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UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA®

RONA TINTA

EDISI 2026



WHO CARES FOR OUR PARENTS WHILE WE WORK? RETHINKING RETIREMENT VILLAGES AS DAILY CARE CENTRES

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Figure 1: a retirement village daycare where older adults receive social, spiritual, and recreational support while their working family members continue their daily responsibilities

Malaysia is ageing faster than many families realise. In 2026, 8.4% of Malaysians were aged 65 years and above, compared with 8.0% in 2025. The old-age dependency ratio also increased from 11.4 to 11.9 within one year (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2026). These increasing numbers disturb the sandwich generation thinking as a working adult may leave home in the morning with a child who needs childcare and an ageing parent who should not spend the entire day alone. But systems and culture usually treat these responsibilities separately.

Malaysia should consider an alternative model known as the daily retirement village. A retirement village is usually understood as a place where older adults relocate permanently. However, that model will suit some families, but it may not suit Malaysians culture who value living with their parents. A daily retirement village model offers a different option. Families could send an older parent to the centre in the morning and bring them home after work. When adult children need to travel, attend important events, receive hospital treatment, or manage other family responsibilities, the same centre could provide short stay respite care for several days.

This approach keeps the family home as the parent's main residence while bringing the services of a retirement village into everyday family life. Md Mansor et al. (2016) identified facilities, environment, lifestyle, and healthcare status as important factors in attracting people to retirement villages. Their later study developed a measurement model for retirement-village migration using Partial Least Squares (Md Mansor et al., 2018). These findings suggest that retirement villages should be viewed as supportive environments, rather than simply residential properties. A daily model could provide many of these benefits without requiring permanent relocation.

The model could go further. Imagine a working mother dropping her child and her elderly mother at the same community care campus before going to work. The child enters a professionally managed childcare section. The grandmother enters an older-person daycare section. Both receive tailored age-appropriate care and supervision. This will be more beneficial as child and grandmother should not simply be placed together throughout the day without proper care and attention. Children and older adults have different safety, staffing, health, and developmental needs. The centre therefore requires separate spaces with carefully planned shared activities.

Evidence suggests that intergenerational programmes are feasible. Lim et al. (2024) tested a programme bringing community-living older adults together with preschool children. Participants engaged in activities involving movement, cognitive stimulation, and social interaction. The pilot found the programme feasible and acceptable, although larger studies are still needed to establish long-term health effects. For sandwich-generation families, a combined care campus could reduce logistical pressure while creating opportunities for meaningful intergenerational contact.

Leaving an older parent alone occasionally is not harmful. The concern arises when living alone becomes persistent social isolation with little physical or cognitive activity. Luchetti et al. (2024) analysed longitudinal evidence from more than 600,000 individuals and found loneliness associated with higher risks of all-cause dementia and Alzheimer's disease. This does not prove that loneliness directly causes dementia, but it strengthens the case for keeping older adults socially engaged. Therefore, a daily retirement village could make that engagement routine. Muslim participants might read or recite the Quran together. Other activities could include light exercise, gardening, board games, storytelling, reading, crafts, and supervised walks. Staff could also provide meals, medication reminders, and basic health monitoring according to each participant's needs. At the same time, adult day services can benefit caregivers as well. A multisite trial involving 34 adult day-service centres found that structured caregiver support within these services reduced depressive symptoms among caregivers over 12 months (Gitlin et al., 2024).

However, the idea will fail if only affluent families can afford it. Affordability already influences retirement-village relocation decisions in Malaysia (Chuah & Tan, 2026). A daily centre should therefore offer flexible half-day, full-day, and short-stay charges. Public agencies, employers, community organisations, and charitable institutions could help subsidise places for lower-income families. Malaysia does not necessarily need more places where families permanently send their ageing parents. It needs flexible places where families can safely share the work of caring for them. A practical next step would be to pilot affordable daily retirement villages near residential and employment areas, then measure caregiver stress, older adults' social participation, service costs, and family acceptance.
If we already accept daycare as responsible care for our children, should we begin thinking just as seriously about meaningful daytime care for our ageing parents?

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