

Getting dad involved

Many fathers here are taking an active role in looking after their children right from their birth

Cheryl Tan and Eunice Quek

Being an employee of the Google office in Singapore made it easier for operations manager Norman Neo, 34, to be a better father.

No, the American company does not conduct fathering workshops for its employees. But what it does may be just as important.

It gives fathers one month's paternity leave, instead of the two days most companies in Singapore give male employees who have just had a new child.

It also pays in full for the maternity expenses incurred by all full-time employees or their spouses, including costs chalked up due to complications and the need for pre- and post-natal care.

As if that is not enough, Google even gives employees an additional \$650 under its Baby Bonding Bucks programme to spend on take-out meals and groceries while caring for their newborns.

Mr Neo, whose wife gave birth to their first child, daughter Cadence, two years ago, says: "The one month of paternity leave helped me set the foundation to become a better father. As new parents, we had to take time getting used to looking after a baby."

His wife, Madam Herlinda Xu, 34, adds that having him "emotionally available and involved as a husband" in the first month to help "change diapers, bathe our little girl and run errands" was invaluable as she "would not have been able to cope alone".

Google South-east Asia's head of human resources Sarah Robb says: "We recognise that the birth of a child is a special event in the lives of mothers and fathers alike, and want our employees to take time off to bond with their child."

Google is the rare company in Singapore with such generous paternity benefits. Others usually offer two to three days of paternity leave and some firms dangle the option of up to six months' unpaid leave.

Singapore fathers have never been in the spotlight more than now. In the past two years, more than a dozen daddy groups such as Daddies Club and Dads For Life have sprung up around the country to help fathers better understand, bond and get more involved with their children. These groups are under the People's Association and Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports.

And recently, a Swedish expert told The Straits Times that men have to become more involved at home if Singapore's all-time low fertility rate of 1.23 babies per woman is to improve.

But a new generation of fathers in Singapore has already started to rise up.

Without waiting for government policies for fathers to move closer to Sweden's (which include 480 days of tax-funded parental leave between husband and wife, and couples who split it equally get a bonus payment), more Singapore dads are getting their hands dirty by helping out

with not only diaper duty but also household chores such as cooking and cleaning.

One such enlightened father is radio deejay Daniel Ong, who quit his job in March to stay at home with his wife, actress-host Jaime Teo, and their five-week-old daughter, Renee. Now a freelance events host, he believes that the time spent with his family is priceless.

He says: "Being with Renee during the formative years is important to fostering bonds and relationships that will go a long way till she's all grown up."

Many studies affirm his belief. Associate professor Rebecca Ang at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, did a study which revealed that Primary 3 and 4 pupils who had the support of their fathers have "more satisfying and less conflictual relationships with their teachers". Her paper on this was published in The American Journal of Family Therapy in 2006.

A Swedish study in 2007 led by associate professor Anna Sarkadi from the Uppsala University in Sweden showed that boys with fathers who were involved were less likely to have behavioural problems. In the case of young women, the risk of psychological problems was lowered.

Nominated Member of Parliament and sociologist Paulin Straughan notes that the concept of the "involved father is a relatively new phenomenon in Singapore". She adds that such involved dads might have been urged by their spouses to do more. "Working mums have so much on their plate. If they don't involve their husbands in child-rearing, they may not be able to manage their multiple responsibilities," she says.

Former deejay Ong would be among the first to agree with her. He says: "After experiencing parenting duties first-hand, I know now that juggling the needs of a baby is five times harder than work. Working dads have it easy."

Hopefully making it a little easier for men to get more hands-on at home are the many fathering groups.

At organisations such as Braddell Heights and Queenstown Family Life Champions, under the People's Association, fathers can choose to spend time with their children over a common hobby such as playing soccer, playing in a percussion group and cooking. There are even discussion groups for fathers to exchange parenting tips.

These interest groups, which meet at least once quarterly, are becoming popular as well. Membership in groups such as the Braddell Heights Men's Cooking Interest Group has doubled to 68 members in two years since it started.

But Centre For Fathering executive director Wong Suen Kwong laments that Singapore dads still have a long way to go to play a larger role in their children's lives.

His centre, founded in 2000, organises bonding activities twice a year which usually sees about 12 father-and-child pairs signing up each time.

According to the father of two children in their 20s, most of his 3,800 members and readers of his weekly e-article Fathering Matters "are often just happy to be behind the computer reading the articles and not doing anything else".

"Ten years on, it's still difficult to get fathers to be involved with their children."

Mr Norman Neo had a month's paternity leave to take care of baby Cadence with wife Herlinda Xu.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF NORMAN NEO
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A stay-home dad, Mr Glenn Ang spends his day taking care of his children, (from left) Scott, nine, Clare, two, and Ryan, seven.

ST PHOTOS: CAROLINE CHIA, MUGILAN, RAJASEGARAN

Father's home

At the end of this month, former teacher Glenn Ang will be celebrating his ninth anniversary as a stay-home dad.

Quitting his job to play a major role at home was a "family decision" taken with his wife when their eldest child, Scott, now nine, was six months old.

Both their mothers were still working at the time and could not help to look after Scott. And they did not want a domestic helper to look after him as they were "not comfortable leaving an infant alone" with one.

So Mr Ang, 38, suggested that he would look after Scott while his wife, Dr Geraldine Oh, 34, continued her studies as an orthodontist.

He says: "I felt lonely growing up and being a latch-key kid. I want to be around for my kids as they grow up and when they come home from school. It's important that I'm there."

Dr Oh says: "Initially, it was a tough decision to make. It was not common for a father to stay at home with the kids, and I was worried that Glenn would be affected by what others may say. But the pros far outweighed the cons. Now, most people say I'm very lucky when they know that Glenn is a stay-home dad."

They are thankful that their parents did not disapprove of the decision. While it

was "tough giving up one person's income", they did their sums and found it manageable to live on just her salary.

Since then, they had two more children, seven-year-old Ryan and two-year-old Clare.

Mr Ang's day begins at 6am and he has to drive both sons to school. He also picks them up, helps them with their homework and looks after Clare. After he puts the children to bed at 9pm, he helps his wife with household chores. His mother-in-law, who retired three years ago, helps out by cooking the meals.

He says: "Being a stay-home dad isn't really a problem since I was used to running the house when I was young. My parents were always working, so I had to prepare meals and do the laundry."

With so much time devoted to his family, he meets friends only occasionally but makes it a point to have a weekly date night with his wife, to "maintain my sanity".

He admits that he misses the company of colleagues and, when his children are older, would consider returning to the workforce to pursue his dream of working with special-needs children.

But Mr Ang, who has a law degree, has no regrets being a full-time father: "I would make the same decision again as I am happy doing what I'm doing."

That is good news for Ryan, who says: "He can play soccer with me. If he's not around, I'll feel bored and run around doing nothing."

Eunice Quek

It's worth it

When his second son, Aaron, was born one week ago, engineer Jeff Chua used up four of his 14 days of annual leave to look after his family - even though he and his wife had employed a confinement lady for a month.

The 35-year-old says: "I was worried whether my wife could cope on her own. I also helped the confinement lady buy anything she needed."

With his first son, Ethan, two, he had used up 10 days of annual leave.

"This time around, I didn't want to take too many days off so that the remainder can be used when my children fall ill," he explains.

His wife, Madam Wendy Foo, 35, is thankful that he is around to help out in the early days after a child is born. She says: "People we know joke that he takes leave and does nothing at home, but he's really a huge help to me."

Mr Chua has no choice but to use his annual leave because his company gives fathers only two days of paternity leave.

"Of course, I wish I had more paternity leave but what is one to do? All fathers just have to deal with it," he says.

Madam Foo's job as a sports executive requires her to work late hours, up to 11pm occasionally, which "forced" him to be more involved with the raising of their children.

But, while admitting that it can be frustrating to look after a sick child, he enjoys



being hands-on with Ethan. He takes the 22-month-old to a babysitter at 7am before going to work. After work, he brings him home and bathes and feeds him.

On weekends, he spends more time with the family, going with them to the playground or supermarket. Saturday evenings are a time to be with their extended families.

Fully committed to his role, he says: "Some people ask me why I don't employ a maid. But seeing your son sit or stand up for the first time brings such happiness. It's worth it. It's okay if I'm tired."

Eunice Quek

Daddy activities

Eat With Your Family Day

What: An art exhibition of works inspired by families eating together
When: Tomorrow to May 31
Where: The Arts House, Print Gallery, 1 Old Parliament Lane
Admission: Free
Info: www.fathers.com.sg

Health And Wellness

What: A health carnival for men and their families, organised by Daddies Club, Queenstown Family Life Champion. While the kids take part in fun games, fathers can attend health talks and workshops
When: May 23, 9am to 4pm
Where: Queenstown Community Centre, 365 Commonwealth Avenue
Admission: \$4, \$2 (above 50 years old)
Info: To register, call 6474-1681

Father-Child Bonding Camp

What: An adventure camp for fathers with children from nine to 13 years old
When: June 4 and 5
Where: Outward Bound School (East Coast Campus), East Coast Parkway
Price: \$390 for a father and child (the camp needs at least 12 pairs to commence)
Info: To register, call Centre For Fathering on 6252-8408 or e-mail cff@fathers.com.sg

10,000 Fathers Reading

What: Share the joys of reading with your child during a workshop, as well as listen to story-telling and making crafts
When: June 5, 11am to 5pm
Where: Compass Point Atrium, 1 Sengkang Square
Admission: Free
Info: Go to www.10000fathers.nlb.gov.sg

Cooking Class

What: With other fathers from the Men's Cooking Interest Group, gain some cooking skills to impress your wife and kids
When: June 19, 2 to 4pm
Where: Braddell Heights Community Centre, 50 Serangoon Avenue 2
Price: Free
Info: Call 6286-7876 to register

Why I Love My Dad

What: Show appreciation for your dad at this Father's Day celebration where you can perform for your father in a talentime segment
When: June 20, 2 to 6pm
Where: Queenstown Community Centre, 365 Commonwealth Avenue
Price: \$5
Info: Call 6474-1681 to register