

Does Having Children Make You Unhappy?

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Motherlode
Living the Family Dynamic



Children do not bring happiness. In fact more often they seem to bring unhappiness. That is the conclusion of one academic study after the next — and there are so many that it makes one wonder if researchers kept trying, hoping for a different result.

In the April edition of the online [Journal of the British Psychological Association](#), researcher Nattavudh Powdthavee, of the University of York in Great Britain (whose own academic work concludes that there is no difference between the life satisfaction levels of parents and non-parents) summarizes the existing studies:

Using data sets from Europe and America, numerous scholars have found some evidence that, on aggregate, parents often report statistically significantly lower levels of happiness ([Alesina et al., 2004](#)), life satisfaction ([Di Tella et al., 2003](#)), marital satisfaction ([Twenge et al., 2003](#)) and mental well-being ([Clark & Oswald, 2002](#)) compared with non-parents.

And it is not just the years of active parenting that tamp down happiness, Powdthavee writes:

There is also evidence that the strains associated with parenthood are not only limited to the period during which children are physically and economically dependent. For example, [Glenn and McLanahan \(1981\)](#) found those older parents whose children have left home report the same or slightly less happiness than non-parents of similar age and status. Thus, what these results are suggesting is something very controversial — that having children does not bring joy to our lives.

Which leads to the seminal question — why does anyone have children in the first place? If, statistically and on average, parents are no happier, and many are less happy, than those without children, then what are all these baby showers about?

Is it because we see others struggle, but we figure it won't be as much of a struggle for us? Because we focus on the upside — the coos and the smiles and the little chubby cheeks? Powdthavee believes we do “delude” ourselves to an extent when choosing parenthood:

There is a widespread belief in every human culture that children bring happiness. When people are asked to think about parenthood — either imagining future offspring or thinking

about their current ones — they tend to conjure up pictures of healthy babies, handsome boys or gorgeous-looking girls who are flawless in every way. This is the case even when the prospective parents know that raising a child will be painstakingly difficult; they tend to think quite happily about parenthood, which is why most of them eventually leap into it.

And are these rose-colored blinders somehow fitted for us by nature? There are theories about that, too, Powdhavtee writes:

Why do we have such a rosy view about parenthood? One possible explanation for this, according to [Daniel Gilbert \(2006\)](#), is that the belief that “children bring happiness” transmits itself much more successfully from generation to generation than the belief that “children bring misery.” The phenomenon, which Gilbert says is a “super-replicator,” can be explained further by the fact that people who believe that there is no joy in parenthood – and who thus stop having them — are unlikely to be able to pass on their belief much further beyond their own generation. It is a little bit like Darwin’s theory of the survival of the fittest. Only the belief that has the best chance of transmission — even if it is a faulty one — will be passed on.

Maybe though, it is because we are not “deluded” at all; perhaps see clearly that parenting is hard, but there are moments — enough of them — to make it worth it. Powdhatvee explores that idea, but concludes that what we see as “enough of them” is probably a bit of a delusion in itself. Follow along here, it’s a little complicated, but worth it:

It is, if you like, like winning a lottery. We may be incredibly happy at first if we win £1,000,000 from the National Lottery. But soon enough that money will go into our bank account or into our other extravagant spending sprees in the forms of nice cars or a big house in the country, most of which, after having got them, we do not spend a lot of time thinking about everyday (see, for example, Kahneman et al., 2006). However, because the experience of winning the lottery is so salient to us — perhaps partly because it is such a rare event — if we are asked to think about it again, we are likely to exaggerate the value that it brings.

It is, on the other hand, much more likely that we as parents will end up spending a large chunk of our time attending to the very core process of child care such as, “Am I going to be able to pick up David from his school in time?” or “How do I stop Sarah from crying?” Most of these negative experiences are a lot less salient than the positive experiences we have with our kids, which is probably why we tend not to think about them when prompted with a question of whether or not children bring us happiness. Nevertheless, it is these small but more frequent negative experiences, rather than the less frequent but meaningful experiences, that take up most of our attention in a day. It should therefore come to no surprise to us that these negative experiences that come with parenthood will show up much more often in our subjective experiences, including happiness and life satisfaction, than activities that are, although rewarding, relatively rare.

Powdhatvee has no children. But don’t assume that he has rationally and scientifically decided not to have them. To the contrary he wrote this essay (which has been generating angry headlines in British

newspapers, such as “[Children don’t make you happy...says an expert who doesn’t have any](#)”) to explore why, in spite of the research, he does want to be a parent. He plans to ask his girlfriend’s father for his “blessing” any day now, he writes, and then the couple want to have children, “hopefully one girl and one boy.”

Why did you decide to have children? Are you happier than before they were born? And was “happiness” even one of the reasons on your decision tree?

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