

Families 'worth the investment'

Responsibility for developing strong bonds lies with each member, says PM Lee

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Family relationships cannot always reflect sunshine and smiles. There will be tension and problems at times among family members, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted yesterday.

But families should not think that breaking apart will see the problems go away. Instead they should resolve differences with a "give-and-take" attitude.

While a network of groups and agencies has sprung up to help strengthen family ties, ultimately, the responsibility for developing strong and stable relations lies with family members themselves.

Said Mr Lee: "No family is perfect, but each family and individual is unique and special to the members that constitute it. And families are worth the investment."

In a speech at a carnival to mark the end of the month-long National Family Celebrations, he reflected on the realities of family life today in a rapidly developing and modern society.

He noted that the basic tenets that make up a strong family – love, respect and filial piety – remained deeply entrenched and said it was important to keep family ties strong.

But sometimes, there will be tension and friction, he said as he referred to the storyline of an advertisement on filial piety by the National Family Council (NFC).

It portrays the tensions in a home caused by an elderly woman living with her son, daughter-in-law and grandson.

The boy watches as his father cares for his dying grandmother in hospital. He asks his father why he is sad about the grandmother – a difficult person to live with – when she had treated the family badly.

The ad and its message had sparked debate in The Straits Times Forum page.

Mr Lee did not want to argue about the merits of the storyline but said he found it a touching story that resonated with Singaporeans because it tried to portray a realistic family situation.

The ad also reflected the difficulties faced by multi-generation families in living together, he said, adding that stresses and strains may intensify as families become smaller these days.

But a survey conducted by the NFC among 1,500 citizens and permanent residents showed they still cherished the five family values first outlined in 1993.

They were: love, care and con-



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Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at a carnival in the Bishan Active Park yesterday marking the end of the month-long National Family Celebrations.

cern; mutual respect; filial responsibility; commitment; and communication.

More than 80 per cent of survey respondents cited these values as being important to them.

The survey also showed that the sense of filial responsibility remained strong among respondents. For instance, 98 per cent said that children should regularly spend time and provide financial support to their aged parents.

And while most also favoured having their aged parents live with them, only just over half would themselves move in with their children when they got old.

But those who were aged close to or above 60 were more likely to prefer to stay on their own, said National University of Singapore sociologist Angelique Chan, who led the survey team.

She explained: "Perhaps they

don't want to be a burden and realise their adult children have their own children to take care of. They also want to age in-place, which we see in other older populations."

She said policymakers may find the data useful to devise better assisted living arrangements and provide facilities and professional help for those living on their own.

Overall, NFC chairman Lim Soon Hock was "happily surprised" that despite 20 years of technological change, economic progress and external influences, the five values remain dear to most Singaporeans.

Mr Lee, who was accompanied by his wife, Ms Ho Ching, agreed. But he said keeping the family unit strong was a constant challenge.

Just look at how societies elsewhere have seen the family come under stress and falter, he said.

"Thankfully, the norm here is still the traditional family – couples get married, have children within wedlock, and grow up as a family unit.

"We do worry about divorce rates and illegitimate births, and a minority of dysfunctional families, but socially, husband, wife and children is still the family norm, and we must strive to keep it that way."

He said family members should do things together, constantly nourish ties between them, and sustain these by taking on different roles in their various phases of life.

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