

Speech by Minister Grace Fu at the 2013 Marriage and Parenthood Package Press Conference

Good morning ladies and gentlemen.

Family is the bedrock of society. Our 2012 Marriage & Parenthood Survey has actually showed that getting married and having children remain important aspirations of many Singaporeans. 83% of single respondents desired to get married and 84% of married respondents intended to have two or more children. Therefore, we would like to support more Singaporeans to achieve their family aspirations while balancing their work aspirations. We would like to see society provide a conducive environment for Singaporeans to get married and have children.

Enhanced M&P Package draws on feedback

Over the course of last year, we conducted about 50 dialogue sessions and received more than 800 pieces of feedback on Marriage and Parenthood-related issues. Besides members of the public, we also received feedback and proposals from various organisations, such as the National Family Council, I Love Children, Singapore National Employers Federation, NTUC, the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises (ASME), PAP Women's Wing, AWARE, Focus on the Family, the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (or RIMA for short), as well as Touch Community Services.

Many have told us that the decision to get married and have children is a deeply personal one. It is ultimately their personal attitude as well as societal values that will have the greatest influence on their decisions. Many said that they had children because they enjoy parenthood and they value the joy of parenthood. Ms Desiree Tan, a mother of three, summed it up very nicely in a letter to the Straits Times in October 2012. She had said, and I quote:

“For us, having children was not about having someone to support and take care of us in old age. While enjoying five good years of married life, we had slowly discovered that there was this indescribable emptiness in our lives that could be filled only by children.

Now the house is filled with their laughter, ear-piercing cries, hugs, fights, kisses, sulking and a love that supersedes everything.” She ended the letter by saying “The greatest motivation for having children, is having children itself.”

Notwithstanding that this is a very personal decision, many Singaporeans raised practical concerns on housing, child care, healthcare and other costs of living issues. They shared that stronger Government support measures would be helpful in shouldering part of the cost incurred in having children. Besides financial support, one recurring theme in the feedback that we received was the societal support for parenting as well as the shared parental responsibility between men and women. Many called for paternity leave so that fathers could spend time with their newborns and also with their wives. Both men and women also said they would like better worklife harmony to fulfil their family and career aspirations.

Let me thank Singaporeans and stakeholders for taking time to provide us with their invaluable

feedback. We have taken into account these views and suggestions as part of our policy review process.

There are 5 key areas in which the M&P enhancements aim to provide greater support.

First, we want to make it faster and easier for couples with children to obtain housing. Currently, there are many housing schemes to help families and couples. However, we want to do more.

- Among first-time applicants for flats, married couples with children have the greatest housing need. Under the new Parenthood Priority Scheme, HDB will give married couples with children priority flat allocation so they can set up their homes faster.
- HDB will also introduce a new Parenthood Provisional Housing Scheme, to allow first-timer married couples with children to rent a flat from HDB at an affordable rental rate while awaiting the completion of their flats.

We hope to encourage married couples to start their families earlier, by granting such households more priority in housing and also providing affordable interim housing solutions.

Second, the enhancements seek to further defray medical costs relating to conception and delivery. Members of the public and various stakeholder groups have asked if we can do more to help couples who want to have children but have difficulty conceiving.

- Under the enhanced Assisted Reproduction Technology package, or ART for short, couples who utilise ART will now enjoy greater co-funding from the Government, of up to 75% of treatment costs.¹ In addition to the current co-funding for 3 fresh cycles, couples can now also enjoy co-funding for 3 frozen cycle treatments. Co-funding will also be extended to couples with more than one child. By making ART more affordable, we hope to encourage couples who have difficulty conceiving, to seek help early.
- In addressing the costs of delivery, we have also reviewed our accouchement fee structure in public hospitals such that they are no longer differentiated across birth order. This will help defray the cost of delivery for couples who are having more children.

Third, the enhancements will further defray child-raising costs including healthcare costs. We will do more to support parents in raising children.

- The Baby Bonus cash gift will be increased by \$2,000 for each eligible child. Parents can now receive \$6,000 per child for the first two births and \$8,000 per child for the third and fourth births.
- We will open a Medisave account for each newborn and give a Medisave grant of \$3,000 to encourage enrolment in MediShield. This is to support parents in planning for the healthcare needs of their children.
- MediShield will also be extended to cover newly diagnosed congenital and neonatal conditions from 1 Mar 2013 to give parents greater assurance. We have received much feedback, including through the Our SG Conversation, on the support needed to deal with congenital and neonatal conditions. I am certain that many parents will welcome these

enhancements, and Minister Gan will say a few words later on.

We have decided to extend the enhanced Baby Bonus cash gift and Medisave grant to children born on or after 26 Aug 2012, when these were first mentioned at PM's National Day Rally speech.

Fourth, we would like to provide additional help to working parents in balancing their work and family commitments. Many parents said that they would appreciate greater work-life support for looking after their young children.

- We have decided to give parents with at least one child aged 7 to 12, 2 days of paid child care leave per year. Parents with one or more children below age 7 will continue to enjoy 6 days of child care leave per year.
- Working mothers who have adopted a child will be able to enjoy 4 weeks of Government-Paid Adoption Leave during the child's first year.
- Working women who currently do not qualify for maternity leave, such as those on short-term contract work, can now benefit from the Government-Paid Maternity Benefit scheme which allows them to enjoy Government-Paid Maternity Leave, in the form of a cash benefit.
- We have extended the maternity protection period to cover the full term of pregnancy to better protect working women from dismissal without sufficient cause and retrenchment. This is an increase from the current maternity protection period of the last 6 months of pregnancy for dismissal without sufficient cause, or the last 3 months for retrenchment.

Fifth, we will signal strongly to the society on the important role fathers play in raising and caring for their children.

- Fathers will now enjoy 1 week of legislated Government-Paid Paternity Leave
- In addition, we will introduce a new Government-Paid Shared Parental Leave. This will allow fathers to share 1 week of his wife's maternity leave entitlement. Together, fathers can enjoy up to two weeks of paid leave upon the birth of their child to bond with their newborns and care for their wives. By inculcating shared parental responsibility from birth, we hope to put families off to a good start and encourage fathers to take on a bigger role in child-raising.

Other Measures

Beyond the measures that are being announced today, the Government is also studying other measures to promote a more pro-family environment. We have received significant feedback from parents regarding the importance of having access to affordable and good quality pre-school care. The Government has been reviewing the sector, and more details, as DPM said, will be announced on Wednesday.

In addition, many have called for more flexible work arrangements to be made available to young parents. Both employers and employees have asked for more support from the Government to put

in place flexible work arrangements, as this will help facilitate work-life harmony. MOM is studying ways to enhance the current Work-life Works! Fund or WoW! for short, to provide incentives for employers to offer flexible work arrangements for their employees. These enhancements will be announced at a later stage.

Family as the bedrock of society

The enhancements announced today reflect the importance that the Government place on encouraging marriage and parenthood amongst Singaporeans. The family unit is the basic building block of our society and we are committed to encouraging and supporting Singaporeans to achieve their family aspirations.

Beyond Government actions, all of us in the society can and should play a role in creating a conducive environment for Singaporeans to start and raise families. For example, employers can put in place in their organisations a family-friendly work environment to support their employees who are getting married and having children. As members of family and the larger community, we can encourage our family members, our neighbours, and our colleagues, to place marriage and parenthood as important life goals by sharing with them our experiences. Many young adults whom we have spoken to told us about the effectiveness of peer influence. One young lady asked me to “make marrying trendy again”. So I will heed her advice but to do so, the Government will need the support of everyone. By working together, we can play a part in placing marriage and parenthood in the forefront of people’s minds. On this note, I would like to conclude this section of the media conference and, and I will now hand over the time to Minister Gan

¹ Capped at \$6,300 per fresh cycle and \$1,200 per frozen cycle.