

Report on “Young Singaporeans' Attitudes Toward Parenthood: Key Findings and Policy Implications”

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Introduction

Singapore’s future depends on its ability to foster family growth while balancing the evolving aspirations and concerns of its younger generation. In an unprecedented study using cutting-edge AI technology, Research Network, in collaboration with NTU Professor Gemma Calvert, conducted in-depth interviews with 230 young Singaporeans, uncovering candid insights into their attitudes towards having children. AI-driven interviews offer a unique advantage over traditional face-to-face methods, allowing respondents to freely express their true feelings without the social pressures that come with in-person interactions.

As Singapore navigates challenges such as an aging population and declining birth rates, understanding the perspectives of the younger generation is crucial for shaping policies that support both individual and national growth. The study provides fresh, unfiltered insights into how young adults view family planning, revealing a complex interplay of emotions, financial concerns, personal aspirations, and societal pressures.

The findings not only reflect the current sentiments of Singapore’s youth but also shed light on potential areas for policy intervention, ensuring that the nation remains a supportive environment for future generations.

Overall Sentiments on Having Children

Young Singaporeans express a wide range of emotions when considering the possibility of having children. While many respondents conveyed feelings of excitement and hope for the future, these positive emotions were often tempered by concerns about the practical realities of parenthood. One respondent shared, *“Thinking about having kids someday makes me feel excited and hopeful for the future,”* reflecting the optimism felt by some. However, for others, anxiety and nervousness dominate the conversation. One participant noted, *“Nervous, because of the increased burden upon my daily life as well as the high cost of living,”* revealing a common apprehension. Another admitted, *“Anxious and not confident as having kids in the future means higher expenses,”* capturing the prevalent financial anxieties. Interestingly, many participants expressed a mix of emotions, suggesting a complex relationship with the idea of parenthood. As one respondent put it, *“I think it’s a mixture of feelings—excitement, nervousness, anxiety, worry—just hopeful for the future.”* This emotional complexity highlights the multifaceted nature of family planning decisions for young Singaporeans.

In-depth analysis: Commonly expressed concerns

(i) Financial Considerations

The financial burden of raising children was the most frequently cited concern, with 70% of respondents emphasizing this issue. The high cost of living in Singapore, coupled with the need to plan for housing and education, creates significant barriers to family planning. As one participant observed, *“It’s expensive to live in Singapore, and having kids means saving financially for them, moving to a bigger place, planning for the kids’ educational future.”* This financial pressure is compounded by concerns about long-term stability, with

respondents frequently expressing the need for substantial savings before even considering parenthood.

(ii) Work-Life Balance

Juggling career ambitions with the demands of parenthood emerged as another common theme, with 60% of respondents voicing concerns about how they would manage both. One respondent captured this fear succinctly: *“Whether I’ll be able to juggle work and my parenthood altogether.”* The desire to be actively involved in their children’s lives often conflicts with career progression, leaving many feeling uncertain about their ability to balance both. This struggle suggests an opportunity for policy reforms aimed at creating more family-friendly workplaces that support both personal and professional growth.

(iii) Mental and Emotional Readiness

Emotional readiness also played a crucial role in decision-making for many participants. Nearly 40% expressed concerns about whether they were mentally prepared for the responsibilities of parenthood. One respondent admitted, *“I do not think I will make a good parent, and it will not be fair on the child if I were to bring him or her into the world,”* reflecting the deep personal introspection that many undergo when contemplating family life. This highlights the growing importance of mental health resources in shaping family planning decisions.

Less common but nevertheless insightful emergent themes

While the majority of respondents focused on financial and emotional readiness, several participants raised less common but equally important concerns that offer unique insights into Singapore's declining birth rate. These themes, although voiced by fewer individuals, likely resonate with broader social groups and may contribute to the underlying reasons why Singapore's population growth is slowing.

- Environmental and Global Concerns

A number of participants expressed anxiety about bringing children into a world facing environmental challenges. One respondent shared, *“I’m worried for my kids in the future because of the environmental factors affecting the wildest days.”* Another explained, *“Maybe I don’t want to have children because of the global warming issues. A lot of things are changing, so I’m not sure how they would survive in the future.”* These concerns reflect a growing global awareness of climate change and its impact on future generations, a factor that may deter individuals from having children.

- Generational Trauma

The issue of generational trauma also surfaced, with one participant emphasizing the lack of support for mental health in Singapore’s culture, particularly around preparing for parenthood. *“I feel like in Singapore, there’s not much support around therapy and being ready to have a kid, especially in an Asian culture where there is a lot of generational trauma,”* the respondent noted. This points to the need for more robust mental health services, particularly as societal expectations around family life evolve.

- Alternative Family Structures

Some participants expressed interest in exploring non-traditional family structures. One individual shared, *“I wish I could raise a kid with my female friends though—I trust them,”* suggesting that traditional nuclear family models may not be the only way forward for future generations. This openness to alternative parenting arrangements, such as co-parenting with

friends, reflects broader societal shifts and the need for policies that support diverse family configurations.

- Digital Nomad Lifestyle Conflict

One unique concern raised by a respondent was the potential conflict between their aspiration to become a digital nomad and having children. *“My life goal as of now is to basically become a digital nomad, where I can work freelance or remotely from any part of the world,”* they explained, *“so of course, having a child is going to affect that personal goal.”* This reflects the growing appeal of flexible, location-independent lifestyles among younger generations, which may not align with traditional family structures.

- Unequal Treatment of Fathers

A male participant voiced concerns about the perceived unequal treatment of fathers in Singapore’s legal and social systems. *“Lots of potential problems like unequal treatment of fathers by the government when it comes to schemes and tax, discrimination in divorce courts, child support,”* he noted, adding that this had led him to consider having children outside of Singapore. This highlights the need for more inclusive family policies that address the concerns of all parents, regardless of gender.

These less commonly expressed themes are important because, while they may not be as frequently mentioned, they could resonate with larger segments of the population. It is likely that individuals with these unique concerns have shared and discussed their views within their social and peer groups, potentially influencing wider societal attitudes. These perspectives may contribute to the broader hesitation among young Singaporeans to have children, thereby impacting Singapore’s overall population growth. Understanding and addressing these nuanced concerns could be key to reversing the nation’s declining birth rate and creating a more supportive environment for future generations.

Policy Implications based on our findings

The insights gathered from this research reveal several key areas where policy reforms and initiatives could make a significant impact on young Singaporeans' decisions around parenthood. These findings underscore the importance of addressing both widespread and unique concerns to create a supportive environment for family planning.

1. Enhanced Financial Support for Families

Financial concerns emerged as the most significant barrier to having children, with 70% of respondents highlighting the high cost of living in Singapore as a major deterrent. While current government support, such as baby bonuses and subsidies, is appreciated, many feel that these are insufficient for the long-term financial commitment required to raise a child. A more comprehensive approach to financial support—perhaps through expanded housing grants for families, enhanced childcare subsidies, or long-term educational savings plans—could provide the stability young couples need to start families earlier.

Additionally, policies that offer more robust support for parents in their middle and later years could reduce the perception that raising children is a lifelong financial burden. This includes initiatives such as tax breaks for families with children beyond infancy and early childhood, as well as better retirement planning options for parents. Addressing these concerns could help alleviate financial anxiety, encouraging young Singaporeans to embrace parenthood sooner.

2. Work-Life Balance Initiatives

Many participants expressed concerns about balancing parenthood with career progression, with 60% fearing that taking time away from work to raise children could negatively impact their professional growth. A more family-friendly workplace culture could alleviate this concern. Policies that promote flexible work arrangements, such as remote work options and staggered working hours, could help parents manage both their careers and their family responsibilities.

Furthermore, offering extended parental leave for both mothers and fathers would allow parents to take on more active roles in their children's lives without fear of career stagnation. Addressing the concerns of unequal treatment for fathers, as mentioned by several participants, could further encourage a more inclusive parenting environment. Employers and government agencies might collaborate on developing workplace policies that ensure fathers receive equal parental benefits, supporting the broader goal of shared parental responsibilities.

3. Mental Health Resources and Support for Generational Trauma

The mental and emotional readiness to become a parent was another prominent theme, with 40% of respondents expressing concerns about their ability to provide emotionally stable homes. Many referenced their own struggles with mental health or generational trauma, particularly in the context of Singapore's Asian cultural norms, where seeking mental health support is often stigmatized.

Expanding access to mental health services, including therapy focused on family and parenting preparation, could be key to addressing these concerns. Incorporating mental health resources into existing family planning programs could help potential parents overcome fears of passing on generational trauma or not being emotionally ready for parenthood. Providing targeted outreach and education around mental health, particularly for new parents, would further normalize seeking help and reduce societal stigma.

4. Education System Reforms

While not one of the most frequently mentioned issues, concerns about Singapore's education system surfaced as a contributing factor for some young Singaporeans' hesitation to have children. Criticisms centered on the academic intensity and stress that children face, which may deter individuals from starting families.

Policies aimed at reducing the pressure within the education system—whether through more holistic approaches to learning, greater emphasis on well-being, or reducing the emphasis on standardized testing—could help allay these fears. Offering more support for parents navigating the education system might also encourage family planning. By addressing the root causes of educational stress, Singapore can create a more conducive environment for both children and their parents.

5. Support for Diverse Family Structures

The study revealed that some young Singaporeans are considering alternative family models, such as co-parenting with friends or raising children outside of traditional romantic partnerships. With societal norms evolving, there is a growing need for policies that support diverse family structures.

The government could explore initiatives that recognize and provide support for non-traditional families, ensuring they have equal access to benefits such as housing, healthcare, and parental leave. This would signal an openness to different pathways for family building, acknowledging that many young Singaporeans are reimagining what parenthood looks like in the modern world.

6. Addressing Environmental and Global Concerns

For some respondents, environmental issues—such as climate change and global instability—pose a real deterrent to having children. This concern, though less commonly mentioned, could be growing as more young people become conscious of the world their children will inherit.

Policymakers could consider highlighting and promoting Singapore’s environmental sustainability efforts as part of broader family planning campaigns, reassuring potential parents that the government is actively addressing these global challenges. Strengthening Singapore’s environmental policies and showcasing a commitment to tackling climate change could provide young adults with the confidence to consider parenthood in a world that is increasingly facing ecological uncertainties.

7. Targeting Niche Concerns with Greater Reach

Unique concerns raised by participants—such as the impact of COVID-19 vaccines on fertility, the desire to be a digital nomad, or the unequal treatment of fathers—while less frequently mentioned, offer critical insights. These concerns are likely shared within social circles and friendship groups, meaning their influence may extend beyond individual respondents.

Understanding and addressing these niche issues can foster broader societal conversations, potentially uncovering deeper motivations behind Singapore’s declining birth rate. Policies aimed at resolving these concerns could involve targeted communication campaigns to dispel myths (e.g., about vaccine safety) or initiatives that promote flexibility (e.g., supporting parents who wish to travel or work remotely). By paying attention to these unique perspectives, policymakers can demonstrate a commitment to understanding and addressing the full range of factors influencing family planning decisions.

These data were collected in May 2024 using Research Network’s local panel of respondents and leveraging the ListenLabs AI-interviewing platform.