,013	\$1,029	\$1,062	\$1,013	\$1,025	\$1,017
Median full day fees	\$856	\$856	\$856	\$800	\$800	\$760
Class C (Kindergarten)						
Total number of centres	467	453	412	404	401	401
Total number of places	55,967	53,746	48,402	46,213	45,140	43,588
Total enrolment	61,645	58,529	55,074	51,906	44,482	38,311
Average full day fees	\$317	\$317	\$357	\$489	\$403	\$390
Median full day fees	\$171	\$180	\$200	\$190	\$200	\$200
Number of SPARK certified centres	568	790	879	948	985	991

Source: Early Childhood Development Agency, Singapore. (2022). Annual Factsheet on ECDC Services.

Social Policy and Its Impact on Keeping Family Strong and Relevant in Singapore



Amazing Read @ Heartlands, Pasir Ris East Community Club, October 2022



Dr Mathew Mathews
Head of Social Lab
Principal Research Fellow
Institute of Policy Studies
National University of Singapore

Dr Mathew Mathews is Head of Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Social Lab, a centre for social indicator research and a Principal Research Fellow at the IPS. To date, Mathews has been involved in over fifty research projects, most of them addressing social policy issues. These have included research using both quantitative and qualitative methods on race, religion, immigrant integration, family, ageing and poverty. Mathews also studies the impact of social programmes on social issues and has been involved in a number of evaluations on the usefulness of various government initiatives. He has taught courses on social policy and has published in a range of academic and media outlets. Mathews currently sits on the boards of OnePeople.sg and National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre. He is a Research Advisor to the Ministry of Social and Family Development and is part of the VWOs-Charities Capability Fund Panel and Families for Life Council.

Singapore support for the family institution

Findings from the 2020 World Values Survey (WVS) of 2,000 Singaporean residents suggest that family is their most important priority. Over 90% indicated that family is a “very important” priority, among others such as work, leisure, friends, politics, and religion. The second most cited item was friends, with just under 40% who chose that as a very important priority.¹

Not only do Singaporeans highly value family, they also have expectations about the institution. The average Singaporean believes that legally constituted heterosexual marriages should be the appropriate site of reproduction. This is borne out from the results of several large-scale population surveys. An IPS survey completed in 2019 of 4,000 Singaporean respondents revealed that 65% of those who were surveyed believed it was always or almost always wrong for pregnancies to happen outside marriage.² Furthermore, results from the WVS highlighted that only just over a quarter of Singaporean respondents agreed that homosexual parents were just as good as other couples in parenting.



The Marriage and Parenthood Survey 2021, which examined the attitudes of over 5,000 singles and married persons, reported that 80% of singles below the age of 40 expected to marry, while 77% also wanted to have children. Among those surveyed who were married, 92% expected to have two or more children.³

Singaporeans also believe in filial responsibilities — 81% of respondents in the WVS expect that adult children should care for their older parents. Moreover, 86% agreed that their main goal as children is to make their parents proud.⁴

The traditional expectations of family form and function that Singaporeans have stand in stark contrast with how the institution is perceived in Western societies. For instance, the majority polled by the WVS in Europe viewed

homosexual couples to be just as good in their parenting abilities (Mathew et al, 2021) while more than 80% of women in Denmark, France, Italy, and Sweden had little reservation about having children without being married (Nippon.com, 2021).^{5 6}

How social policies have shaped the institution of family in Singapore

The strong support for the family in Singapore is certainly a product of our traditional cultures, which emphasised family as a fundamental organising principle. All our ethnic festivals come with traditions to gather the family together, honour elders, and reinforce the importance of maintaining the traditional notions of family. But cultural and tradition alone are

¹ Mathew, M., Teo, K. K., Tay, M. & Wang, A. (2021). Our Singaporean values: key findings from the World Values Survey. IPS Exchange Series No. 16. <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/ips-exchange-series-16.pdf>

² Mathew, M., Lim, L., Selvarajan, S. (2019). Religion, morality and conservatism in Singapore. IPS Working Papers No.34. <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/ips-working-paper-34—religion-morality-and-conservatism-in-singapore.pdf>

³ Prime Minister's Office. (2022). Marriage and parenthood survey 2021: Strong aspirations among Singaporeans to start families, flexible work arrangements preferred <https://www.strategygroup.gov.sg/media-centre/press-releases/marriage-and-parenthood-survey-2021/>

⁴ Mathew, M., Teo, K. K., Tay, M. & Wang, A. (2021). Our Singaporean values: key findings from the World Values Survey. IPS Exchange Series No. 16. <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/ips-exchange-series-16.pdf>

⁵ Mathew, M., Teo, K. K., Tay, M. & Wang, A. (2021). Our Singaporean values: key findings from the World Values Survey. IPS Exchange Series No. 16. <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/ips-exchange-series-16.pdf>

⁶ Nippon.com (2021). Women in Asia less open to having children outside marriage than European counterparts. <https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h00969/>

insufficient to explain why Singaporeans are committed to the family. Social policy has certainly played a substantial role in shaping family values.

Singapore's social policies valorise the role of the family in society. Among the five shared values adopted by Parliament in 1991 was the value of "family as the basic unit of society". The extract below from the white paper illustrates this value:

"The family is the fundamental building block out of which larger social structures can be stably constructed. It is the group within which human beings most naturally express their love for parents, spouse, and children, and find happiness and fulfilment. It is the best way human societies have found to provide children a secure and nurturing environment in which to grow up, to pass on the society's store of wisdom and experience from generation to generation, and to look after the needs of the elderly"⁷

The white paper then noted that there have been trends in developed societies which have placed "heavier reliance on the state to take care of the aged, and more permissive social mores, such as increasing acceptance of "alternative lifestyles", casual sexual relationships and single parenthood"⁸. Singapore however was to be critical of these trends as they could destabilise the family unit.

This notion of family continues to be communicated through government discourse and subsequent policies. The Broadcasting Act restricts media content that promotes values antithetical to family values. The Ministry of Education's family and sexuality education programmes, which are part of its Character and Citizenship Education programme, teaches students "about being responsible family members, and to be grateful for the role their families play in shaping who they are and who they become."⁹ Moreover, the programme encourages students to broaden "their definition of success to include quality family life".

Housing policies to regulate the high demand for affordable housing in Singapore prioritise those who are married. Singles are only eligible to purchase an HDB flat when they reach 35 years of age; however, those who are married with young children have priority in the queue for new Built to Order (BTO) flats. There was substantial backlash after an announcement was made that singles would not be eligible for public housing in prime locations in 2021. The Minister for National Development reasserted that this was not a matter of excluding groups, but rather prioritising those who would need it more.¹⁰ Yet, single unwed mothers who probably most need support for housing

are seemingly overlooked. They receive only half the grant amount compared to married, divorced, or widowed parents to purchase resale flats. Moreover, if they need interim housing as they wait for a BTO flat, they are not eligible for subsidised rental housing of more spacious three and four room flats. They are only eligible for flats under the Public Rental Scheme which do not have flats of a larger size.¹¹

As part of its pro-natalist policies, the government offers substantial grants for couples upon the birth of their Singaporean children. Couples would receive a cash gift of \$8,000 for each of their first and second child, and \$10,000 for their third child. However, here again as in the case of public housing, only married parents are eligible, suggesting that building a traditional family unit, with a married husband and wife is desirable. In April 2022, the Minister of State, Ms Sun Xueling echoed this rationale in a Straits Times interview by stating, "Most Singaporeans agree that marriage and parenthood within marriage provides the most stable and permanent environment to raise children. Our family policy upholds these social mores"¹². She also asserted that the range of pro-family incentives, which included Baby Bonus cash gifts, child-related tax reliefs, and public housing, was meant to send a "strong signal that our society continues to value family formation through marriage".¹³

⁷ Parliament of Singapore. (1991). White Paper on Shared Values. Singapore: Government of Singapore.

⁸ Parliament of Singapore. (1991). White Paper on Shared Values. Singapore: Government of Singapore.

⁹ Ministry of Education. (2021). Character and Citizenship Education Syllabus. <https://www.moe.gov.sg/-/media/files/secondary/syllabuses/cce/2021-character-and-citizenship-education-syllabus-secondary.pdf>

¹⁰ Lim, J. (2021). Excluding singles from future HDB flats in prime areas not a 'step backwards': Desmond Lee. Today Online. <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/excludingsingles-future-hdb-flats-prime-areas-not-step-backwards-desmond-lee>

¹¹ Housing & Development Board. (2022). Helping Single Parent Households. <https://www.hdb.gov.sg/about-us/news-and-publications/publications/hdbspeaks/helpingsingleparent-households>

¹² Tan, T. (2022). Govt's support for family extends to unwed parents and their children: Sun Xueling. The Straits Times. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/community/govts-support-for-family-extends-to-unwed-parents-and-their-children-sun-xueling>

¹³ Tan, T. (2022). Govt's support for family extends to unwed parents and their children: Sun Xueling. The Straits Times. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/community/govts-support-for-family-extends-to-unwed-parents-and-their-children-sun-xueling>

Since 2016 though, the government has relaxed its rules to allow unmarried parents equal access as married parents to also obtain funds up to \$12,000 in their child's savings account. This relaxation was based on the government's agenda to increase support to all children, especially the most vulnerable, so they would not lose out on early opportunities, which are crucial for success in later years. Unwed parents were recognised as disproportionately disadvantaged.

Children's filial responsibilities to their elderly parents are enshrined in the Maintenance of Parents Act, enacted in 1995 and subsequently revised. It allows "parents who are unable to support their basic needs due to old age or illness [to] get support from their children who are capable of supporting them but are not doing so".¹⁴ This is done through mediation assistance and counselling and where non-adversarial means do not bear fruit, a claim can be lodged at the Tribunal for the Maintenance of Parents Act.

Social policies and its role in building and strengthening the family unit

While social policies have helped to uphold traditional family values, these values and the importance on building a traditional family unit can weaken over time. As such social policy needs to not only highlight the

ideal forms of family, it also has to facilitate family formation and strengthening.

Managing cost of raising children

While the latest Marriage and Parenthood survey shows that Singaporean singles want to marry and have children, and those who are married idealise having two or more children, the reality is that many have not achieved their aspirations, and this is not because they do not value family formation. Singapore's dismal total fertility rate can be explained by other factors that couples have to consider. For instance, when married couples were asked in the survey, why they did not have more children, 64% chose financial cost as one of their top three reasons. Noticeably, there were more who noted financial cost as a barrier for procreation in 2021 than when the previous wave of the survey was conducted. In 2016, 61% indicated they felt this way.¹⁵

In order to allow couples to realise their parenthood dreams, increased attention has to be given to managing the various pain points, with child-related costs being at the top of the list. In 2017, the government made efforts to find more affordable options for infant milk powder, given that the prices of formula milk had become substantially more expensive than in other countries. But other than providing alternatives, public

education efforts and legislation have to quell market tendencies to boost demand for premium services on a whole range of child products and services directed to prey on parental guilt and aspirations to give children only the best. In its 2017 report, the Competition Commission of Singapore highlighted the use of aggressive marketing tactics by manufacturers and distributors of formula milk who were intent on having parents choose premium milk products, even though there was little credible scientific evidence of their purported superior nutritional value. This "premiumisation" tendency extends to childcare and educational services, as well as recreational activities.¹⁷ These not only drive-up costs and make it seem like child-raising costs are unachievable, but they also exert unnecessary stress on parents when they are unable to keep up with what the market advertises as ideal products for their children. To this end, the government has over the years developed alternative services which are much more affordable and has sought to signal the quality of these products. For instance, to curb the escalating demand for private preschool education — which has been marketed as better able to prepare children for the demands of primary school compared to non-profit kindergarten options provided by PAP Community Foundation and NTUC's First Campus— the Ministry of Education (MOE) has set up highly affordable kindergartens. This reduces the apparent

¹⁴ Ministry of Social and Family Development. (n.d.). The Maintenance of Parents Act. <https://www.msf.gov.sg/policies/Helping-the-Needy-and-Vulnerable/Supporting-Vulnerable-Elderly/Seeking-Maintenance-from-Children/>

¹⁵ Prime Minister's Office Singapore. (2022). Marriage and parenthood survey 2021: Strong aspirations among Singaporeans to start families, flexible work arrangements preferred. <https://www.strategygroup.gov.sg/media-centre/press-releases/marriage-and-parenthood-survey-2021/>

¹⁶ Tay, T.F. (2017). Parliament: Govt will take steps to ensure affordable infant milk powder options. The Straits Times. <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/parliament-government-will-take-steps-to-ensure-affordable-infant-milk-powder-options>

¹⁷ Competition Commission of Singapore. (2017). CCS's findings on the market inquiry into the supply of formula milk. <https://www.ccs.gov.sg/media-and-consultation/newsroom/media-releases/formula-milk-market-inquiry-findings>

advantage that expensive private pre-school education can offer to prepare children adequately for primary education, given that MOE is best placed to ensure that its kindergarten curriculum provides the competencies pre-schoolers need to do well in its primary schools.

Interventions in the work and family nexus

Another area of substantial concern that affects married couples' aspirations to have children relates to the work-family nexus. Besides the ample supply of quality childcare (and increasingly now, even infant care), reduced levies for employing migrant domestic workers and government-subsidised childcare sick leave and parenting leave, much has to be done to guide employers to create family-friendly workplaces.

While the flexibility of working from home has been discussed ad nauseum since 2010 when the government reviewed its thrust to tackle Singapore's below replacement fertility rate, it was the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic which mainstreamed flexible work arrangements such as working from home. Now with all restrictions at the workplace being lifted, employers may prefer workers to return to the office every day.

However, an IPS report based on the tracking of sentiments of about 2,000 Singaporeans throughout the course of the pandemic noted that those with dependants had a much stronger desire to work from home or have flexibility.¹⁸ The study also

showed that those with younger children who had to return to office on most days, tended to report lower levels of well-being. Thus, it is imperative that focused attention be given to get employers serious about their corporate purpose to provide quality work arrangements that are catered to workers' family needs. Policies may be required to mandate employers to do all they can to make flexible work arrangements possible in their work settings through organisational and job re-design. Funds for consultancy services to better work-life harmony practices in organisations are already available, although some employers are probably hesitant to embark on such a change. It would mean an overhaul of existing, often informal systems at workplaces, which keep parents with children from taking childcare or child sick leave to be with their children, for fears of angering colleagues and the management team.

Facilitating parenting competencies

Parenting has always been a challenging endeavour, but with COVID-19, it has reached a new level of difficulty, given children's reduced opportunities to interact easily outside the home, with mandatory home-based learning and little outdoor play. An IPS report published in July 2022 showed that the top three issues that at least a third of parents were concerned about, coming out from the pandemic, were the social development of

children (43%), development of unhealthy lifestyle habits such as too much screen time (42%), and emotional development of children (35%).¹⁹ These concerns reflect that parenting challenges are increasingly evolving and perhaps becoming more complicated. It also requires parents to draw from beyond their own childhood experiences to navigate parenting in a new era. State-sponsored programming is thus necessary to provide opportunities for, and popularise, such learning. The Ministry of Social and Family Development has in recent years rolled out in schools the evidence-based parenting programme, Triple P, as well as SignPost for parents who have to care for children with greater need.²⁰ Other evidence-informed programmes are also being tested to cater to parents with children of younger age groups, as well as grandparents, who are increasingly being recognised as crucial caregivers to young children. But such educational programmes need to meet the time-starved schedules of young parents, who often are unnerved by new demands – and so new methods of learning made possible through e-learning portals need to be accelerated and mainstreamed.

Conclusion

While family is viewed as a priority for all groups in society, it was noticeable from the WVS and other research that some who go through adverse events in the course of family life may become less enamoured with this institution. The 2020 WVS showed that 96.2% of married respondents reported that family was very important, in

¹⁸ Mathew, M., Phoa, F., Hou, M. and Lim, E. (2022). Attitudes towards work and workplace arrangements amidst COVID-19 in Singapore. IPS Working Paper No. 45. https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/working-paper-45_attitudes-towards-work-and-workplace-arrangements-amidst-covid-19-in-singapore.pdf

¹⁹ Mathew, M., Phoa, F., Hou, M. and Lim, E. (2022). Attitudes towards work and workplace arrangements amidst COVID-19 in Singapore. IPS Working Paper No. 45. https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/working-paper-45_attitudes-towards-work-and-workplace-arrangements-amidst-covid-19-in-singapore.pdf

²⁰ Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2022). Parenting: A regional approach to service delivery through parenting support providers. <https://www.msf.gov.sg/policies/Strong-and-Stable-Families/Supporting-Families/Pages/Parenting.aspx>

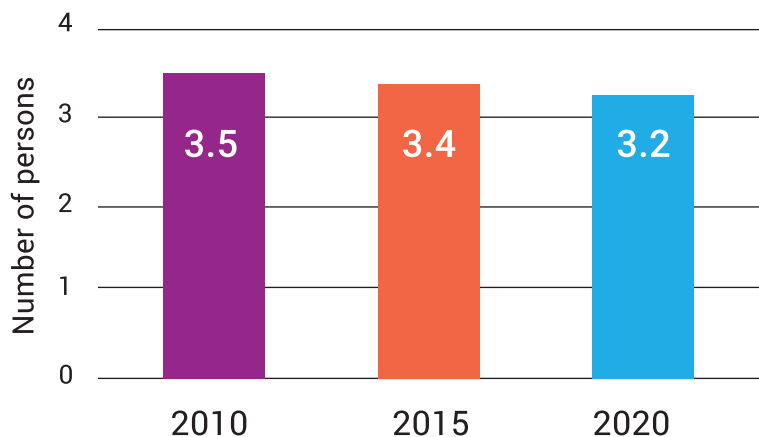
contrast to 84.1% of divorced, separated, or widowed respondents who felt the same way. For those experiencing divorce, family violence, and neglect from family members, intensive restorative services such as counselling are crucial if these individuals are to find or re-discover the relevance of family to their daily lives and re-enter the system of family support and care.

It is evident through the above discussion that Singapore continues to address many issues that hinder families from thriving in the city-state through social policy and programmes. As Singapore comes out of the pandemic and seeks to cope with the ever-changing demands of the social and economic landscape, it is inevitable that social policy and programmes will need to be leveraged on even more to keep the institution of family strong and relevant in Singapore.



DID YOU KNOW?

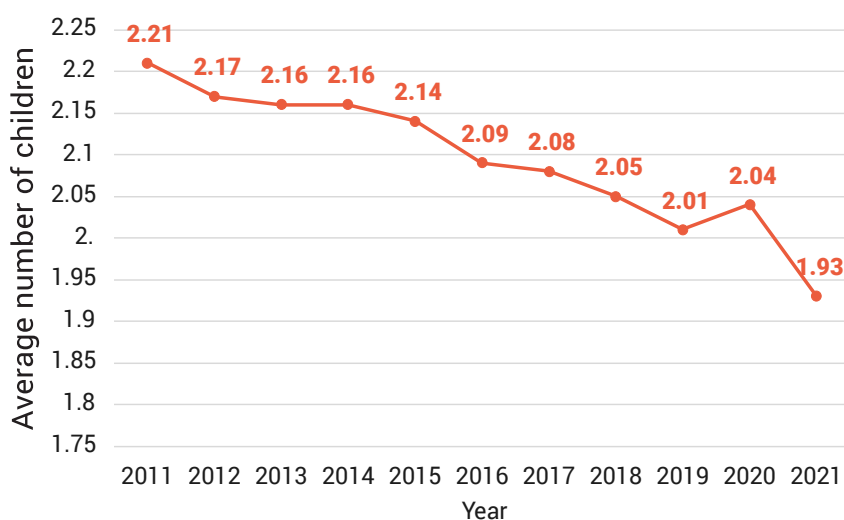
Average resident household size



Households have reduced in size over the years, with the overall average size of resident households decreasing from 3.5 persons in 2010 to 3.2 persons in 2020.

Source: Ministry of Social and Family Department, Singapore. (2022). Families and Households in Singapore, 2010-2020. Statistics Series Paper No. 1/2022.

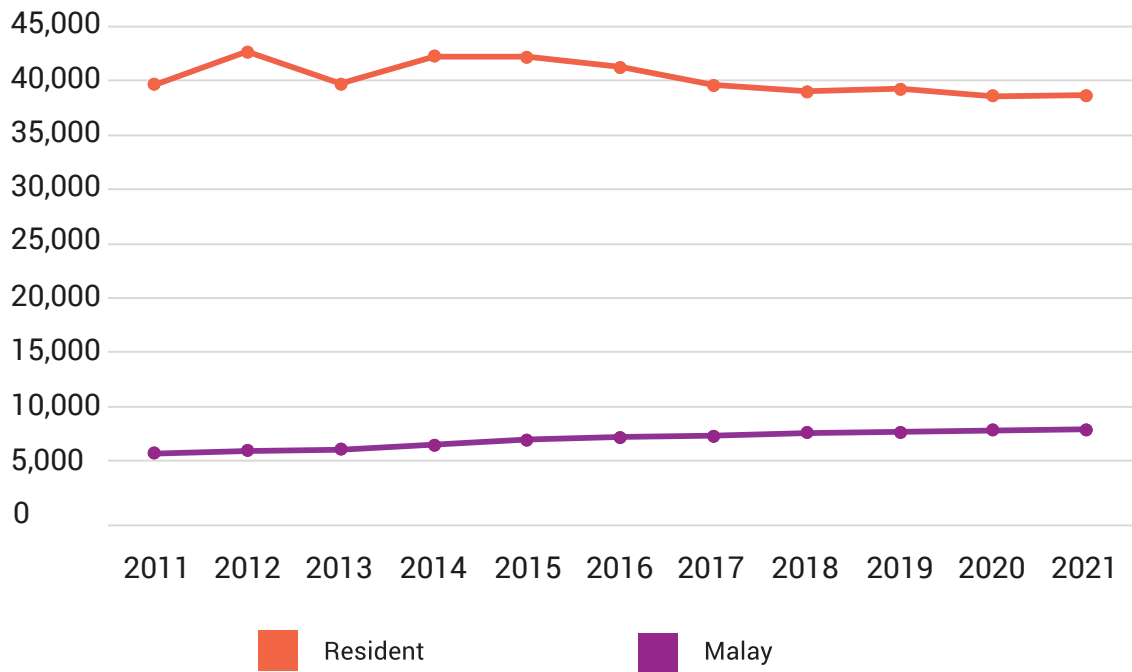
Average number of children born by resident ever-married females



The average number of children born by resident ever-married females in Singapore has been on a decline over the past decade. In 2021, the average number of children per resident ever-married female is 1.93.

Source: Department of Statistics Singapore. (2022). Average Number of Children Born by Age Group of Resident Ever-Married Females.

Live births by resident and Malay populations



Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore. (2022). Live-Births by Sex and Ethnic Group.

Repeal of Section 377A, Family Institution, and Social Norms



Amazing Read @ Heartlands, Keat Hong Community Club, October 2022



Dr Mohammad Hannan Hassan
Deputy Mufti
Office of the Mufti
Islamic Religious Council
of Singapore (MUIS)

Interested in philosophy, history of ideas and civilisations, Islamic education, Interfaith relations, and Islamic Ethics, **Dr Mohammad Hannan Hassan** specialises in Muslim-Jewish relations, interfaith relations, and history and philosophy of Islamic law in the Malay Archipelago.

He received his PhD (Islamic Studies) from the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Canada, and Master of Arts (Islamic Civilisation) from the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC), Kuala Lumpur. He holds B.Ed (Hons), First Class with Distinction from Kuwait, and granted the Amir of Kuwait Award.

He has conceptualised, designed, planned, and directed Islamic educational programmes (curriculum, syllabi, textbooks, teachers' manual, teachers' development programmes, etc.), and Islamic intellectual discourses. His educational contribution extended to countries in North America, Europe, Middle East, Australia, and Southeast Asia.

As the Deputy Mufti, he contributes to guiding the religious life of the Singapore Muslim Community, and to ensuring a cohesive society in Singapore, oversees the Muis Academy and Asatizah Development. He is also the Program Head, Postgraduate Certificate in Islam in Contemporary Societies.

While the society appreciates that the repeal of Section 377A of the Singapore Penal Code is not a legalisation of homosexuality nor same-sex marriages, section 377A is seen as a moral bastion and a deterrence to such possibility. Generally, the Singapore society holds dear to the definition of marriage as a union between man and woman, and that children should be brought up in a heterosexual marriage family unit, and that this institution should be protected and safeguarded.¹ While the community acknowledges that retaining section 377A is increasingly becoming untenable, how do we continue to protect and safeguard the family institution? Are we compromising on our moral values or opening the gates for the normalisation of homosexuality and eventually a same-sex marriage as observed in various parts of the world? How then do we navigate the changing social norms, legal consistency, and continue to protect the family institution as cherished by the community?

I would argue that laws alone are not the best protector of these social norms and laws alone cannot protect the traditional family unit. The responsibility to protect and nurture the desired norms and institutions does not fall solely on the legislators and the parliament, but on the society, as a shared responsibility. Social norms are the unspoken rules and laws, whose power and authority may be even more effective than laws and policies. The intangible sanctions and rewards are effective and powerful, whereas tangible sanctions and rewards



such as laws and punishment may be rendered unnecessary. These norms are not mere alternatives to legal rules and legislations, but instead the impetus and basis for these rules and legislations. This article focuses on the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore's (MUIS) religious guidance on the matter that emphasises the need to strengthen the institution of family and social norms.

Section 377A and its repeal

Section 377 of the Singapore Penal Code, a legacy of the British Law, stipulates that carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animals is an unnatural offence punishable with imprisonment. This section was repealed in 2007. However, Section 377A, which criminalises sex between two consenting male adults while retained *de jure* in the Penal Code, is *de facto* not enforced. This was further reiterated by the Court of Appeal of the Supreme Court in a ruling in February 2022. However, the constitutionality of the section is being challenged, and the position is increasingly becoming indefensible. Having consulted various stakeholders of the society, and having

considered all factors, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong then announced at the National Day Rally on 21 August 2022 that Section 377A would be tabled to Parliament for a repeal.² With the repeal, Section 377A will no longer be legally valid, *de jure* and *de facto*. However, in maintaining the pro-family posture and the prevailing social norms, a constitutional amendment was to be made together with the repeal. This repeal and constitutional amendments were then tabled for first reading on 20 October 2022.

The repeal of Section 377A decriminalises sex between two consenting male adults, and that one's consenting sexual relationship or practice is a private matter. However, the definition of marriage of a union between man and woman, and the institution of a family, will still be protected. The proposed Article 156(1) of the Constitution stipulates that "the Legislature may, by law, define, regulate, protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote the institution of marriage." By this Act, the right to define marriage falls on the legislative power, instead of the judicial power. Both the government (laws) and the public authorities (policies) enjoy the power to exercise the authority to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote the institution of marriage, based on the definition of marriage as a union between a man and a

¹ Mathews, M. Lim, L. & Selvarajan, S. (2019). Religion, Morality and Conservatism in Singapore. IPS Working Papers No. 34. <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/ips-working-paper-34—religion-morality-and-conservatism-in-singapore.pdf>

² Lee, H. L. (2022). National Day Rally 2022 [Speech transcript]. Prime Minister's Office Singapore. <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/National-Day-Rally-2022-English>.

woman. While Section 377A is repealed, the institution of family continues to be protected and supported by the Constitution and all relevant policies remain intact, such as the Housing and Development Board (HDB)'s public housing, adoption, education and media policies.³

MUIS' religious guidance

The Office of the Mufti (OOM) of MUIS had extensively and intensively consulted various sectors of the *asatizah* (religious scholars) fraternity and the community since the beginning of 2022. This series of engagements and consultations sought to understand the Muslim community's concerns, views, and suggestions on the matter and the way forward. Subsequently, on 22 August 2022, the OOM issued an *Irsyad*⁴ and Guidance on LGBTQ+ Developments in Singapore.

The *Irsyad* emphasises the principles of *Shari'ah* and its objectives pertaining to the institution of family and marriage. It affirms that changes in law or legislation does not mean that the Muslim way of life will change too. It calls upon the Muslim community to collectively protect these principles as a personal duty. The *Irsyad* further asserts that "our religious values and teachings remain the same. Muslims must live with confidence guided by the enduring principles and values of their faith".⁵

The founding of a family that is based on a marriage, namely the union between a man and woman, remains as the bedrock and the foundational unit of a society. Indeed, this union is a sacred bond that brings various benefits to individuals and society and prevents various forms of harm. Marriage, as proclaimed by the Qur'ān is one of the Divine Signs of God the Creator. Islam forbids all other forms of sexual relationships and unions (ibid).

Nevertheless, the *Irsyad* is cognisant of the shifting attitudes and diverse views around sexuality, lifestyles and the institution of family. "Developments on the LGBTQ+ front worldwide are clear indications of how societies have evolved in ways that present varying and conflicting choices. The Muslim community is rightly concerned over the long-term impact of these developments on our religious values and practices, particularly when Islamic guidelines on sexuality are openly contested. There is therefore a need for guidance that can help our society appreciate the complexity of what we are dealing with and navigate this diversity delicately and sensitively" (ibid).

However, these contesting views, diversities, and discourses must not polarise the community and be a reason to weaken the community. Such discourses are not unexpected in this open and globalised world, which Singapore cannot but be a part of the greater global society. Taking guidance

from Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the rich Islamic traditions, Muslims must remain steadfast and hold firmly to the religious principles and the established religious boundaries and at the same time observe compassion, respect, kindness, and gentleness in engaging with all peoples. Islam protects human dignity and modesty. It condemns violence and degrading of human dignity. It calls to protect one's privacy and confidentiality. "Even as we preach our principles and values, we should respect our differences, without devolving into calling out or cancelling individuals or groups that differ from one's own or degenerating into hate speech." (ibid).

The way forward for the community, whatever one's orientations and inclinations are, is to engage with dignity, respect, compassion, and gentleness. The responsibility does not fall solely on the lawmakers. On the contrary, strengthening the institution of a family and its enduring values, is primarily the responsibility of individuals through the family and social institutions. In the face of shifting attitudes, globally and locally, strengthening of the institution of family and its values and the desired social norms have become even more incumbent now. To this end, the OOM makes a strong call to the community "to deepen the love for our faith in all its dimensions and to teach our children the same. As the religious authority, MUIS will continue to support all efforts to strengthen Islamic values in all religious

³ Lau, J. (2022). NDR 2022: Five things to know as Singapore moves to repeal Section 377A. The Straits Times. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/ndr-2022-five-things-to-know-as-singapore-moves-to-repeal-section-377a>

⁴ *Irsyad* is a religious guidance issued by the Office of Mufti (OOM). *Irsyad* aims to address various issues related to Islamic practices and perspectives on current development. In the Singapore context, *Irsyad* is unlike a *Fatwa*, an Islamic religious ruling issued by the Legal (Fatwa) Committee chaired by the Mufti, as according to the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) S30-33. The OOM acts as the Secretariat of the *Fatwa*.

⁵ Office of the Mufti, Muis. (2022). Religious Statement and Guidance on LGBTQ+ Developments in Singapore. <https://www.muis.gov.sg/officeofthemufti/Irsyad/RELIGIOUS-STATEMENT-AND-GUIDANCE-ON-LGBTQ-DEVELOPMENTS-IN-SINGAPORE>

instruction and curriculum for the community. This is undoubtedly a great test of our empathy, respect, compassion, and principledness in dealing with the teachings of our faith in a complex and more open world. It is important that we take a considered and civil approach in engaging on this issue and in finding a common understanding on how to move forward as one society amidst a diversity in values and orientations.” (ibid)

Strengthening the institution of family

Families continue to be a key social institution in nurturing the society. Fathers play a critical role in strengthening the families, nurturing its values and upbringing of the children. According to the Singapore Fatherhood Public Perception Survey conducted by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), 97% of Singaporeans are of the view that fathers play an important role in their children’s lives.⁶ It is heartening to learn that Muslim parents see Islam as their primary source in upbringing their families. In a survey on Knowledge, Attitude, and Practice on Parenting by Malay-Muslim fathers in Singapore, the centrality of Islam as a key source of knowledge and guidance is clear. “Islam is seen as a framework that shapes the fathering practices of Singaporean Malay-Muslims” (ibid). When asked to rank

aspects of fathering knowledge that they would most like to improve on, out of the five options that were listed, the majority chose the option of improving their knowledge of Islam to help them better perform their fathering duties, because the greater knowledge in the faith will enable them to instil in their offspring proper Islamic values.⁷ When asked to indicate the qualities they expected of good fathers, they cited these frequently chosen characteristics, in order of importance: (1) raising children who are academically and religiously inclined; (2) nurturing a loving and close-knit family unit; (3) establishing a financially stable household, (4) ensuring plenty of opportunities to spend quality time with family; and (5) imparting “life lessons” and values to children, which are cultivated through play and discipline. (Ibid)

This survey reflects that Muslim fathers wish to embed Islamic principles and values in their fathering practices, at least in terms of the attitude and beliefs. The task then is in empowering not only fathers, but both parents and *asatizah* with the relevant knowledge, attitudes, and skills to continue to provide the religious guidance and education in nurturing a community that is confident and competent to live as a gracious and contributing community, radiating blessings to all, and thriving in and with diversity.

Conclusion

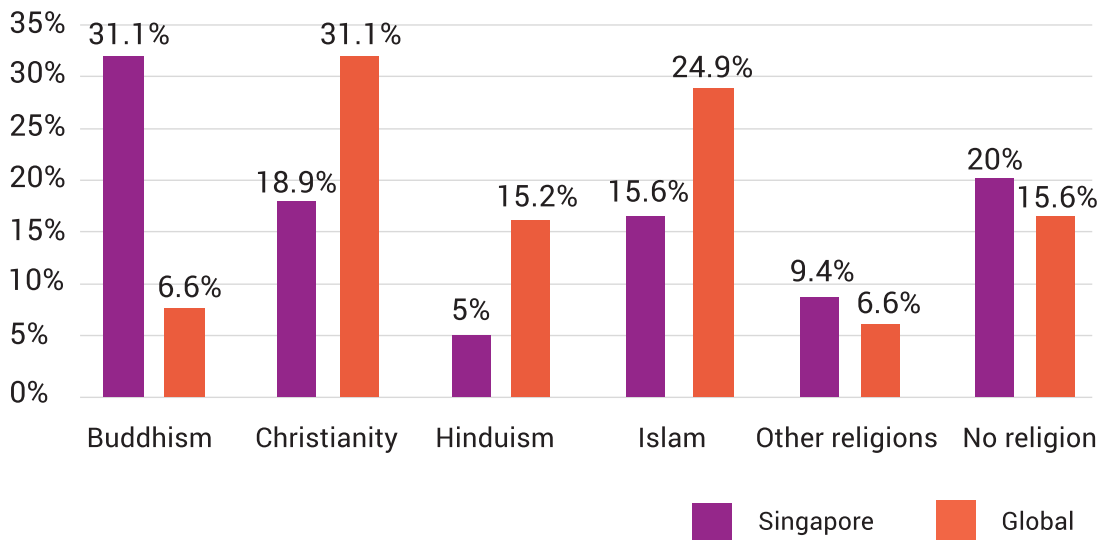
In conclusion, the repeal of Section 377A is supported by stronger constitutional, legal, and administrative measures to protect, support, foster and promote a strong family that is based on a heterosexual union. In fact, some legal professionals dubbed the repeal as an intelligent move in the face of the constitutional challenges. This is further emphasised by the Office of Mufti of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) in its religious statement and guidance following the announcement of the repeal, that heterosexual marriage and family remain as the bedrock of the society, a sacred union, based on the Islamic principles, objectives, and values. And that it is the responsibility of individuals and families to protect these social values and norms. A change of law, if and when it happens, does not necessarily change these principles, objectives, and a Muslim way of life. Given the open and global society, diverse ideas and worldviews continues to be a main feature, particularly in a plural and diverse society like Singapore. As we navigate through these diverse ideas and worldviews, the community should observe compassion, kindness and empathy, based on the principles of human dignity, respect, and modesty. The inevitable tensions must not lead to divisive conflict and the weakening of the community. The onus to protect the social norms does not fall solely on the legislators, but rather a collective responsibility of members of the society: individuals, families, and social institutions.

⁶ Juhari, M. S. (2021). Knowledge, Attitude & Practice: An Exploratory Investigation of Parenting Challenges Facing Malay-Muslim Fathers in Singapore. <https://fathers.com.sg/wp-content/uploads/MM-Fathering-Project-Report-version-22-Feb.pdf>

⁷ Juhari, M. S. (2021). Knowledge, Attitude & Practice: An Exploratory Investigation of Parenting Challenges Facing Malay-Muslim Fathers in Singapore. <https://fathers.com.sg/wp-content/uploads/MM-Fathering-Project-Report-version-22-Feb.pdf>

DID YOU KNOW?

Religious composition of the Singapore and global populations



Source: Department of Statistics Singapore. (2021). Census of Population 2020, Statistical Release 1: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion.

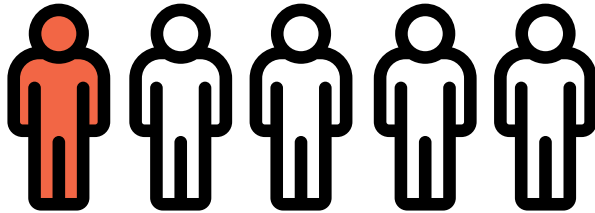


Based on Singapore Census of Population 2020, Islam is the third largest religion in Singapore, with 15.6% of Singaporeans who are Muslims. In 2015, The Pew Research Center released a report on The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050, which had shown that Islam is the second largest religion in the world with 24.9% of the global population who are Muslims.

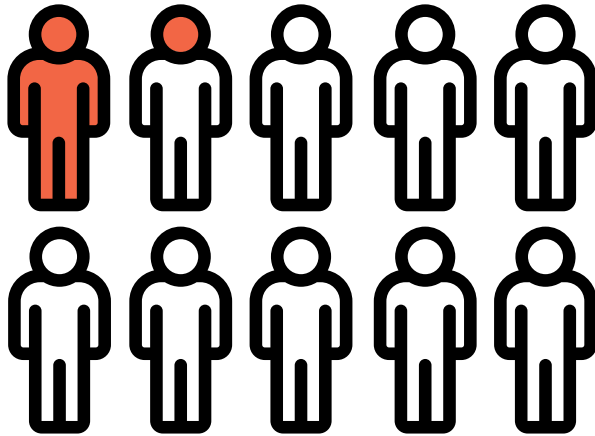
Source: Pew Research Center. (2015). The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050.

Attitudes towards homosexuality amongst Singaporeans

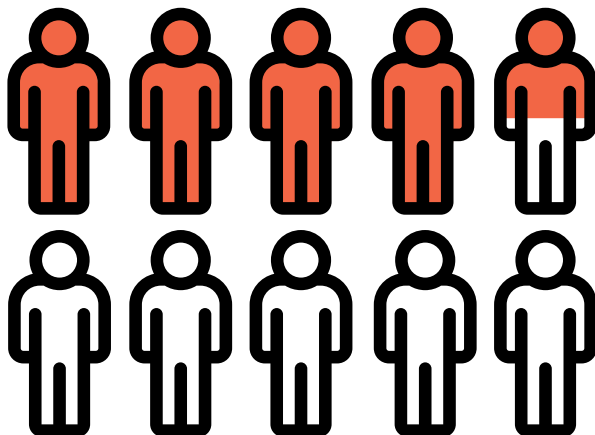
In a survey conducted by Ipsos in 2022 on 500 Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents aged 18 and above,



1 in 5 respondents disagree with Section 377A of the Singapore penal code.



1.2 in 10 respondents identify as LGBTQ+.



4.5 in 10 respondents say that they are more accepting of homosexual relations than they were in 2018.

Source: Ipsos Group S.A. (2022). Attitudes towards same-sex relationships shift towards greater inclusivity in Singapore.

Promoting Intergenerational Efforts in Singapore



School holiday cycling trip for Yayasan MENDAKI beneficiaries, Marina Bay, December 2021



Nasyitah Binte Yassin
Co-Founder
Yaa Bunayya SG

Nasyitah Yassin has been in the early childhood industry and had previously worked in an anchor operator organisation close to a decade. She has led her team of teachers and children under her care at her previous workplace to partake in intergenerational programmes. She recently graduated with a postgraduate Master's Degree in Early Childhood from the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University. Currently, she is a field practicum supervisor/ adjunct lecturer with the National Institute of Early Childhood Development (NIEC). Nasyitah is also a craft enthusiast and a play-based learning advocate helming Kids' Kits SG and one of the co-founders of Yaa Bunayya SG, specialising in educational programmes and children's publications. She was the recipient of the Yayasan Mendaki Special Achievement Award (2009) and a beneficiary of Tertiary Tuition Fund Subsidy (TTFS) as well.

Abstract

Positive interactions between children and elderlies in homes and community spaces have been studied extensively worldwide. Studies highlight the long-lasting effects on the well-being of both parties. More initiatives can be developed and implemented in Singapore to strengthen ties between the young and elderly. We can build a caring society through advocating for programmes and efforts involving the two generations as part of Singapore's community partnership and development.



relationship between the young and old continues to widen rapidly.³ Thus, it is not surprising to see a growing emphasis on the collaboration between preschools and senior activity centres or nursing homes in Singapore.⁴ It is crucial for Singapore to foster intergenerational experiences to foster connection and build a tightly knitted community between children and the elders.

Positive outcomes were clearly documented. It was found that children who had attended the IG programme were more socially accepting and helpful. They showed significant levels of empathy for the elders and attitudes that were more positive. Greater self-regulation was also observed in these children compared to those from the SG programme.

Introduction

The COVID-19 global pandemic had further exposed the older generation's fragility. The digital divide, particularly in digital communication, has widened the gap between the elders and young children.¹ As Boivin argues, when children spend too much time on their devices, the time spent with their grandparents, for example, starts to decline exponentially. As a result, there is a lack of meaningful interactions between the two generations.² This phenomenon exists in Singapore as well. Fuelled by an ageing population and declining birth rates, the estranged

Potential benefits

A study by Femia and colleagues (2008) demonstrates that children benefit significantly from intergenerational programmes. Their study made comparisons between children who were between the ages of six to eight years old who had attended either an intergenerational (IG) programme or a traditional single-generation (SG) programme from their former preschools. A period of one to three years of comparison on the children's development was made upon the graduation of the programmes, respectively.

Similarly, Underwood and Dorfman shared that the elders benefitted from intergenerational programmes. Results from a study involving 43 elderlies in a nursing home and their personal encounters concluded a plethora of benefits to the programme. Companionship, deeper engagement, and greater awareness of intergenerational understanding as well as increased opportunities for life experiences were experienced by the elders, indicating positive outcomes from such programmes.⁵ These findings offer valuable insights into the benefits of such programmes involving both the elderly and children.

¹ Boivin, N. (2021). Co-participatory multimodal intergenerational storytelling: preschool children's relationship with modality creating elder inclusion. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687984211012055>

² Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants, Part II: Do they really think differently?. *On the Horizon*, 9(6), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1108/10748120110424843>

Boivin, N. (2021). Co-participatory multimodal intergenerational storytelling: preschool children's relationship with modality creating elder inclusion. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687984211012055>

³ Leong, K. S., Klainin-Yobas, P., Fong, S. D., & Wu, X. V. (2021). Older adults' perspective of intergenerational programme at senior day care centre in Singapore: A descriptive qualitative study. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 30(1), e222–e233. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.13432>

⁴ Tan, S. A. (2017). Singapore's first inter-generational playground, childcare centre in a nursing home launched. *The Straits Times*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/health/singapores-first-inter-generational-playground-childcare-centre-in-a-nursing-home>

⁵ Underwood, H. L., & Dorfman, L. T. (2006). A view from the other side: Elders' reactions to intergenerational service-learning. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, 4(2), 43–60. https://doi.org/10.1300/J194v04n02_04

The experiences can be extended to Singapore's community to benefit both parties. Rather than being in silos or isolated due to the varied pace of life, children and elderlies can relearn to grow together. Though we are beginning to see a greater number of intergenerational programmes, more can be done in terms of the frequency and meaningful curriculum to impact a wider community. Intergenerational programmes play a part in getting young people and children to re-evaluate their interactions with their grandparents and other elderlies and to focus on strengthening family ties and understanding. These initiatives should advance towards an age-integrated society where intergenerational engagement occurs naturally in the family, community, and work settings.⁶

Challenges and recommendations

Inspiring intergenerational programmes are beginning to be prevalent in the community. A new building complex comprising of a nursing home, a senior care centre and a pre-school recently opened in September 2022.⁷ St John's-St Margaret's Village (SJSVM Village), an intergenerational facility, promotes reciprocal relationships between pre-schoolers and seniors to partake in cohesive activities. Such sites were first developed in Kampung Admiralty.⁸

Although there is a myriad of benefits in promoting intergenerational programs, it comes with a set of challenges. These include lack of manpower and the lack of a suitable curriculum involving both the children and the elderly.⁹ To further elaborate, a curriculum that can allow both the young and the elderly to be engaged and to encourage active participation, a curriculum that leverages on common interests, may be more impactful.

In order to mitigate the challenges when it comes to a lack of manpower, one recommendation is to encourage parents to be partners. As cited in Hara and Burke, a child's holistic development and success are influenced by their parents who routinely exhibit appropriate parenting techniques, interact with the school personnel, volunteer at the school, support their children's learning at home, participate actively in decision-making regarding the school and regularly work with the school community. The intergenerational programme is an opportune moment for parents to partake in and a win-win solution for the schools, parents, community and ultimately, the children. Therefore, preschools can work towards utilising the support from parent volunteers to build an engaging and dynamic support system to facilitate teachers and children in the implementation of intergenerational programmes.

Working together to generate a relationship-based curriculum that caters to both seniors and children is integral. Technology has allowed communication to be done more conveniently and some examples include via emails or virtually if a physical meeting is not workable. Some ideas would be to look into the current interests of the two generations. Another is to leverage on the various celebrations and to build on creating shared experiences relating to cultural arts, stories and music/dance, unique exercises, and traditional food. These themes allow both the young and old to immerse in Singapore's identity. This particular recommendation is inspired by the study conducted in Kamei, Itoi, Kajii, Kawakami, Hasegawa and Sugimoto, where interactions between the elderly and children were programmatically supported.¹⁰ Joint activities that were semi structured, where the seniors could hand down the community history and culture to the children and that the children would learn about the Japanese culture and tradition, would be something we can adapt from.

Recounting from my personal experiences as one of the lead coordinators for community partnership in bridging the preschools that I was working in to senior activity centres, I also learnt that it is highly critical to collaborate with nearby senior activity centres or nursing homes as it opens up more possibilities

⁶ Thang, L. L. (2011). Promoting intergenerational understanding between the young and old: the case of Singapore. United Nations Report of the Expert Group Meeting. https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/docs/egm11/EGM_Expert_Paper_Theng_Leng_Leng.pdf

⁷ Woon, W. (2022). New complex houses facilities for both seniors and pre-schoolers. The Straits Times. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/health/st-johns-st-margarets-village-houses-facilities-for-seniors-and-pre-schoolers>

⁸ Tan, S. A. (2017). Singapore's first inter-generational playground, childcare centre in a nursing home launched. The Straits Times. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/health/singapores-first-inter-generational-playground-childcare-centre-in-a-nursing-home>

⁹ Shih, Y.H., Wu, C.C. & Chung, C.F. (2022). Implementing intergenerational learning in a preschool: a case study from Taiwan. *Educational Gerontology*, 48(12), 565-585. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03601277.2022.2053035>

¹⁰ Kamei, T., Itoi, W., Kajii, F., Kawakami, C., Hasegawa, M., & Sugimoto, T. (2011). Six month outcomes of an innovative weekly intergenerational day program with older adults and school-aged children in a Japanese urban community. *Japan Journal of Nursing Science*, 8(1), 95-107. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1742-7924.2010.00164.x>

for collaborations, especially if the facilities are different from the ones cited above.

For instance, my team (from the childcare side) worked closely with the team from the senior activity centre that was nearby. We consolidated the interests and needs of both the children and the seniors in both centres respectively to facilitate in the curriculum development. The partnership aims to enhance children's development in prosocial behaviours such as empathy and respect while interacting with the elders and for the elders to bond, lead a healthy holistic lifestyle, and share their knowledge and skills with the children.

From there, both teams dynamically planned and implemented appropriate activities, once or twice a month. Some of the activities include, performing qigong together, celebrating festivities, playing traditional games, designing artworks, singing and dancing to popular Singapore medleys and songs, having a picnic outing to East Coast Park and performing a mini concert together as a finale. This partnership was also in conjunction with the Start Small, Dream Big initiative by the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA).

As we recognised the reality of manpower constraints, efforts were made to involve parents and families of the children from the childcare centre. Parent volunteers played a major factor in how we were able to proceed with the implementation of the activities that had been planned.

As a youth, I thoroughly enjoyed the whole experience as I get to witness the beautiful interactions between the young and the young at heart. It warms my heart to see the respectful relationship between various age groups. At the same time, my colleagues and I picked up playing the ukulele to the songs such as 'Burung Kakak Tua', 'Chan Mali Chan' and 'The More We Get Together (in different languages)' taught and reinforced by the seniors! The partnership was indeed rich in cultural activities and values. The objectives were met when the children, parents of the children and the elders, indicated their encouraging responses and feedback on such partnerships. They shared how these partnerships had a positive impact on their lives – be it in terms of social emotional development, leading a healthier lifestyle, and even positive relationship-building.

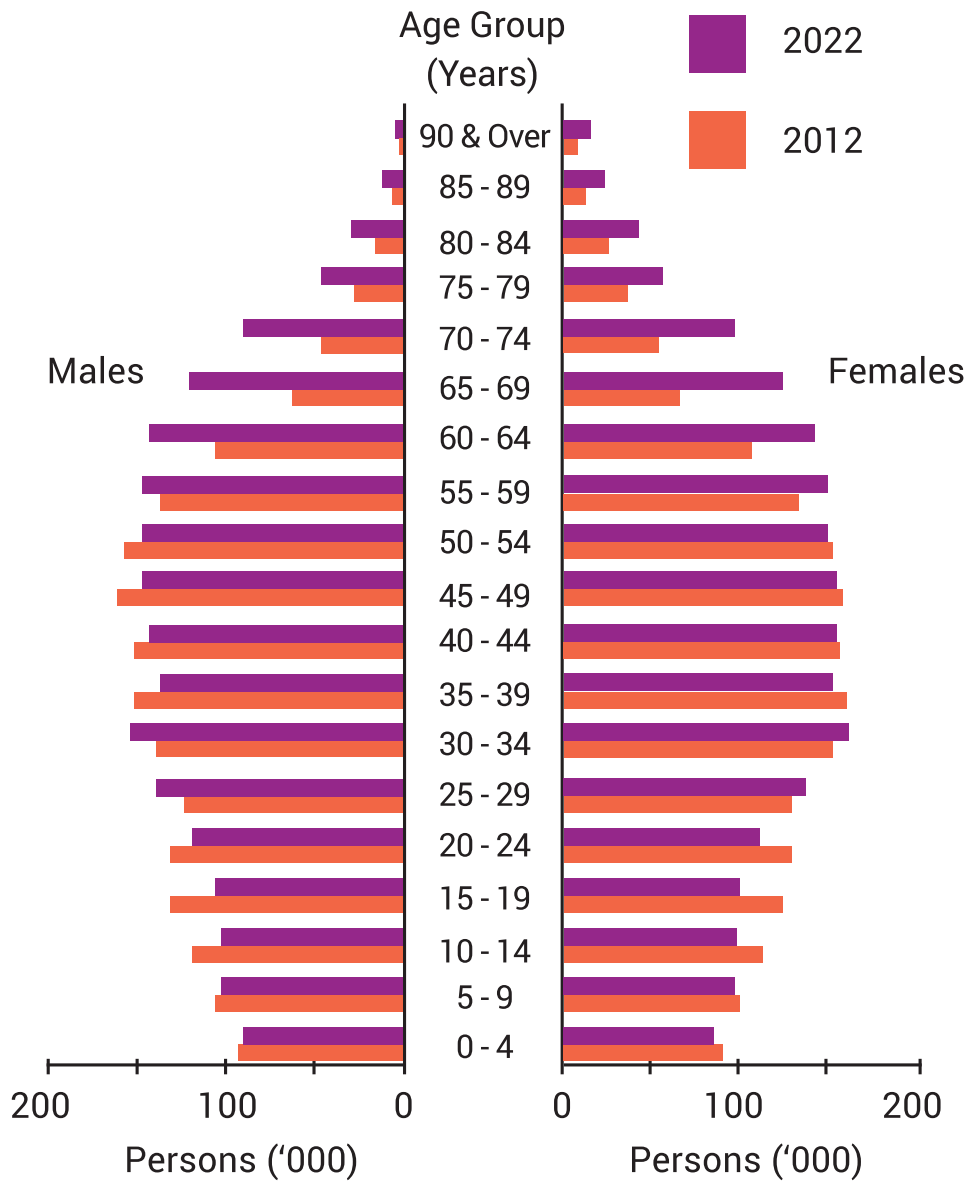
Conclusion

Being a youth and having experienced bridging interactions between children from preschools and seniors from senior activity centres, the beauty of the collaboration and partnership have encouraged both age groups to share their fountain of love that they have. Children can develop holistically, particularly in social and emotional aspects, when they are given opportunities to interact with the elderly. They learn to form meaningful and respectful relationships with the elders and the skills are transferable when interacting with their own grandparents. Having more intergenerational programmes and efforts will be beneficial to build a caring community where both the children and the elderly look out for one another.



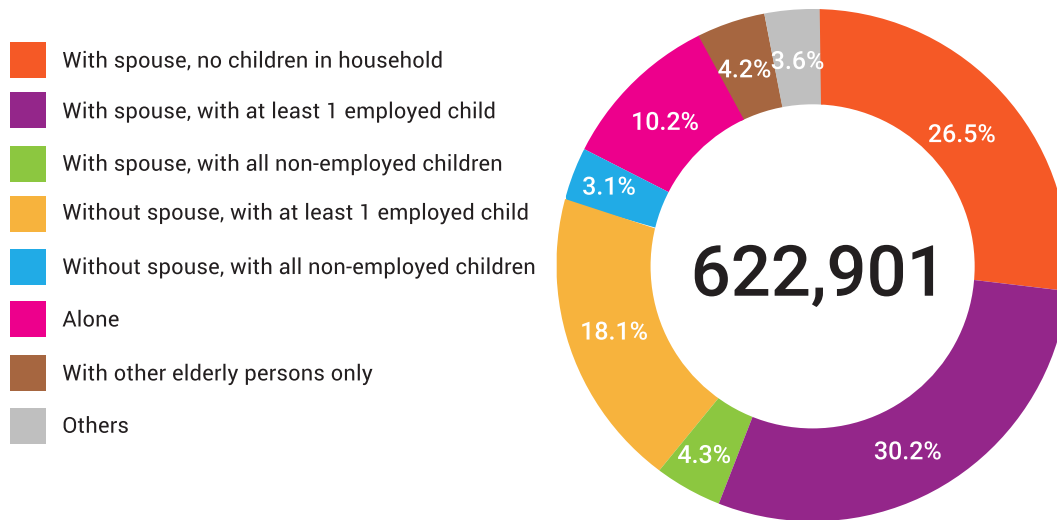
DID YOU KNOW?

Age distribution of Singapore population



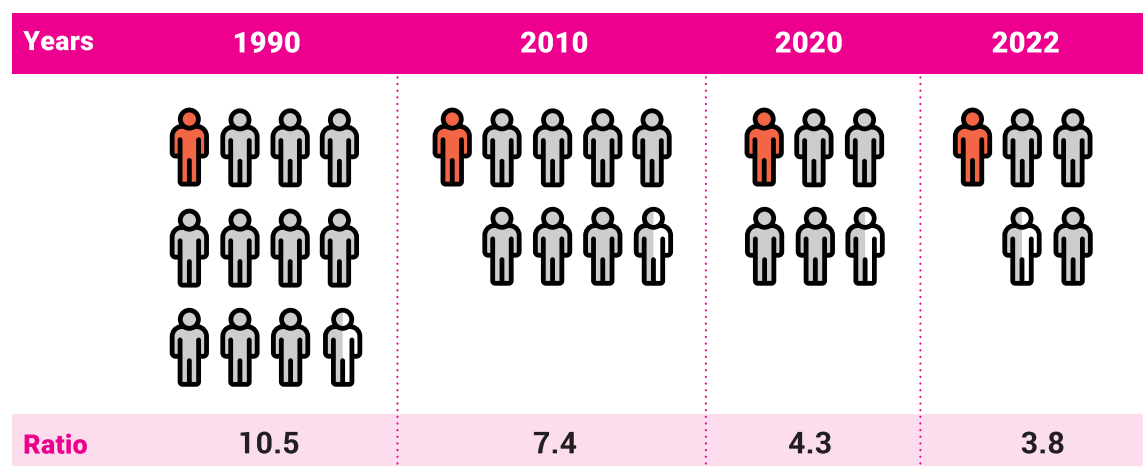
Source: Department of Statistics Singapore. (2022). Population Trends.

Residents aged 65 years and over in resident households



Source: Department of Statistics Singapore. (2022) Residents Aged 65 Years and Over in Resident Households Dashboard

Declining old-age support ratio



Source: Department of Statistics Singapore. (2022). Understanding Old Age Support Ratio

Building Strong Families When the Whole World is Weak – A PPIS experience



Amazing Read @ Heartlands, Pasir Ris East Community Club, October 2022



Hazlina Abdul Halim
President
*Persatuan Pemuda
Islam Singapura*

Hazlina Abdul Halim is the President of the Singapore Muslim Women's Association, a Director with Community Chest, the Singapore Business Federation Foundation, and Yayasan MENDAKI and is a member of several national committees and alliances for action. Hazlina also spent three years lecturing in journalism, television, radio and broadcast studies at Temasek Polytechnic.

COVID-19 weakened families, heightened fears

As COVID-19 swept through the world, families faced the impact head on. While families are not homogenous, the pressures increased during Singapore's Circuit Breaker period which saw family violence cases spike.¹ Families struggled to adapt to the curbs such as restrictions on leaving places of residence and limited living spaces in a one-room flat - no more than 250 square feet – shared by six people or more. For some, the prolonged close proximity with flatmates was uncomfortable.

As the pandemic raged on, so did its impact. Even as Singapore emerged out of the Circuit Breaker phase, in the *Heightened Alert* phase came shortly after. The challenges continued to grow exponentially with inflation.

Some families survived on the wages of sole breadwinners who were usually men, while women fulfilled caregiving roles at home. To cope, the sole bread winners might have been forced to spend more time at work to increase earnings, which unfortunately affected the time available for a couple or family to deepen bonds. For a young and newly formed family, tensions may emerge in their relationship early on as the stay-at-home wives could also be struggling with isolation and stressors surrounding adjustments. Working long hours can also be a health hazard if they are unable to get enough rest.



Recognising these worrying trends, PPIS, *translated* - the Singapore Muslim Women Association) stepped up to join the Alliance for Action to Strengthen Families and Marriages (AFAM) supported by the Ministry of Social and Family Development. PPIS works with partners such as Yayasan MENDAKI to develop upstream measures.

For PPIS, an organisation that offers a suite of services for families across 17 centres island wide believes that families are the bedrock of society, and our priority is to support and empower vulnerable families. Stronger families lay a stronger foundation for our community and of course for Singapore. Each family has unique needs and requires varying support because each family is different.

For dual-income households, both spouses may also struggle to cope with the increasing living expenses as the world emerges from COVID-19, due to lower wages or higher number of dependents or both. The median income for Malay households continues to lag behind the other ethnic groups

at \$5,704 – approximately 24% lower than the national median.² While these families may receive financial assistance schemes available in the community for low-income families, not all schemes have adjusted their per capita income eligibility criteria or the quantum of assistance. Some social workers have observed that families are concerned about crossing the eligibility PCI threshold as they are dependent on the help and in doing so limit their earning potential.

The rising cost of living and related financial struggles may also impact the ability of parents to provide adequately for the necessities and care of their children. This in turn impacts the development and growth of their children. For example, remarried parents who face rising costs of living and limited resources may skip providing maintenance to their children from previous marriages. Others might opt for convenient, less nutritious food at the expense of physical development and health. It is also not unheard of for some to avoid professional healthcare and self-medicate to cut costs. This in turn, would lead to poorer health and the ability to earn.

¹ Iau, J. (2021). Coronavirus: More cases of family violence during circuit breaker; police to proactively help victims. *The Straits Times*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/coronavirus-more-cases-of-family-violence-during-circuit-breaker-police-to>

² Department of Statistics Singapore. (2020). Census of Population 2020, Statistical Release 2: Households, Geographic Distribution, Transport and Difficulty in Basic Activities.

During the pandemic where many had lost their jobs or had difficulties in getting employment, the gig economy became an attractive solution. The families that PPIS serves are often involved in the gig economy to get cash quickly. However, certain benefits associated with full-time formal employment are sacrificed. This includes medical coverage and CPF contributions which may prove risky in the longer term as this affects their ability to own homes, healthcare benefits, and retirement plans. On the flip side, with the access to quick cash, the gig economy offers families the flexibility to respond faster to caregiving needs as well as family crises. Therefore, efforts to encourage regular contribution to CPF and other guardrails to ensure basic health and welfare needs must be prioritised. PPIS welcomes the recent recommendations by the Advisory Committee on Platform Workers for companies to standardised insurance protection for injuries while working and compulsory CPF payments for those below 30 years old and optional CPF payments for everyone else.

The rising cost of living, inflation, and impending recession affects everyone, regardless of our socio-economic status or background. But more so for those who are vulnerable.

PPIS family services mainly serve the vulnerable families in our community. The majority are from the lower socio-economic status and are faced with psycho-emotional and challenging life stressors such

as grief, adjustment to changes in family life arising from marrying young, divorce, remarriages, fostering, family violence, and aggression. For these families, PPIS supports them and hopes to strengthen and support them to overcome the challenges that come their way.

Help is here, help is near

During the pandemic our services saw a 10% increase in the number of families asking for help. Core programmes across our family services such as Casework and Counselling which focuses on the individual family assessment of needs and support required is one such service. Beyond this individualised intervention, families received help through collaborative efforts with other partners too.

Assessment of families is part of the casework intervention and a fundamental requirement to ensure the approach taken is targeted and relevant. Beyond the surface, families may have other underlying concerns that are inter-related to coping with the present challenges. Following a needs assessment, financial assistance and vouchers may be offered to help tide over the family's financial crisis or to enable the family to be stable enough to work on their financial and other psycho-emotional issues. To facilitate access to assistance during the pandemic, our social workers conducted home visits and counselling sessions nearer to the clients' place of residence or provide transport assistance to clients to attend sessions at our agency. Practical assistance to navigate the changes in service

delivery included Home-Based Learning, where we distributed donated laptops.

In rendering assistance, our social workers not only tap on internal resources but also work collaboratively with other stakeholders and donors. Clients faced with medical compliance issues, for example, may be assisted with medical consultation fees or connected to medical social workers to ensure access to medical assistance. Counselling is also rendered to individuals and their families to address relationship issues. Closer monitoring was also made for vulnerable adults and children in view of the possible increase in tensions within family interactions arising from financial and employment struggles. Where applicable, if the assessment of needs suggests that families or individuals need specialists' intervention (such as psychologists or therapists), costs incurred will be subsidised by PPIS, if required.

Group activities were conducted online during the pandemic and shifted to physical settings when the situation improves. Today, hybrids are also common in-service delivery and highly dependent on the nature of activities. The pandemic period had required us to be nimble and adaptive. It was a steep learning curve for our social workers and the families they work with. Most of these families adjusted well but there remains a small group that requires handholding to navigate the changes to service delivery.

Another key initiative PPIS established during the pandemic was the Women in Need (WIN) Fund, to further enhance support and assistance for women to tide

over difficult times. Singaporean/PR women or non-Singaporean/PR women whose spouse/parent/child is Singaporean is eligible if she or her family's breadwinner lost their job, resulting in reduced income after 23 January 2020 with a gross family income of \$6k to \$9k and/or per capita income of \$1,700 to \$2,000 pre-COVID-19 and has school going children and/or elderly parents living in the same household. Aside from supplementing income loss, women could tap on the fund for their training needs. In partnership with Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SMCCI), PPIS also curated a Micro Business Programme for women who are scaling up their businesses.

Apart from the resilience in these families, what surfaced was the resilience of PPIS and her staff, particularly the frontline social work practitioners, which included those in services deemed essential and in full operations during the initial phase of COVID-19. The community and donors too showed a collaborative and serving spirit when they stepped forth to provide donations and support.

Helping people who help

The challenges PPIS faced in trying to facilitate help to these families began with the challenges of the clients whom we took on.

At times the clients' coping mechanism generates more challenges for them and their family. For some, the motivation to have more than one job to meet their families' needs can be at the expense of their physical and mental well-being. Meanwhile, with both parents going to work

and without an alternate caregiver, older children who may still need to be supervised ended up being parentified to look after younger siblings. Some children may drop out of school to earn extra income for the family. Others coped by borrowing from moneylenders, some turned to gambling in the hope of making a quick buck whereas some filed for bankruptcy to evade loan repayment.

Clients also may find engaging with Social Purpose Entities like us challenging. Attending a counselling session or any group activity may result in direct loss of income as most earn wages on a day-to-day basis. For those known to multiple stakeholders in the community, while it could mean more resources for the family, the clients may end up overwhelmed with too many stakeholders involved in attending to their case. Overwhelmed clients might choose to relate only to certain stakeholders or withdraw altogether and cease participation or even drop out of programmes. A way to address this is for the different stakeholders to hold case conferences and agree on respective stakeholders' roles to best meet the needs of the clients. Service delivery was exceptionally challenging during the pandemic. In the initial phase, delivery of emergency services, such as crisis shelters for the homeless, was affected due to the lack of resources. In the latter phase when remote service delivery was introduced, not all clients were comfortable - some were not tech savvy while others were unable to find a private space to ensure confidentiality is maintained. Moreover, poor connectivity can cause disruptions in service delivery. Some may not even have the necessary gadgets and were

unable to get access to internet connection, let alone remote service delivery.

PPIS believed that the best way to tackle these challenges is by teaming up with our stakeholders, and our key partners to help families more comprehensively. However, this approach came with a different set of complexities. One instance is when an identified stakeholder does not have professionals with the language proficiency that match the client's needs. In other cases, stakeholders could have conflicting expectations.

In a crisis when multiple needs are addressed concurrently on our end, managing stakeholders' requests may be as equally challenging as managing clients' requests. Furthermore, while the pandemic sparked the spirit of giving, many donors also stated that they wanted to interact directly with families as a condition. This led to complications as several factors may be compromised such as personal data protection, confidentiality, and privacy. Because of this request, staff needed to acquire individual consent. This puts a strain on manpower resources as the team needed to dedicate time for ad-hoc interaction requests. To be sustainable, PPIS had to prioritise our core mission which is to help families so they can in turn help themselves.

This leads us to the question of what families could do when faced with financial constraints, the rising cost of living, inflation, and impending recession. At the start of the pandemic, PPIS developed a Psychosocial Resilience Framework based on the 3Cs – Coherence, Connection, Cohesion. This framework covers the importance of individual mastery and familial mastery which

serves to guide our practitioners. In line with this, the following advice can be considered for families and organisations:

1. At the individual and family level – **reflect and prioritise needs over wants**. Being aware of one's financial limitations and knowing the importance of managing limited resources is crucial. This includes making lifestyle changes to tide over difficult financial situations. We would advise those who struggle to manage stressors, to seek professional support or get information on available assistance schemes.

2. At the organisation and community level – **understanding the needs and context that clients are in and reaching out to ensure access to help is key**. Each client is unique and requires a customised approach. Some clients prefer online sessions as they feel safe or because it is a cheaper option. Others need the physical human touch and attention to feel engaged and safe. Some couples and families grew to prefer online sessions for the convenience or to limit interaction with social workers. This can affect social workers' ability to sight vulnerable family members. For such cases, home visits are a must.

Faith and family - Reasons to survive

Overall, physical or online service delivery has its own pros and cons. Considerations like clients' engagement, accessibility, affordability, safety, and technology savviness of clients are key when deciding the most suitable approach. Families are creative and will find ways to pull through challenging times and this would subsequently increase their capacity for problem solving and build their resilience. For the vulnerable group, our role is to facilitate and enable them to actualise their potential to cope with these challenges and, be a source of support for each other in the long term. For the group that needs a little push to climb and grow, our role is to support them in attaining their hopes and dreams for a better future, and to discover their aspirations.

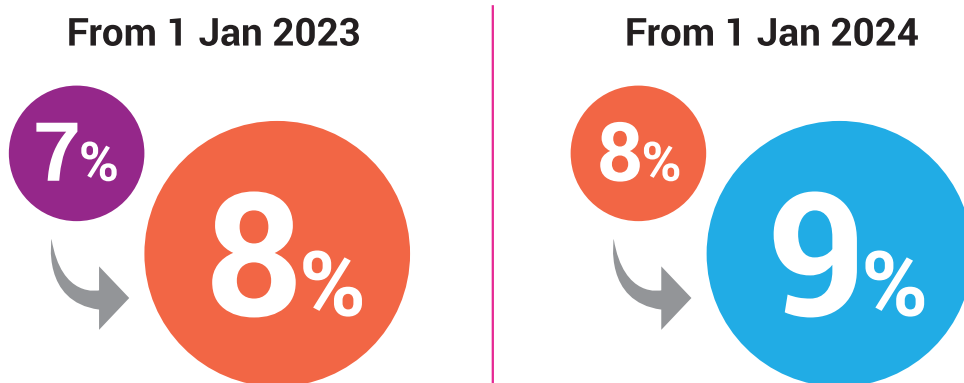
In the inaugural Aspiration of Muslim Women Research conducted by PPIS Research and Engagement Department (RED), findings showed that faith and family continue to be the core tenets of a Muslim women's aspirations. Even as women aspire to gain financial independence, be healthier, and become better Muslims, this aspiration is grounded by the desire to be better for their families. Throughout our 70 years of service to the community, our commitment remains to pave the way for women's progress. Because we believe a woman's march is not hers alone – it is a journey that must include families, children, and the community. Only then can our vision truly come to life - a community of successful women and thriving families.



DID YOU KNOW?

Increase in Goods and Services Tax (GST)

As announced by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance Mr Lawrence Wong in Budget 2022, the Goods and Services Tax (GST) hike will be implemented in 2023, staggering the increase in two steps.



Source: Mahmud, A.H. (2022). Budget 2022: GST will go up to next year, then 9% from 2024. CNA.

Government's Support for Singaporeans in Greater Need

To extend more help to Singaporeans disproportionately affected by the higher prices, the Government is investing more resources and enhancing existing schemes.

In October 2022, the Government announced a new support package that will provide further cost of living relief, with more support for lower- to middle-income groups.



Higher cash payout from GST Voucher scheme

Enhancements to the permanent GST Voucher (GSTV) scheme announced at Budget 2022 will enhance the regular GSTV–Cash payouts to further offset the GST expenses of lower- to middle-income Singaporean households.

Source: Government of Singapore. (2022). Support for Singaporeans in greater need. <https://www.gov.sg/article/support-for-singaporeans-in-greater-need>

GST Assurance Package: Cash Payouts

- Payouts to be made to every Singaporean aged 21 and above, over five years from 2022 to 2026
- First payout has been made in Dec 2022

Singaporeans aged 21 years and above in reference year	Payout period	Owns 0 to 1 property			Owns > 1 property
		Assessable Income (AI)			
		AI ≤ S\$34,000	S\$34,000 < AI ≤ S\$100,000	AI > S\$100,000	
2023	Dec 2022	S\$200	S\$150	S\$100	S\$100
2024	Dec 2023	S\$400	S\$250	S\$200	S\$200
2025	Dec 2024	S\$400	S\$250	S\$200	S\$200
2026	Dec 2025	S\$400	S\$250	S\$100	S\$100
2027	Dec 2026	S\$200	S\$150	S\$100	S\$100
TOTAL		S\$1,600	S\$1,050	S\$700	S\$700



Starting from the payout in August 2022, more Singaporeans will qualify for the permanent GSTV–Cash payouts as the annual Assessable Income threshold will be increased from \$28,000 to \$34,000.

Eligible Singaporeans will receive up to \$400 of regular cash payout in August 2022, which is \$100 more compared to the current rates. This will be further increased to up to \$500 in 2023.



In addition to these enhancements, GSTV–Cash recipients will receive a Special Payment of up to \$300 cash in August as part of the targeted support package announced in June 2022. About 1.5 million Singaporeans will be eligible for this Special Payment.

Source: Ministry of Finance, Singapore. (2022). Budget 2022 - Assurance Package.

Leading Roles of Youth – Improving Families and Uplifting Communities



NextStop: Go Digital Seminar, Google Singapore, October 2022



Nassar Mohd Zain
President
Malay Youth Literary Association (4PM)

Nassar Mohd Zain is the President of 4PM in Singapore. He obtained his Bachelor's (Honours) and Master's Degree in Architecture from the National University of Singapore, and is a project management professional at Far East Organization. He is also a member of the Board of Directors of Yayasan MENDAKI.

Helen Keller's quote, "Alone, we can do so little; together, we can do so much" aptly describes the present situation for our youth, families, leaders, and community. The world is now rife with VUCA characteristics – **V**olatility, **U**ncertainty, **C**omplexity, and **A**mbiguity.¹ Not only is the world reeling from the effects of COVID-19 pandemic, it is also facing the geo-political tensions in Asia and Europe, affecting trade, impacting energy prices, and causing supply chain disruptions. The financial impact of these world issues had trickled down domestically. The inflationary pressures resulted by the global conflict may further stratify social issues such as class division and slowing social mobility within Singapore.

In response to VUCA threats, leaders (across family, community, and national-political levels) must have the acute Vision, Understanding, Clarity, and Agility in addressing the specific matters.

Importantly when we work together on a common goal, we can achieve things beyond our greatest imagination.

This is especially true if our intentions are earnest, and the purpose is genuinely for the greater good of the community and nation.



Class division and social mixing

Even though social mixing has been a hallmark of Singapore society based on the various urban policies such as housing and education, research in 2017 shows that the sharpest social division in Singapore may now be based on class, instead of race or religion.² The Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Study on Social Capital in Singapore shows that on average, Singaporeans who live in public housing have fewer than one friend who lives in private housing. People who study in elite schools also tend to be less close to those in non-elite schools, and vice versa.³ My own personal experience is an example – I do not have any friends who studied in or graduated from ITE. Neither did I know of anyone living in rental housing until I was in the university and started to do community service work with non-profit organisations. This limits my knowledge and understanding of the struggles and challenges faced by vulnerable families and individuals.

There is definitely more that can be done in bridging the class division that is increasingly apparent in Singapore's community. The onus does not only lie on the government, but on all leaders. While the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth has already shared that they had started on several initiatives, such as sports and arts programmes, to promote social mixing, more needs to be done at the community level. An example is 4PM's Ramadan on Wheels (ROW) programme a six-month engagement programme, that rallies over 1,000 youth volunteers across all races and religion, to provide social assistance and befriending low-income and underserved families and elderlies. Youth from schools are given proper training to manage the clients or beneficiaries. Many of them become regular volunteers later on, and even join as part of the organising committee of ROW or other 4PM services in subsequent years.

To better understand how to mitigate the effects arising from class division, as a community leader, it is key to understand our

¹ Houston, A. (2022). What critical qualities do leaders need in this Vuca World?. Social Enterprise Academy. <https://www.socialenterprise.academy/what-critical-qualities-do-leaders-need-in-this-vuca-world>

² Ng, K., & Toh, E. M. (2018). The big read: Social stratification - a poison seeping into S'pore's housing estates and Schools. Today Online. <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/big-read-social-stratification-poison-seeping-spores-housing-estates-and-schools>

³ Ng, J.S. & Teng, A. (2018). Special report: Social mixing across class lines; Who is your friend? Bursting social-class bubbles. https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/st_social-mixing-across-class-lines-who-is-your-friend-bursting-social-class-bubbles_210118.pdf?sfvrsn=5572760a_2

minority youth. We must consider their concerns, goals, and aspirations so that we can understand how they would define success and excellence. Further to this, research has also shown that a strong and stable family can promote positive social behaviour in youth, while instability is associated with social maladjustment, including behaviours such as aggression toward peers, teachers, or parents.⁴

With this, only then can we curate evidence-based programmes to maximise their potential and bridge the class division. Mentoring programmes at 4PM such as Buddy, YouthEDGE, and FRENZ aim to bridge the class divide, by ensuring the youths are properly guided, and their social competencies honed to succeed as useful members of society.⁵

Youths and their aspirations

In this fast-changing world, youths are aware of what is important to them. The National Youth Council (NYC) Youth Survey in 2021 tells us about youths' priorities and concerns.⁶ It seemed like other aspirations such as the desire to own a home, career achievements, and finances are secondary, long-term goals for the youth. Though they continue to be key goals, these goals are viewed as important stepping-stones for further aspirations such as marriage and parenthood. Youth may not necessarily view

success as one's professional development, but rather success is seen as forging strong familial ties and carrying out obligatory duties as a son or a daughter. Family values consistently come first for our youth. They aspire the most to maintain strong family ties. Youths value the importance of a strong and stable family unit, with 8 in 10 youths reporting that they would care for their aging parents, regardless of the circumstances.

For youth in Singapore, family and friends are the main sources of emotional and developmental support.⁷ Youth continue to list their family and friends as the first people they turn to when it comes to seeking advice for personal problems and important life decisions. Committed to maintaining the strong bonds in their communities, young people are dedicating most of their leisure time to their immediate families and other relatives.

4PM's experience in organising programmes for ITE students does reflect the above NYC findings and shows that strong family support plays a key role in students achieving academic success. It was observed that the majority of the BESTARI award recipients, those with GPA 3.8 and above, have a strong family support as can be seen during the award giving ceremonies and well wishes video. Whereas FRENZ mentoring participants, students identified by ITE as bottom 20% in terms of academic performance, are mostly from

disadvantaged families.

Since strengthening familial relations is important to youth, there is a need to further understand the possible determinants of family and marriage aspirations.⁸ Demographic statistics had highlighted that the median age of first marriage of Muslim brides and grooms is lower than the resident population. Specifically, among university graduates, the median age of first marriage for Muslim brides is 28.1 years and 29.6 years for non-Muslims.⁹ When comparing educational qualifications, brides with secondary and below education tend to marry earlier than brides with university education, whether they are Muslim or not (ibid). These statistics may point to the likelihood of marriage and family being more important to Muslim brides who have lower education. It may be possible to postulate that Malay youth, of which most are Muslim, and youth from the lower SES group are more likely to aspire to marriage.

By understanding the trends in early marriage among our youth, we could use the importance of ensuring a good quality of life to start dialogues on how "success" should be defined. However, it also highlights the need for youth to financially support their family by empowering themselves with the necessary knowledge and skills to deal with the demands of family and work. As such, having a mentor guide these youth through these trying times will benefit them as not only would the mentors

⁴ Briggs, S., Cantrell, E. & Karberg, E. (2019). Family Instability and Children's Social Development. ChildTrends. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/family-instability-and-childrens-social-development>

⁵ Encyclopedia of Children's Health. (2022). Social Competence. <http://www.healthofchildren.com/S/Social-Competence.html>

⁶ National Youth Council. (2021). The State of Youth in Singapore - Youth & Their Diverse Priorities. <https://www.nyc.gov.sg/en/initiatives/resources/national-youth-survey>

⁷ National Youth Council. (2021). The State of Youth in Singapore - Youth & Their Diverse Priorities. <https://www.nyc.gov.sg/en/initiatives/resources/national-youth-survey>

⁸ Senin, S.N. (2018). Youth Aspirations - uncovering patterns and understanding stories of class and ethnicity. NUS Libraries. <https://scholarbank.nus.edu.sg/handle/10635/150352>

⁹ Department of Statistics Singapore. (2021). Statistics on Marriages and Divorces. <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/population/smd2021.ashx>

support their family by empowering themselves with the necessary knowledge and skills to deal with the demands of family and work. As such, having a mentor guide these youth through these trying times will benefit them as not only would the mentors support their growth, but they are also a source of knowledge to help them make connections. By offering encouragement and just being present, these mentors intertwine their coaching and mentoring to help develop resilient youth with the aim of nurturing them to be an individual full of confidence, character, competence, who cares about and contributes to society.

This is also important for the mental health and well-being of our youth. Today's youth face very different mental health challenges compared to the previous generation. This is a profound issue that families, society, and government must acknowledge if they are to address the mental health of the youth.¹⁰

In a report by Singapore Management University on Singaporean youth' well-being, family capital, community capital, and national capital are important determinants of subjective well-being of our youth in Singapore.¹¹ Having family-oriented and altruism-oriented goals contributed positively to well-being. The Youth STEPS survey by the IPS and the NYC shows that the youth in Singapore hold fast to noble values, not only individual values such as self-reliance, independence, and pragmatism but also family and community values such as respecting parents, compassion, and thoughtfulness.

Families and communities – bedrock of youth development

While community engagement and social participation are important youth development strategies, the role of the family seems to be critical in the subjective well-being of the youth and its relationship with other variables. Today's youth need to navigate between meeting individual aspirations, achieving their family's dreams, and achieving community's goals.¹²

Through the ROW programme in 2022, we see many young people helping over 350 families. They include families in need, the elderly and the disabled, and those who are at risk of isolation with low or no source of income.

Community activities provide an important opportunity for youth to gather, discuss and take proactive steps together. Other examples from 4PM include the collaborative programme with Malay Heritage Foundation, the *Sembang Ilmu* 'Plus' which invites youth to appreciate the meaning of Malay life in Singapore and the archipelago, and the Ship for SouthEast Asian and Japanese Youth Programme (SSEAYP) exchange programme with NYC. These collaborations provide opportunities to collectively share Asian experiences, knowledge, and aspirations.

The uncertain journey that young people undertake is undoubtedly frightening. However, it can also be an enlightening moment especially when discovered and supported by family and loved ones. Every milestone, no matter how small, should be celebrated. And with every milestone achieved, it is not uncommon for youth to face the question of "What comes next?" with trepidation and uncertainty. However, it is important for youth to face this disequilibrium because "I do not know" also allows our youth to rethink, reframe, and redefine success. "I do not know" can be a perfectly sensible starting point, provided it is approached not with an attitude of helpless resignation, but one of inquisitiveness and surprise.

Let us call on our youth to be their own superhero and support them as they embark on their own superhero journey. Youth is the catalyst of change and progress. While we, the mentors, and leaders, cannot guarantee a smooth journey towards success, we can be confident that with the right guidance, there will be progress. As Jabari argues, "Societies must create the platforms and pathways that give youth a voice and a chance to pursue and have a real stake in shaping the policies that will impact their future".¹³

¹⁰ Neo, C.C., Goh, C.T. & Yip, C. (2022). More youths seeking help with mental health - but finding it isn't always easy. Channel News Asia. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/cna-insider/youth-mental-health-illness-singapore-help-treatment-2649296>

¹¹ Ho, K.W. (2018). Contributors of Singaporean youths' wellbeing: Life goals, family-community-nation capitals, opportunity and social mobility. The state of youth in Singapore: Research compilation. Research Collection School of Economics. https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3249&context=soe_research

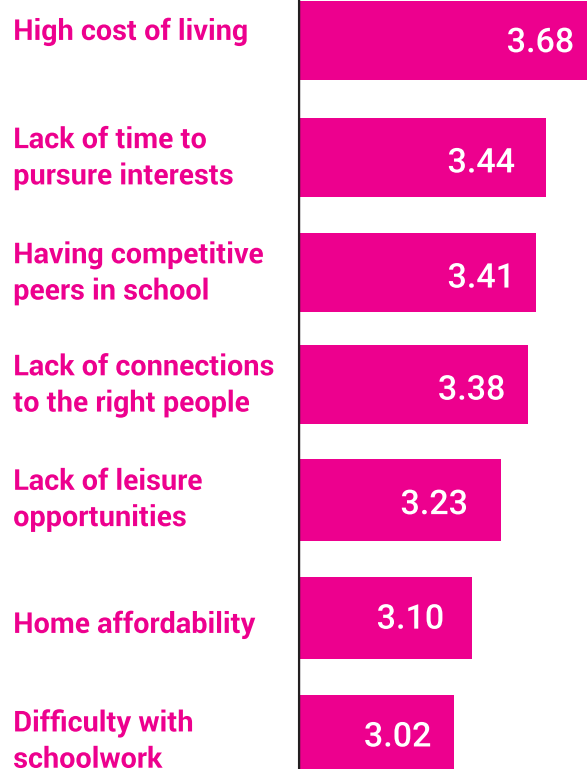
¹² Trybe. (2022). Importance of Family in a Youth's Success Story. https://www.trybe.org/role-of-families/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=role-of-families

¹³ Jabari, M. (2022). How to give the world's youth a voice in shaping global challenges. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/08/how-to-give-the-worlds-youth-a-voice-in-shaping-global-challenges/>

DID YOU KNOW?

Top 7 Challenges (Mean scores on a 5-pt scale)

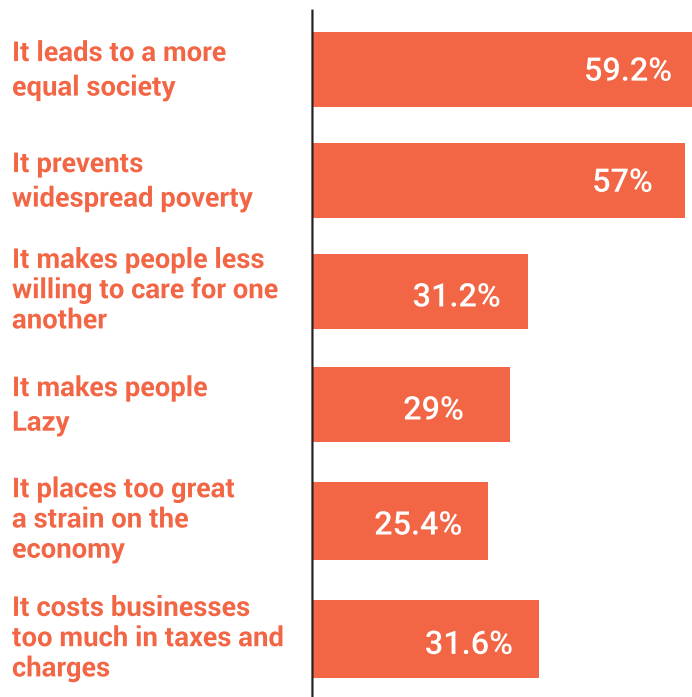
Q. The following is a list of challenges that you might have faced or are already facing. Please rate how these challenges affect or have affected you on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is “Not at all” and 5 is “Very much”.



Source: National Youth Council. (2019). Youth Study on Transitions and Evolving Pathways in Singapore (Youth STEPS).

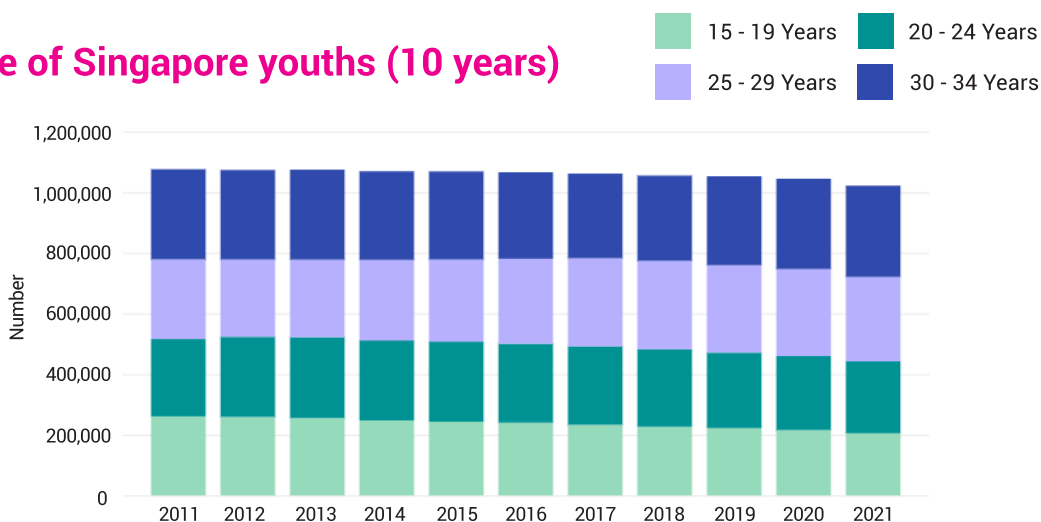
Views on social benefits (% Which report agree / strongly agree)

Q. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about social benefits and services in Singapore? please rate each statement on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “Strongly disagree”, and 5 being “Strongly agree”.



Source: National Youth Council. (2019). Youth Study on Transitions and Evolving Pathways in Singapore (Youth STEPS).

Profile of Singapore youths (10 years)



Source: Department of Statistics Singapore. (n.d.). Profile of Singapore Youths Dashboard.



We would love to hear your
thoughts on MENDAKI
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