

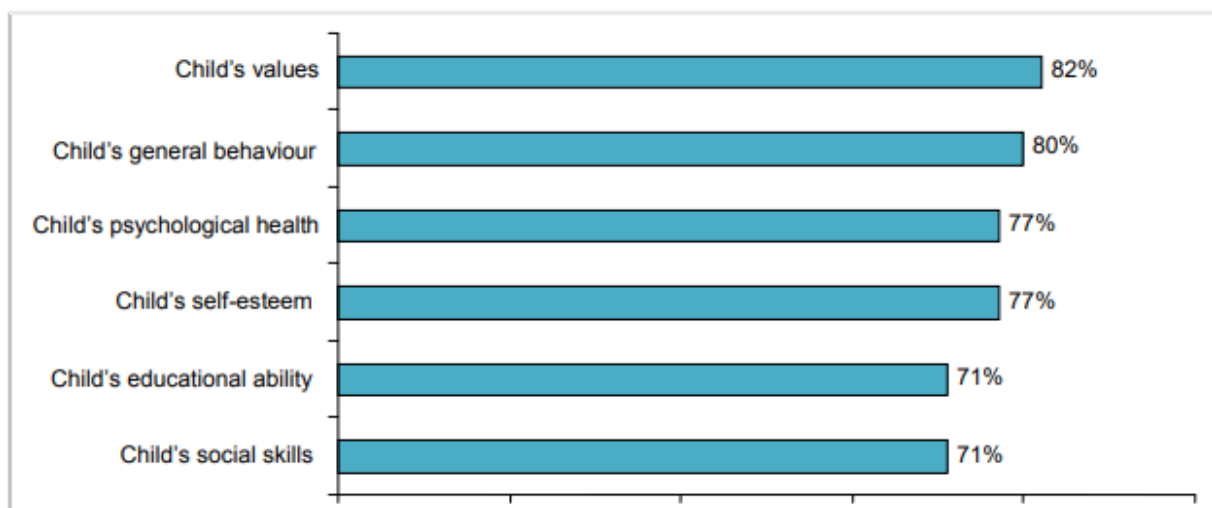
## A Malay/Muslim Father's Role in His Children's Education

by Mohamad Zahrin Abdullah

### 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.



Base: n=2,220

Question: Next I'd like to ask you about the impact that fathers have on their children. Please tell me how much you think fathers influence each of the following aspects...using a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 means greatly influence and 1 means does not influence at all.

Source: Fatherhood Public Perception Survey 2009

<sup>1</sup> MSF Fatherhood Public Perception Survey. (2009) <https://dadsforlife.sg/research/singapore-fatherhood-public-perception-survey-shows-that-singapore-dads-want-to-be-active-fathers/>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

**Definition of a Father's Roles and Responsibilities (% who cite this response)**

Be a breadwinner	46%
Provide emotional care/support and give love/affection to children and family	36%
Assist in child's learning and education	18%
Serve as a role model for child	18%
Provide moral/spiritual guidance	17%
Look after child's day-to-day needs	11%
Provide discipline to child	10%
Be responsible towards and take care of family	9%
Support, love and be loyal to mother of child	6%
Be involved in general upbringing of child	3%
Play and engage in recreational activities with child	3%
Be leader/ 'man'/ decision maker of household	2%
Provide protection/ safety/ security	1%
Be familiar with child's friends and social life	1%
Others	4%

Base: n=2,220

Question: *When you think about a father's roles and responsibilities, what comes to your mind?*

*(Free response, up to three responses accepted)*

Source: Fatherhood Public Perception Survey 2009

<sup>2</sup> MSF Fatherhood Public Perception Survey. (2009) <https://dadsforlife.sg/research/singapore-fatherhood-public-perception-survey-shows-that-singapore-dads-want-to-be-active-fathers/>

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 lives.<sup>3</sup>

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, 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".<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

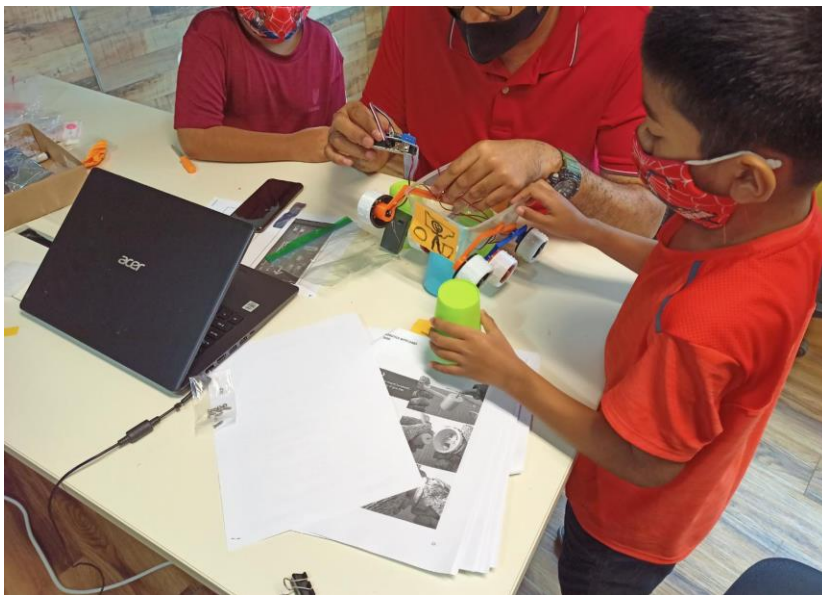
<sup>4</sup> Dewey, J (1901), Lectures on Ethics 1900–1901, Donald F. Koch (ed.), Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL

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. Unknowingly, 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 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.



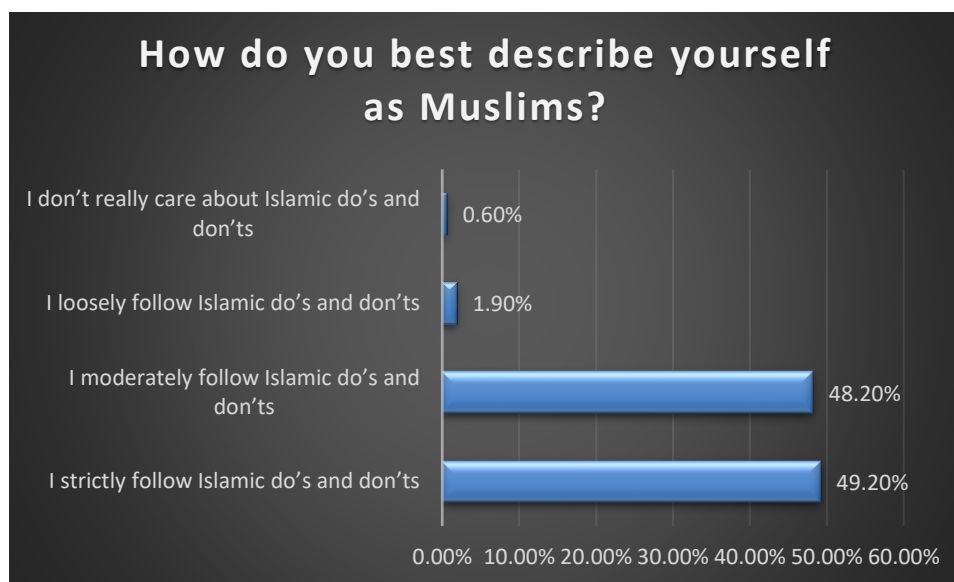
Fathers Building Robot Cars from Scratch (Source: Robotics with Dads 2020)

*Bapa Sepanjang Hayat* currently offer 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.

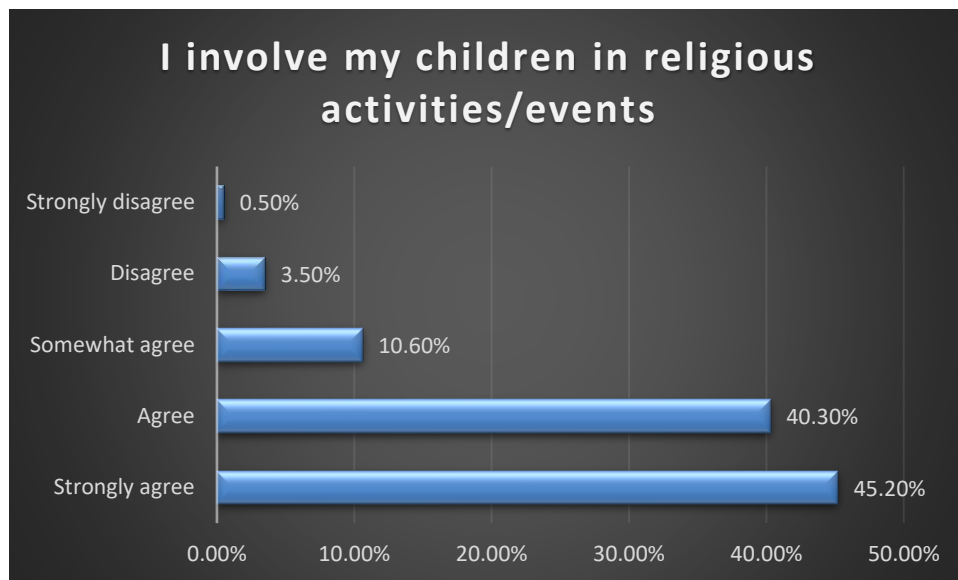
### **How Islam Shapes the Father’s Role**

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 Professionals), PPIS (Persatuan Pemuda 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 events.<sup>5</sup>



<sup>5</sup> 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.



Source: PPIS, 2021

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 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.

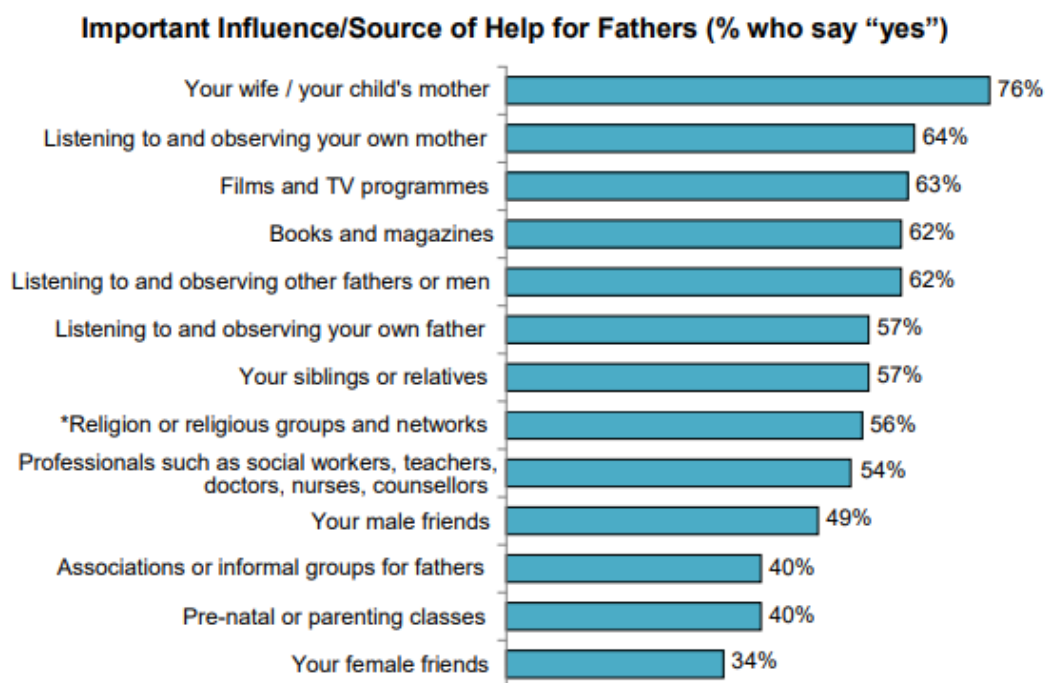
### **The Family Unit**

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.<sup>6</sup>



Base: Fathers with children aged 15 years and below (n=339)

\*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.*

Source: Fatherhood Public Perception Survey 2009

<sup>6</sup> MSF Fatherhood Public Perception Survey. (2009) <https://dadsforlife.sg/research/singapore-fatherhood-public-perception-survey-shows-that-singapore-dads-want-to-be-active-fathers/>



The reality is that fathers' involvement is not on par with the level of mother's involvement in the children's upbringing. This is despite 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.

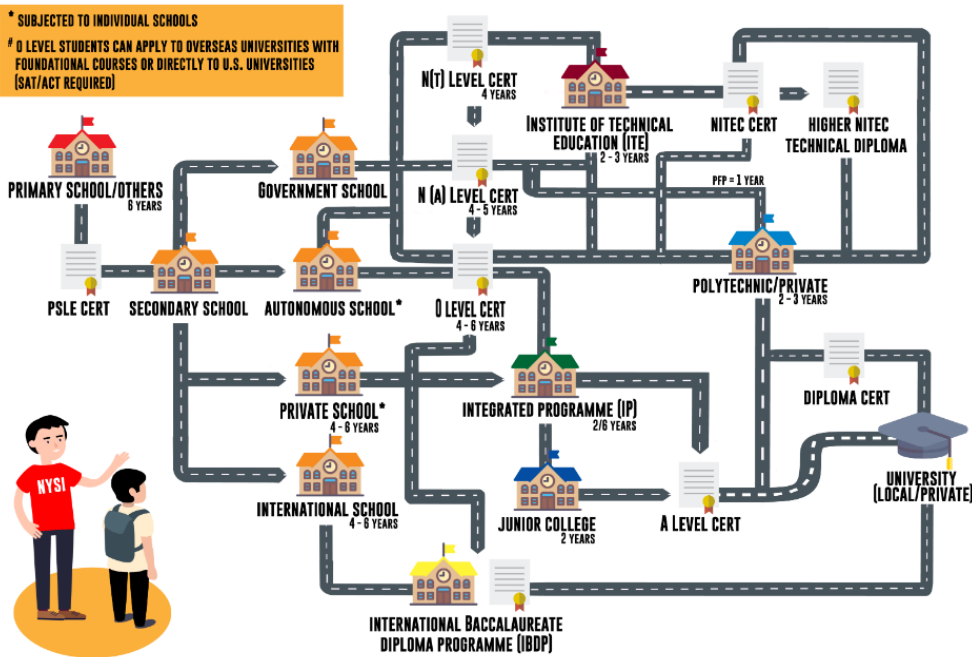
Although there may be differences in how fathers and mothers involve themselves in their children's lives, when fathers and mothers are both actively involved in the child rearing process, the child benefits. A positive parenting model can help to build and strengthen emotional bridges between the parents 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 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?

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<sup>7</sup> MOE's Multiple Pathways, New Opportunities <https://www.moe.gov.sg/microsites/cos2021/multiple-pathways.html>



Source: National Youth Sports Institute<sup>8</sup>

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.

<sup>8</sup> National Youth Sports Institute (2022), <https://www.nysi.org.sg/athlete-life-management/education-pathway/post-secondary-school-students>

At the secondary level, there are 58 schools that have embarked on the subject-based banding (SBB). SBB (Sec) 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.<sup>9</sup> 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 aspirations and support them in exploring different options”*, Dr Mohamad Maliki Osman, Second Minister for Education.<sup>10</sup>

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.

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

<sup>10</sup> Maliki, O. (2021) MOE Committee of Supply Debate Response,

<https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/speeches/20210303-moe-fy2021-committee-of-supply-debate-response-by-second-minister-for-education-dr-maliki-osman>



## Did You Know?



The Centre for Fathering (CFF) launched Eat with your Family Day (EWYFD) in 2003 and it is held on the last Friday of each school term.<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup>

The 2021 Marriage and Parenthood (M&P) Survey<sup>13</sup> 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.

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

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

<sup>13</sup> Prime Minister’s Office (2022). Marriage and parenthood survey 2021: Strong aspirations among Singaporeans to start families, flexible work arrangements preferred. Retrieved from <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.