

Speech by Senior Minister of State Josephine Teo at the Family Life Champion Award Ceremony, 7 Sep 2016

Friends and colleagues

Nowadays, when people see me, they may teasingly call me the “baby woman”. This is on account of my work in the PMO/NPTD. Not long after I took on the portfolio, we made a move to raise the paternity leave benefit from one week to two weeks. Previously, the second week could be offered voluntarily by employers and the Government would pay for it. But from January 2017, all employers must offer two weeks.

Employees welcomed the move – both the daddies and mummies. Quite a few people have come up to me to say “thank you”. Naturally, employers had concerns but most have supported it. We made the announcement earlier this year, to give time for employers to adjust, particularly the SMEs. Some have decided to implement it straightaway. That’s a smart move, in my view, because of the signalling effect to their employees. These companies will certainly be more ready to cope when the law takes effect in a few months.

I have been asked whether this move to increase paternity leave will help to raise our TFR.

My answer is “No, leave benefits alone cannot provide the answer”. The experience of Singapore and the many countries we have studied shows clearly there is no silver bullet to improving birth rates. There is no single measure that can persuade people to have children, or more children.

What then can we do to boost birth rates? What can persuade Singaporeans to have children or more children? Can our Family Life Champions play a role?

Our starting point is that people nowadays marry and have kids because they want to, not because they have to. Fortunately, aspirations for marriage and parenthood remain strong in Singapore. Our birth rates in recent years have stabilised but we can do better.

There are three important elements that help individuals decide in favour of marriage and parenthood, and that is, when they feel that these are **achievable, enjoyable and celebrated**.

Ensuring Marriage and Parenthood is Achievable

Young Singaporeans want to have stable jobs and build up some financial resources before settling down. And, even as the economy grows more slowly, that aspiration is achievable provided we keep unemployment rate low and generate modest income growth.

A second important factor for young Singaporeans is home ownership. Thankfully, we have an extensive public housing programme that has kept home ownership affordable. Many young couples are able to own their first marital homes through the BTO programme, something unheard of in most cities. The majority of those who purchase BTO flats in non-mature estates do not pay anything out of pocket for their mortgage instalments. It’s a great help to family finances.

Another key factor is quality childcare that is accessible and affordable. Parents want to have peace of mind knowing that their children are well looked after while they work. They also want their children to socialise and learn.

MSF, ECDA and MOE have been working jointly to increase childcare provision. More than 30,000 childcare places have been added since 2013, most of which are in HDB estates. There will be 10,000 more by the end of next year, especially in the newer estates. This will help to improve

accessibility and make it closer to homes. About 30% of childcare centres are also located near workplaces. Childcare subsidies are available to all parents and additional means-tested subsidies help lower and middle-income families with childcare costs.

Families are also supported in other areas. Education is of high quality and heavily subsidised from primary to post-secondary and even tertiary levels. An increasing number of student care centres help address the care-giving needs of working parents. MOE has committed to setting up student care centres in all primary schools by 2020. More help is also provided to needy families, including through new measures like the CDA First Step, KidSTART and the Fresh Start housing scheme.

Taken together, there is significant support for marriage and parenthood. They show the Government's strong commitment to make Singapore a 'Great Place for Families'.

Supporting Parenthood so it is Enjoyable

All the above are necessary but still probably insufficient.

The example of South Korea suggests that even with abundant resources poured in by the Government, couples may still not want children or to have more children. It has to do primarily with the lack of support by employers and co-workers. There are also unhelpful workplace practices and cultures resulting in long hours away from home.

In Korea, there is a very strong sense of 'presentee-ism', in other words being present, with the implicit understanding that you do not leave work until your boss has done so. There is also a very prevalent culture of "hoesik". And what is "hoesik"? It literally means staff company dinner; in practice, it means to go out after work to have a drink and socialise. But this takes time away from family.

Another aspect that seems to suppress birth rates has to do with traditional expectations that good mothers must stop work to care for their children. This has made it harder for women in some countries to enjoy both career and parenthood, even if they did not face discrimination at work.

The availability of flexible work arrangements can thus help employees better manage work and family commitments. As a result they make parenting a more enjoyable process.

The evidence points quite clearly to the fact that when parents feel supported by their employers and co-workers, they tend to enjoy parenthood more and are therefore more open to have more children. Their single colleagues too, will hopefully take the cue and be more favourable towards marriage and parenthood.

The wider community plays an important role too. For example, how convenient it is for parents to change their babies' diapers, or to travel on public transport with children in strollers. We also need child-friendly community spaces.

There's clearly much that society as a whole can do to make parenthood more enjoyable.

Celebrate Marriage and Parenthood

When I looked at the birth rates in different countries, the differences could not be explained by factors such as costs, childcare availability and work-life support only. For reasons that are not completely understood, it seems that there are other factors that influence TFR, such as historical, geographical and other socio-economic factors. A key ingredient appears to be how much a

society values and celebrates families and children; and that makes the people want to have more kids.

Respected sociologist and former NMP, Assoc. Prof Paulin Straughan, once observed that “no one is going to give you a prize for getting married and having kids!” She believes this explains why some people are not taking proactive steps to find a partner, to settle down and start families.

I believe that there is much value when the whole society comes together in an effort to foster positive mindsets toward marriage and parenthood, and to help shape supportive social norms. That is where I think Family Life Champions can play a critical role.

Through you, we can as a society continuously celebrate parenthood, celebrate having babies and celebrate families. I’m told, for example, that FLCs reached out to some 10,000 people nationwide this year through “Baby Singapore” shows alone. But that’s not enough We had more than 33,000 babies last year so there’s obviously a lot more room for you to grow!

Collectively, through the many varied initiatives, you have reached out to 100,000 residents this year. It is a wonderful achievement which you should all be very proud of.

I therefore wish to thank all FLCs and Family Life Connectors. Your dedication and efforts have made family life more celebrated in our communities. I also thank Mr Abdullah Shafiee, PA Board Member and judge of the Family Life Champion Award.

I have three suggestions as you think about how FLCs can play a bigger role.

- i. More visibility on the ground, so that residents who are parents or parents-to-be know they can link up with you, and with one another through you.
- ii.
- iii.
- iv. Special focus on parents-to-be and new parents, because not everyone is able to live near to their own families and those who can’t will benefit greatly from being plugged into a network of fellow-parents.
- v.
- vi.
- vii. Be a super-connector of ground-up initiatives; for example, the Toa Payoh West Parenting Interest Group has since grown into a 120-strong group and members frequently come together for playdates and bond with other families in the neighbourhood. I am happy to learn that group members have also stepped up to take the lead to organise joint family activities, and share parenting tips and skills.

Launch of FLC PLAY (Partnership Leisure Activities for Young Families) Programme and FLC Playdate Kit

A new initiative that has just been launched is the FLC PLAY, which stands for “Partnership Leisure Activities for Young Families”. The FLCs will collaborate with various Community Partners to bring essential parenting knowledge to the young families in the community. I’m told you will kick start the first series with the Early Childhood Development Agency. Activities will be customised and interactive, and held at various community centres.

Managing Zika

One current topic that may be useful for you to touch on is Zika which has seen a spike recently. Parents-to-be are understandably concerned and I have been asked if the TFR will be affected.

The Ministry of Health and NEA have been putting out useful information about the spread of the virus in Singapore, and the precautions we can take. This has helped to dispel myths and clarify doubts. As Zika is spread by the Aedes mosquito which has been in Singapore for some time, it is unlikely to go away soon. What we can do as a community, is to prevent mosquito breeding especially in our homes. FLCs, through your network of interest groups and the PLAY initiative can also help to raise awareness in the community.

Whether or not it affects TFR, I see no reason to speculate. Most people, including parents-to-be, have responded in calm and rational ways. I'm hopeful that we will all learn to live as normally as possible even with the presence of Zika or Dengue or Cikugunya, take precautions but not let them disrupt our lives including plans to start families.

Congratulations to Award Recipients

In closing, let me congratulate those who are being recognised today for your outstanding achievements as Family Life Champions. You make a difference to your community, and bring us all closer together by watching out for each other and generously giving your time and effort to help one another.

On behalf of the families you have touched, and the many more that you will reach out to, thank you for choosing to make a difference and for helping to make Singapore a Great Place for Families!

I wish everyone a wonderful evening ahead.