



PRESS RELEASE

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New studies point to stronger support for working parents as key to child development

Presented at the Population Association of Singapore (PAS) 2026 Annual Conference, new Singapore studies explore how modern family life, from infant childcare and paternity leave to children's growing use of AI, is reshaping parenting and child development. The findings will also inform a joint NUS Medicine–PAS white paper on fertility and human development.

Singapore, 21 May 2026 —As Singapore grapples with one of the world's lowest fertility rates, new research presented at the Population Association of Singapore (PAS) 2026 Annual Conference jointly organised by the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore (NUS Medicine) and PAS is shedding light on what modern families need to thrive and what policymakers, employers, and society can do to better support them.

From the pressures facing working parents navigating childcare decisions, to the role of fathers in the home, to how children are engaging with artificial intelligence (AI), a suite of new studies using nationally representative data from Singapore points to a consistent conclusion: that supporting families holistically — through better workplace policies, shifting gender norms, and stronger community resources — is essential to improving both child development outcomes and Singapore's fertility outlook.

Drawing on nationally representative data from the Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG-LEADS) from more than 2,500 children in Singapore, Professor Jean Yeung Wei-Jun from the Department of Paediatrics at NUS Medicine, President of the PAS, Director of Social Sciences at the A*STAR Institute for Human Development and Potential (A*STAR IHDP) and Dr Kristy Lee, Research Scientist at A*STAR IHDP found that children who received non-parental care within their first 18 months demonstrated higher levels of achievement during their preschool year. The findings point to a need for stronger support for working parents to reduce parenting stress as the study also found that children who experienced non-parental care during infancy could also face a greater risk of behavioural challenges due to greater parenting stress. Late entry into infant care and extended hours in care were identified as additional risk factors for behavioural issues. Stronger support for working parents includes flexible work arrangements, accessible childcare, stronger community support networks and early childhood interventions.

The infant care study is among several Singapore-based research papers presented at the PAS 2026 Annual Conference held on 21–22 May 2026 examining fertility, reproductive health,

child development, family policy and ageing from multidisciplinary perspectives. Ms Indraneel Rajah, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office and Second Minister for Finance and National Development, graced the event as Guest-of-Honour.

Key insights from this conference will shape a joint white paper on fertility and human development by NUS Medicine and PAS. The paper, which will provide actionable policy and implementation recommendations, will be shared with Ms Rajah and the newly formed Marriage and Parenthood Reset Workgroup.

Prof Yeung's team will also be presenting two other studies using nationally representative data from SG-LEADS, a large-scale longitudinal study tracking child development in Singapore:

- **Children's AI usage patterns challenge assumptions about the digital divide**
*(Lead Researchers: Prof Jean Yeung Wei-Jun and Senior Research Scientist Dr Xuejiao Chen, A*STAR IHDP)*
Research has found that 57.4% of children aged 8–9 and 82.6% of those aged 10–13 had used AI tools. Among older children, those whose parents have lower levels of formal education were more likely to use AI for leisure or general purposes rather than academic ones. Crucially, findings suggest that children from families with higher socioeconomic status were not necessarily more likely to adopt AI tools or use them for academic purposes, challenging common assumptions about who benefits from and who is left behind by the digital divide.
- **Paternity leave alone is not enough; shifting gender norms is equally critical**
(Lead Researchers: Prof Jean Yeung Wei-Jun and Research Assistant Professor Nanxun Li, Hong Kong University)
Despite paternity leave policies aimed at promoting fathers' involvement and gender-equal childcare, this study finds that paternity leave taken by fathers in Singapore does not appear to increase the likelihood of having a second or third child, a finding that contrasts with some evidence from Nordic countries. The study suggests that Singapore's relatively short paternity leave duration compared to Nordic countries, combined with persistent patriarchal norms and strongly gendered parenting practices, may explain why policy changes in Singapore have yet to translate into meaningful shifts in fathers' caregiving roles or fertility decisions. More substantive change — including longer leave, flexible work arrangements, and a broader cultural shift towards shared parenting — will be needed.

Prof Yeung said, "As societies have fewer children, human development across the entire life course becomes more important than ever. The long-term strength of societies will depend not only on population size, but also on the wellbeing, capabilities and connectedness of people across generations. Societies that support good health, economic security, affordable caregiving, gender equity, work-life balance, healthy longevity, social inclusion and opportunities, across the life course are more likely to create environments where individuals feel hopeful about the future and confident in forming families."

"Reproductive health and biology matter more than we think. Earlier fertility awareness, earlier assessment, and timely preconception care can help individuals make more informed decisions and seek support sooner," said Adjunct Assistant Professor Huang Zhongwei, Deputy Director at the NUS Bia-Echo Asia Centre for Reproductive Longevity and Equality (ACRLE), NUS Medicine, and Consultant in Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility at the National University Hospital. Adj Asst Prof Huang delivered a keynote on tackling biological drivers of low fertility in Asia and underscored the need for better translation of fertility biology into policy and care pathways.

Professor Chong Yap Seng, Dean of NUS Medicine and Chief Clinical Officer at A*STAR IHDP, added that family formation should also be understood in terms of long-term health. “Family formation is not just a demographic goal; it can also be a pathway to healthy longevity. Can we reframe marriage and parenthood not merely as demographic imperatives, but as drivers of healthy longevity? The evidence base suggests stable partnership and co-residence correlate with longer life. The marriage-longevity association is robust across over 140 years of research across multiple countries although the protective effect is modulated by gender and relationship quality. This is the same for parenthood.”

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About National University of Singapore (NUS)

The National University of Singapore (NUS) is Singapore's flagship university, which offers a global approach to education, research and entrepreneurship, with a focus on Asian perspectives and expertise. We have 15 colleges, faculties and schools across three campuses in Singapore, with more than 40,000 students from 100 countries enriching our vibrant and diverse campus community. We have also established our NUS Overseas Colleges programme in more than 15 cities around the world.

Our multidisciplinary and real-world approach to education, research and entrepreneurship enables us to work closely with industry, governments and academia to address crucial and complex issues relevant to Asia and the world. Researchers in our faculties, 30 university-level research institutes, research centres of excellence and corporate labs focus on themes that include energy; environmental and urban sustainability; treatment and prevention of diseases; active ageing; advanced materials; risk management and resilience of financial systems; Asian studies; and Smart Nation capabilities such as artificial intelligence, data science, operations research and cybersecurity.

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About the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (NUS Medicine)

The NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine is Singapore's first and largest medical school. Our enduring mission centres on nurturing highly competent, values-driven and inspired healthcare professionals to transform the practice of medicine and improve health around the world.

Through a dynamic and future-oriented five-year curriculum that is inter-disciplinary and inter-professional in nature, our students undergo a holistic learning experience that exposes them to multiple facets of healthcare and prepares them to become visionary leaders and compassionate doctors and nurses of tomorrow. Since the School's founding in 1905, more than 12,000 graduates have passed through our doors.

In our pursuit of health for all, our strategic research programmes focus on innovative, cutting-edge biomedical research with collaborators around the world to deliver high impact solutions to benefit human lives.

The School is the oldest institution of higher learning in the National University of Singapore and a founding institutional member of the National University Health System. It is one of the leading medical schools in Asia and ranks among the best in the world (Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2026 by subject and the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings by subject 2026).

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