

# Family Time: Making Every Moment Count

Text and photos by Dr Jipson Quah, Dr Daniel Fung and Dr Tan Yia Swam

**Working hours for medical professionals are often long and demanding, leaving little time and energy for oneself and their families. SMA News approached three of our Editorial Board Members to find out how they spend quality bonding time together with their families.**

## Dr Jipson Quah

As my peers and I approach our thirties, we face an impressive myriad of responsibilities. Many of my peers are grappling with issues like managing their finances, getting married, purchasing a house, and getting through residency and postgraduate examinations, among others. Here, I give another snapshot of my life as a junior doctor – juggling a young family on top of work responsibilities. As all parents will have realised by now, everything revolves around your children.

In between histopathology reporting work and studying, I try to spend whatever precious time I have with my wife and daughters. Most recently, we brought our eldest daughter to Sydney where I was attending the Pathology Update 2017 conference, and we did some sightseeing and shopping. We even visited a number of zoos and parks where my daughter had a great amount of adventure. Keeping her meaningfully occupied is very often our foremost preoccupation during our holidays.

One of my children's favourite pastimes is visiting the indoor playgrounds. Yes, Daddy has brought them to quite a number of such playgrounds, especially during the public holidays and weekends. These places are relatively safe and fun, often with some enrichment activities or children's shows. They love to run around in the colourful play zones and navigate through the mazes. While we let them explore to their hearts' delight, we also ensure that they do not run into other children. I particularly like the Pororo- and Polliwogs-themed indoor

playgrounds at Marina Square and Suntec City, respectively.

Another enjoyable activity would be weekend meetups with friends and colleagues over tea, but with an evolutionary twist. By that, I meant tea parties with the daughters. The parents will sit around and sip our imaginary tea, while the children bake their make-believe cakes and delicacies with the aid of their toy tea sets and Lego pieces.

After dinners on most days, I try to do my fair share of teaching by reading to them both in English (mostly) and Chinese (as best as I can). Occasionally, we would do some spelling and play mathematics games to keep the learning fun. Bahasa Indonesia is beyond me, so I leave the teaching of the language to my in-laws. It is quite surprising to see how much the little ones pick up just by listening and observing.

When time and energy permit, we will also play music and sing together. They enjoy watching my wife and I play the piano (they do join us to tinkle at the keyboard) and they sing and dance along at times. My wife and I do not watch much TV on our own these days. Instead I accompany the girls while they watch children's TV programmes like *Ben and Holly's Little Kingdom*, *Team Umizoomi* and *PAW Patrol*. Not only does it help me relive my childhood days, but it also serves as an excellent family bonding activity and creates more relatable conversational topics between all of us.

After all that is done, it is time to hit the books (or bed)!

Dr Jipson Quah is currently a resident in the Department of Histopathology at Singapore General Hospital. He enjoys music-making, fitness-related activities and editorial work in his free time.



### Legend

1. Dr Quah's wife and daughters
2. Dr Quah's daughters enjoying themselves at the Pororo-themed indoor playground
3. Celebrating my eldest daughter, Grace's 21st birthday three years ago
4. Family holiday to celebrate Joyce's 50th birthday at Luang Prabang
5. CL captaining a boat at my friend's son's birthday party
6. CJ wearing a different kind of mask from the one I usually wear



## Dr Daniel Fung

It is hard after years of raising small and adorable children (both at work and at home) to have to face tall adolescents and young adults who are no longer as cute as they used to be. My wife, Joyce, and I discovered our empty nest recently as we realised that our regular time for family get-togethers (ie, meals and visits on weekends to family gatherings and outings) became increasingly small in terms of attendance. These days, we have to specifically make time for family get-togethers. Fortunately, we still have the regular birthday celebrations and in our family, that's at least seven times a year, not including the grandparents, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews.

A regular family holiday also helps. The draw for our kids is the free trip and

we hope to make this an annual event. In fact, a friend of ours has an inheritance from an aunt who dictated that the money can only be spent on family holidays, which is a great idea in my opinion. Finally, great family time can occur when a member is performing (Joyce and her choir) or having an event important to them (Grace getting her membership confirmation in church). The key to spending time with the family is learning to evolve the practices and innovate on new opportunities. After that, I guess we will be waiting for our grandchildren to bring us full circle.

Dr Daniel Fung used to be a part-time professional and a full-time father of five children. He realises that he is now a full-time child psychiatrist and a grandfather wannabe.



## Dr Tan Yia Swam

When we had our first son, CJ, both my husband and I were still in general surgery advanced specialist training at Tan Tock Seng Hospital. Some thought that we got to spend a lot of time together, but the truth is that we always made sure we were in different subspecialty teams and hardly ever did calls together to keep work and personal life separate. Thus, we probably spent more time with our teammates than with each other!

We did our respective outrotations (I went to National University Hospital and he went to Singapore General Hospital), took our exit examinations at different times, and each of us stepped up to be the more involved parent while the other was busy. Somehow, we made it through.

Our routine then was quite standard:

**7 am:** drop CJ off at childcare

**7.30 am:** ward round and work

**7 pm:** one of us had better pick up CJ on time (or risk a \$10 fine for every five minutes past 7 pm), or get the grandparents to help. *Tabao* (Chinese for takeaway) dinner from the kopitiam

**9 pm:** bedtime routine for CJ, household chores, sleep and it begins again

**Weekends:** as registrars, we could usually arrange one day off each, so one would stay home to look after CJ, while the other one rounded and cleared whatever emergency there was. We

rarely went out as a family except maybe to bring CJ down to our condominium's pool or playground, or to the nearby shopping mall.

By the time our second son, CL, came along; we were both associate consultants, with a bit more control over our time.

Our daily routine had a small improvement:

**7.10 am:** drop CJ and CL off at childcare (with CL kicking and screaming)

**7.35 am:** ward round and work

**6 pm:** pick CJ and CL up (grandparents rarely needed unless the husband has a long case in the OT or I have a work meeting). Dinner is *tingkat* (Malay for tiffin carriers) delivery

**9 pm:** bedtime routine for CJ and CL (with CL kicking and screaming), household chores, sleep and it begins again

**Weekends:** we bring them out to East Coast Park and Bishan Park, or just around the neighbourhood to swim, scoot or cycle. I would check out mummy blogs to read up on family-friendly restaurants or shopping malls, and organise playdates with CJ's friends. Sunday is laundry day, which is no joke when it comes to four people's clothes, underwear, towels and bedsheets. If there's a special occasion, like the recent Star Wars Day at Gardens by the Bay, we would try our best to go for it!

Ultimately, we realised that it is not how much time we have, but how we make the most of it. It takes a bit of juggling and planning, and lots of support and understanding from friends, colleagues and family. ♦

Dr Tan Yia Swam is a consultant at the Breast Department of KK Women's and Children's Hospital. She continues to juggle the commitments of being a doctor, a mother, a wife and the increased duties of *SMA News* Editor. She also tries to keep time aside for herself and friends, both old and new.

