What’s next for pro-parenthood measures? Focus on work culture

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The Singapore Government recently announced a host of new measures to entice couples to have children, with a focus on education and healthcare. This comes after its first attempt at successfully encouraging married couples to have children, and is unlikely to be the last.

Population matters in Singapore are essential to the nation’s future. Singapore’s total fertility rate was 1.36 last year, among the lowest in the world and similar to other East Asian societies which have experienced ultra-low fertility. While population levels can be sustained through naturalisation, having new generations of children born and raised here is essential if we are to have a population core deep enough to fuel our economy and its values. It is certainly in the collective interest to ensure population growth so that a future Singapore workforce can be sustained, as others argued by those with an eye on the country’s economic vibrancy.

Parenthood is also an important individual aspiration for many young Singaporeans.

The 2016 Marriage and Parenthood survey conducted by the National Population and Talent Division polled close to 6,000 singles and married people aged 40 and below. A majority of married respondents indicated their intention to have more children, while only 3 per cent had intentions to have no children. However, there was a clear disparity between aspirations and reality, according to the Department of Statistics.

In last year, 44 per cent of married women aged 40 and below and 42 per cent of married men aged 40 and below had two or more children, while 23 per cent had only one, while 21 per cent had none.

Parenthood aspirations are ultimately socio-cultural. Perhaps such aspirations have also been kept alive because the Government’s relentless focus on this matter for years, but it takes much more than pro-parenthood attitudes to start and grow a family. Couples need to be reassured whether parenthood is indeed achievable given their circumstances. The survey found that financial costs and the stress of a child are the most widely cited reasons for not having more children.

These concerns are not unreasonable, nor should they be. Living in a global city is expensive. Children require ongoing financial expenditure on food, education and healthcare that can be substantial, especially if parents adopt the logic that only the best – and often the most expensive – is good for their child/ren. Then there are the opportunity costs involved in child rearing, especially for women who stop work or work fewer hours. These are inevitable lifestyle adjustments, such as a lesser leisure time.

Parenthood is as stressful. In the early years, ensuring adequate care for the child, especially if it requires care for two children, is a constant need to ensure that children are adequately prepared and coping with the demands of the education system can take a toll. Undoubtedly, Singaporeans look to the Government to make parenthood less costly and stressful. In the past decade, the Government has responded to these concerns and has tackled them on various fronts – it gave generous ‘baby bonus’ grants and introduced co-saving schemes, extended maternity and paternity leave, ramped up childcare provision and increased subsidies for pre-school and housing substantially.

It also introduced schemes to better reconcile work and parenthood commitments, and offered more financial assistance with artificial reproduction technologies. It was evened to check the rapid rise in price of baby milk powder to ensure more affordable, high-quality options.

The latest measures by the Government will mean substantially more subsidies for pre-school costs borne by parents’ household income. More parents will also qualify for subsidies with a rise in the income ceiling for this assistance. Childhood vaccinations at polyclinics and Community Health Assist Scheme General Practitioners’ clinics will also be subsidised. These measures are also accompanied by various changes in the education system such as the reduction in emphasis on examinations, especially in primary school.

These measures, when combined, will hopefully make the prospect of raising a child sound less daunting for couples who want children, but are intimidated by the prospect of raising them. It is important to note that the measures are focused on making parenthood more affordable and accessible to families of all income levels, including those who cannot count on the nation to provide a leg up.

The Government’s heavy investment in pre-school education makes it highly affordable, and the reassurance of subsidies at tertiary level, including loans for more expensive medical school training, will helpfully increase optimism among parents that Singapore society will give a fair chance to their children despite their socio-economic status.

Looking at the breadth of pre-school policies, the Government has certainly done much to address the challenge of low fertility. However, an even more robust approach to promoting family-friendly work culture is what is needed now. The gap between what work practices in Singapore and in societies that pride themselves on cultivating conducive family-friendly workplaces is substantial. For example, Singaporean workers seldom assert that they “might not respond to e-mails after office hours” (a frame common among many employees in more-family-friendly societies) or that they need to leave work on time to attend childcare needs. Job redesign to allow two part-time employees to share a position is also uncommon.

Exploiting family-friendly work policies might be perceived as jeopardising business competitiveness. Nevertheless, more-state intervention to good workplaces into being family-friendly environments might be necessary, even if it is insufficient on its own. Business and individual efforts are also needed. However, voluntary adoption of these practices to cultivate family-friendly work cultures is likely to be slow and uneven, given that the logic of profit maximisation dominates businesses. Further enhancements to2 parenthood packages should focus on encouraging family-friendly practices.

This article is based on a research paper by Mathew Mathews, head of Social Labs at The Key Feng, a research associate at the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore.