More young couples in their 20s having kids

More family-friendly work policies, greater sense of urgency cited for rise

By TESSA WONG

MORE young married couples in their 20s are having children, an increase parents and experts attribute to two main changes in Singapore.

These are: more family-friendly policies by the Government in the workplace, plus a greater sense of urgency to have children among those under 30s.

According to a new survey, the mean number of children a married person aged 30 and younger had last year was 0.9.

This is a near doubling in five years; in 2007, the figure from a similar study was 0.5.

The increase is probably because more people are having their first baby earlier, said Dr Mathew Mathews, a principal investigator of the survey on marriage and parenthood done last year by the National Population and Talent Division.

He pointed to the drop in the proportion of married 20-somethings who are childless. The group shrank to 42 per cent last year from 63 per cent in 2007.

The survey, released on Thursday, polled 4,646 people, and 2,526 of them were married.

The findings also show that a greater proportion of the 20-something group are having more than one child. Those with two children have more than doubled to 17 per cent, from 8 per cent in 2007.

But experts like sociologist Daniel Goh of the National University of Singapore cautioned against popping the champagne bottle.

Pointing to the steady decline in the total fertility rate, he said it does not signal that Singaporeans in general are having children earlier.

Rather, young couples could have wanted a Dragon baby, as the current Year of the Dragon is considered auspicious in Chinese culture.

Still, the increase is significant as it shows that the proportion of Dinkys, or “double income no kids”, is shrinking, said Dr Paulin Stranghan, one of the study’s principal investigators.

“These under-30s are going against the norm. We should find out what makes them buck the trend,” she added.

Parents like Ms Kew Jia Hui, 29, said they were encouraged by the 10-week paid maternity leave, from 12 weeks – a change that was made in 2008. Said the part-time database analyst and mother of a one-year-old girl: “The longer leave is very reasonable, and I’d consider having more kids if the paid leave is even longer.”

She suggested that Singapore copy Britain and let mothers take a year off, “It’d help if we could be assured we still have our jobs after the year is up,” she said.

Most female workers in Britain can take maternity leave of up to a year, but at lower pay.

Another reason often mentioned by young parents like Ms Srujana Challa is the fear that they will have less energy to mind their baby if they delay parenthood. Also, they will have to retire from work later in order to support their family, they said.

Ms Srujana, 27, a software engineer, and husband Thota Anand Krishna, 30, a management executive, with their one-year-old son Thota Krishna Nandan. As the couple aim to have two to three children, they want to start as early as possible so it would be easier to manage them as they grow up.