

**April 12, 2002 Friday**

**SECTION:** SINGAPORE

**LENGTH:** 335 words

**HEADLINE:** Obstacles to having **babies** to be tackled

**BODY:**

TO SPUR the Singapore stork, the Government intends to go beyond using 'tangible financial incentives', like the **Baby Bonus**, and work on creating a more conducive environment for families here to have children.

It will do this by tackling oft-cited obstacles, such as the constant tug-of-war parents face between work and family, and inadequate childcare arrangements.

The 'new operating philosophy' was revealed yesterday by Mr Laurence Lien, secretary to the ministerial and working committees on marriage and procreation, which were set up to boost Singapore's flagging birthrate. Mr Lien said the groups acknowledged that 'no one measure by itself could work'.

'However, taken together, they might have a reasonable chance of arresting the decline in the total fertility rate - though immediate results might not be encouraging.'

Just last Friday, a disappointed Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong announced in his first speech to the new Parliament that the rate here had plunged to a historic low of 1.42 per woman last year.

Mr Lien revealed the new thinking in a paper he presented about the Government's procreation policies on the second day of an international workshop focusing on the fertility decline in Asia, held at the National University of Singapore.

Other new directions proposed included encouraging married couples, who tend to have two or fewer children on average these days, to increase their brood to three.

He added: 'Viable options should also be created for mothers who choose not to work, or who prefer to work part-time, to stay at home to have more children.'

Husbands will be encouraged to take on their share of family and parenting responsibilities to help relieve women of the sole responsibility of child-rearing and, hopefully, to make them less averse to it.

Beyond cash rewards

THE Government will tackle oft-cited obstacles such as:

High cost of having children;

Tug-of-war parents face between work and family; and

Inadequate childcare arrangements.