

Mr Marcus Cheong, 32, and his wife Si Lin, 31, with their daughters Matilda, two, and a then three-month-old Rebekah in March. He took six weeks' leave when his second daughter was born at the start of the year, utilising both his two weeks of paternity leave as well as shared parental leave.  
ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG



GREATER SATISFACTION

**Having dads involved from the very beginning... not only presents good benefits for mums and kids, but dads will also feel greater satisfaction towards their role as a father and a husband. They grow into their roles as dads.**



**MR BRYAN TAN**, chief executive of the non-profit Centre For Fathering, on the benefits of dads getting involved early on in the initial weeks of childbirth.

the gender stereotype that it is women who should look after the children.

"Men are also scared that if they take leave, they will lose out on career development," he added.

Mr Tan said the centre's engagement with fathers suggests this is changing, though some men still worry that taking paternity leave will impact them negatively.

"But more dads are now taking paternity leave. Though aware of any perceived consequence, they decide to prioritise family," he said.

A recent survey by charity Focus on the Family of 350 fathers found that fathers spent more time with family during the pandemic, in particular during the recent phase 2 (heightened alert).

It also found that the top three factors that would support fathers in being more involved would be to have more time to spend with children, flexible work arrangements and to be able to manage children's behaviour and problems well.

The study showed fathers are becoming more involved and adept at meeting the needs of their families, said Focus on the Family.

Mr Tan, who recently welcomed a fourth child into his family, said the four weeks of leave he took were invaluable.

"The first 30 days we had to constantly monitor, battle fever, infections and jaundice. It took a good month before I could start breathing again," he said.

He suggested extending paternity leave to 30 days – roughly the time needed for a family to assimilate to a new addition, mums to recover, and dads to learn to support and adjust to the routine.

Mr Ng suggested that there could be more flexibility in the paternity leave scheme, such as extending the eligibility period to two years from the current one.

Another suggestion would be to allow it to be consumed in half-days, to encourage more to take it.

Mr Marcus Cheong, 32, a digital transformation manager at Focus on the Family, took six weeks' leave when his second daughter was born at the start of the year, utilising both his two weeks of paternity leave as well as shared parental leave.

He spread some of it out over months, taking every Monday off.

"Kids are more interactive past one month and I wanted to experience that as well so I spread out my leave that way," said Mr Cheong.

His workplace was supportive of this arrangement for both his children.

"Having the opportunity to be more hands-on with my daughters and watch them grow, especially in the early stages, is an experience that I don't want to miss."

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# Better outcomes in family when dads take paternity leave: Study

Children less likely to have behavioural issues and there is more marital satisfaction

Goh Yan Han

Children whose fathers take paternity leave when they are born are significantly less likely to have behavioural issues like hyperactivity or antisocial behaviour, according to a local study by the National University of Singapore (NUS).

The two factors have a cause-and-effect relationship, the study found after using rigorous statistical methods.

It also found that families where fathers took paternity leave had less internal conflict, a lower likelihood of maternal depression, and more marital satisfaction and father-child closeness.

But while the study makes a strong case for paternity leave, it found that fathers in more labour-intensive or menial jobs, such as machine operators and cleaners, were half as likely to take leave as dads working as legislators, senior officials or managers.

The study authors said the findings indicated more can be done to make it easier for fathers to take such leave.

The positive benefits were also heightened when more paternity leave was taken, such as two weeks instead of one. The more leave that is taken, the better the family dynamics, and the fewer the behavioural problems, the study found.

Professor Jean Yeung, founding director of the Centre for Family and Population Research at NUS, and Ms Li Nanxun, a PhD student in the NUS sociology department,

analysed data from 4,500 children in households with children up to age six between 2018 and 2019.

The data was drawn from the Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG Leads), a large-scale nationally representative cohort study.

The authors said this is the first evidence-based study here showing the positive impact of paternity leave on family relations and children's behaviour.

Prof Yeung noted that the study's sample coincided with changes to the paternity leave scheme over the years. One week of government-paid leave was rolled out in 2013 and extended to two weeks in 2017.

Among the fathers in the study, 68 per cent of fathers took paternity leave. Of that group, 35 per cent took a week or less, 58 per cent took two weeks and about 4 per cent took more than two weeks.

The study also found that men who were younger, had more education, and higher income, were more likely to take paternity leave.

Fathering experts said it was important for men to be involved in the initial weeks in caring for their wives and newborn infants.

Calling birth a rite of passage for men as well as women, Mr Bryan Tan, chief executive of the non-profit Centre For Fathering, noted: "Having dads involved from the very beginning... not only presents good benefits for mums and kids, but dads will also feel greater satisfaction towards their role as a father and a husband. They grow into their roles as dads."

Prof Yeung noted that the take-up rate here for paternity leave is higher than in Japan and South Korea, where less than 10 per cent of men take time off when their children are born. However, there are still fathers who do not take the leave, and further data collection in the SG Leads study will look into why.

"Given the positive impact of paternity leave documented in this study, it is crucial to further investigate why those with jobs such as machine operators, assemblers, and cleaners are less likely to take paternity leave," said Prof Yeung.

Previous research suggests that they could have less flexible work hours, and worry about being easily substituted, or employers may not be as supportive, she added.

Labour MP Patrick Tay, who is assistant secretary-general of the National Trades Union Congress, said

that the work in these sectors is mostly manual, with employees needed to be on site.

"Their compensation may also be highly dependent on actual work hours clocked and they are usually attracted by the overtime payment," he said. These factors hold them back from taking leave.

He added: "More important is for employers to create a culture that embraces paternity leave. Having the right policies in place is insufficient if the work culture frowns upon or is prejudiced against staff who consume paternity leave."

Mr Louis Ng, a Nee Soon GRCMP who has spoken in Parliament on paternity leave, agreed on the need to change workplace mindsets. Mr Ng, who is also part of the committee for the Alliance for Action on Work-Life Harmony that is looking into reshaping workplace culture, noted that one hurdle is

