

# Does Having Children Create Happiness?

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Introduction:

Couples without children have been looked down upon by their counterparts for years. Childless couples are often seen as unfortunate and unhappy. Ali, L. 2008, recalls, "When I was growing up, our former neighbors...were the only couple on the block without kids...all the other parents, including mine, thought it was odd-even tragic...Each time I visited the Sloans, I'd search for signs of insanity, misery, or even regret." This remains a commonly held belief in today's society, as people do not accept that childless lifestyles could lead to happiness. However, recent studies show that couples without children are not, in fact, unhappy. The findings from this research begs the question, "Does having children truly make people happier than they were prior to their roles as parents?"

Although the popular belief that couples without children are unhappy has some ground on reality in certain circumstances, recent studies prove that having children actually decreases our average level of daily happiness (Ali, L., 2008). Many caring parents argue that children provide individuals with a purpose or utility of life. It also can lead to strong feelings of accomplishment and achievement, as parents internalize their children's successes. However, despite the fact that society emphasizes having children and that it should lead to happiness, evidence shows that the negative outcomes of having children actually prevents a life characterized by increased well-being. Specifically, having children interferes with marital life, creates a stressful financial burden, and makes it difficult for women to assert power through a stable job. Children keep parents from asserting their independence and control over their own lives which we have learned is a main contributor to individual happiness. Due to these reasons, it becomes evident that children, instead of providing an increase of daily average happiness, in fact provide the opposite.

The findings of these new studies create a huge controversy in today's society. As individuals reach adulthood and marry, they now face a more difficult decision as to whether or not to have children. Having children has always been viewed as the next natural step in one's life after marriage. Recently, though, childlessness has become an increasingly popular option for couples (Abma, J. & Martinez, G., 2006). Yet, society has not come to accept childlessness despite its positive implications and the negative aspects of having children. As a result, it becomes crucial to study the relationship between having children and happiness in today's world. We examine having children in terms of marital discord, financial burdens, women's roles, and older adults, as these topics challenge traditional beliefs regarding having children.

### Marital Discord as a Product of Having Children:

The social norm for raising children is a joint venture between the mother and father. Every individual was raised differently, which, in turn, translates to different ideas on how to raise children of his/her own. While couples might find that they agree on almost every aspect of raising their child, for now, this argument will focus on the side that finds parents primarily disagreeing with each other. With that said, there are many parental values that are extremely easy on which to disagree. For example, one parent

might want to spank their child, while his or her spouse might disagree. One parent might want to breastfeed the child, and again, the husband might disagree. These are only two examples of the literally hundreds of points of contention parents might find themselves facing. Two unique and conflicting views on how to raise one's child often lead to disputes between the parental units and ultimately can strain a relationship. The disagreements that often arise from arguments over children negate any happiness which was preliminarily gained from having said children. This issue of marital discord was studied by Doss, Stanley, & Markman for a period of 8 years. The study analyzed 218 couples--some of these couples had children, while others remained childless. This gave the authors a control group and a variable group, and allowed them to actually test the correlation between children and relational happiness. The study measured various stress factors through the course of the relationship and the findings were very unique. The study confirms that children in fact do put a strain on the spousal relationship. The study concludes that "the birth of the first child has a small to medium negative effect on both fathers' and mothers' relationship functioning" (Doss, B., Rhoades, G., & Markman, H., 2009). Clearly the study finds that children strain relationships, and it can be deduced that the negative strain is the product of a change in the very nature of the relationship focus.

When a couple has a child, the focus of the relationship is no longer on each other, but it becomes on the child. Couples who went out to dinner frequently might no longer have as much time because they have to take care of their child or cannot afford a baby sitter. According to Doss, et. al's study, the most negative deterioration in relationships did not occur as a direct result of the birth of a child. It occurred because of the subsequent transition between life before child, and a totally different life post child birth. Doss writes, "Additionally, parents showed clear increases in negativity, conflict, and problem intensity following the birth of a child, whereas nonparents did not show such changes at the same point in time, nor did they show such declines over time more generally. Given the sudden nature of the negative relationship changes following birth for parents, the most likely explanation is that they are caused by stressors encountered during the transition to parenthood that are not handled well." (Doss, 2009) It is never easy to approach drastic change, and certainly having a child would be one of the biggest changes in a parent's life. Understandably, there are extreme levels of stress as a result of the change of lifestyle a child would bring. This stress is released and projected toward the person with whom one spends the most time, and in the case of two parents, that person would be the significant other.

In addition to the stressful change found at the beginning of a parental life, children can also make the end of a marriage more difficult as well. When traditional couples with children decide to ultimately end their relationship and enter into a divorce agreement, children add an additional level of unhappiness to the already unhappy situation. Lengthy custody battles and the thought of losing the relationship with one's children produce an extraordinary level of unhappiness. It is not only the children who suffer. In a bitter divorce battle, parents stand to lose complete custody of their children. This results in a severe downgrade in life-satisfaction equitable to the loss of a family member.

### Financial Burdens as a Product of Having Children:

The first thing that comes to the mind of weary parents is the financial strain of a child. The economic stress of providing for children has proved to decrease the average daily happiness of parents. It costs an extreme amount of money to raise a child in today's society. For 2007, the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that families making between \$45,800 and \$77,100, will spend a whopping \$204,060 to raise a child from birth through age 17. Higher-income families will spend the most, \$298,680 (Lino, 2008) (See Table 1). These figures do not even include the cost of college or the opportunity cost of lost time at work. According to the College Board, the average price of a private, four-year institution is \$25,143 per year. A public, four-year school will run parents about \$6,585 per year (2008-2009 College Costs). This unbelievable amount of money takes a giant toll on a parent's bank account and free time. Not only do parents have to work more, they have less money to spend on luxuries and leisure activities for themselves. If you equate happiness with spending money, having a child may not be the move.

On the other hand, people have argued that some happiness is derived from financially supporting a child. Some critics believe that the large amount of money that parents spend on their children is actually what makes them seem happy. Parents rationalize the extreme amount of money they spend on their children and seemingly conclude that our children must be repaying us with happiness (Gilbert 2006, p.1). Many parents do not want to believe that after all the time and money spent on their children, that the perceived return could be anything less than happiness.

Elliot Aronson and Judson Mills proved this phenomenon in their 1959 paper, "The Effect of Severity of Initiation on Liking for a Group." Published in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, their study proclaims that "persons who go through a great deal of trouble or pain to attain something tend to value it more highly than persons who attain the same thing with a minimum of effort (p. 177)." In their study, college women who volunteered for discussion groups were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: A Severe initiation condition, a Mild initiation condition, and a Control condition:

In the Severe condition, subjects were required to read some embarrassing material before joining the group; in the Mild condition the material they read in order to join the group was not very embarrassing; in the Control condition, subjects were not required to read any material before becoming group members. Each subject listened to a recording that appeared to be an ongoing discussion being conducted by the group which she had just joined. Afterwards, subjects filled out a questionnaire evaluating the discussion and the participants (p.181).

The women who underwent a severe initiation process identified the group as being significantly more attractive than did those who underwent a mild initiation or no

initiation. The results were clear: people positively evaluate that for which they suffer. The story with children is no different. While it may lead to happiness down the road, the sacrifices made to provide for children affect daily happiness negatively. The exorbitant amount of money it costs to raise a child from birth not only weighs heavily on parents' wallets but also on their happiness. Children give us many things, but an increase in our average *daily* happiness is unfortunately not among them.

### Threatening Women's Roles as a Product of Having Children:

Society has implanted the idea that once couples are married, they must start having children. This traces back to the societal expectations discussed in the article by Ali, L. (2008). Society expects married couples to have children and feels that something must be wrong with voluntary childless couples. However, such a norm has had an extremely negative effect on women. Women are forced to trade in their professional careers for a domestic one. Such a task also has the effect that women are losing their sense of independence, especially financially. They must now rely on the income of their husbands, which can create a shift in the power status. Putting careers on hold can lead to self-esteem issues for certain women. They are left feeling useless in the workforce and by their significant other. Having kids complicates a woman's life in ways that are not as difficult for men.

Penelope Trunk (2008), a founder of three start-up companies as well as an active advice columnist, seems to agree stating, "men today are more involved in parenting than ever before, but still, children affect women so much that they don't start earning less than men until after they have kids." Trunk (2008) also believes "that the lack of happiness is precisely because women love their kids so much." They sacrifice their independence and ultimately happiness in order to care for their children. In fact, four out of five working women in Britain are full-time employment. However, when children arrive, only a third of women with pre-school children work full time (Igwebuikwe, H., 2008). In a 2008 issue of Newsweek magazine, "89 percent of stay-at-home-mothers think their children would be happier if they worked, whereas 46 percent of working mothers think their children would be happier if they stayed home." A study performed for Institution of Economic Research at the University of Essex, "found that even those mothers who work more than 45 hours a week benefit from much higher levels of life satisfaction than full-time moms." Providing further evidence, they also found that women's life satisfaction "increases only when children start going to school" (Booth & Van Ours 2007).

It can be even harder for women to return to the work force after their children are old enough to live independently. A study done at the Forte Foundation in New York and the Wharton Center for Leadership and Change at the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania showed that:

Half of working mothers who returned to work felt discouraged by their employer. Eighty-three percent ended up accepting a comparable or lower-level position, while 61 percent changed industries. About 45 percent of the women surveyed started their own businesses, and 59 percent went to work at smaller companies (Mercer 2005) (See Table 2).

Women are being degraded even in the work force. They are not getting jobs that they are qualified for, but instead taking jobs that pay less, which again can play a role in power status and finances. Women become less happy because they are forced to put their careers on hold and lose their independence in order to raise children.

### Childlessness in Older Adults: Does Not Prove Harmful

Recent research and studies show that voluntary childlessness holds positive implications regarding overall life-satisfaction (Duffy, J., 2003). However, it becomes necessary to study childlessness amongst older members of society. Dykstra, P.A. & Hagestad, G.O. (2007) found that studies relating to the correlation between having children and happiness tend to ignore this population of older adults. They argue that excluding this population leaves a dangerous gap in information that interferes with the validity of findings related to this topic. Hence, due to the fact that most studies leave out this age group, it becomes important to dedicate an entire section of research on these individuals. After synthesizing the conclusions drawn from studies on childlessness older adults, it becomes evident that childless older adults face certain vulnerabilities that could lead to a lower level of subjective well-being. However, other research points to the flaws in these arguments and suggests that childlessness alone does not negatively affect levels of happiness for older adults.

According to several studies, childlessness amongst older adults negatively impacts one's access to social networks, which could lead to a lower quality of life. While other studies reveal evidence against this claim, it is important to acknowledge this at first in order to set the precedent for crucial counterarguments. Specifically, studies show the importance of social support networks in terms of one's overall life satisfaction; without social support networks, individuals can experience loneliness and depression (Zhenmei, Z. & Hayward, M., 2001). Older adults and the elderly rely on their children as social support networks, as oftentimes they outlive spouses, friends, and other family members. Thus, without children, they often lack the social support networks that might allow them to maintain a healthy and happy lifestyle. Dykstra, P.A. & Wagner, M. (2007) found that in Amsterdam, Berlin, and Germany, childlessness results in smaller networks amongst men and women. In general, smaller networks can lead to isolation, loneliness, and low life satisfaction levels. Furthermore, Dykstra, P.A. & Hagestad, G.O. (2007) agree with the assertion that childless individuals face support deficits later in life. Particularly, they lack crucial relationships defined by strong commitment and mutual obligation that typically exist in filial ties (Dykstra, P.A. & Wagner, M., 2007). This sense of commitment and mutual obligation gives individuals a

sense of meaning and purpose and, without such bonds, older adults might feel less satisfied with life as a whole.

Despite these findings, which suggest that older childless adults lack important social support networks, Zhenmei, Z. & Hayward, M.D.'s impressive study found that, in general, childlessness does not imply negative effects on the psychological well-being of older people (2001) (See Table 3). Therefore, although the evidence against childlessness among older adults holds some truth, other studies counter this argument and prove more convincing and valid. Specifically, Zhenmei, Z. & Hayward, M.D. discovered that, although elderly people as a whole often lack important social support networks, childlessness has no direct effect on their psychological well-being. They sampled 6,517 people aged 70 and older and used the Asset & Health Dynamics Among the Oldest Old data set in order to estimate logistic and ordinary least squares regression models of psychological well-being. The results revealed that childlessness did not significantly increase loneliness or depression for divorced, widowed, and never married elderly persons. Yet, childlessness coupled with marital status and sex impacted loneliness and depression. Specifically, divorced, widowed, and never married childless men exhibited higher rates of loneliness and depression when compared with their women counterparts. This study illustrates the fact that marital status and gender have a direct impact on the negative psychological well-being of older adults, but not necessarily childlessness. Therefore, this suggests that the studies discussing the lack of social networks leading to loneliness and depression likely is caused by marital status, not childlessness. In fact, Seccombe, K. (1991) found that weak support networks of married childless couples is complemented by stronger marital support. Without such marital support, individuals often become isolated and/or depressed. Hence, childlessness does not directly lead to loneliness and depression due to lack of social support networks; instead, marital status seems to more directly cause these negative outcomes.

Further, the study of Dykstra, P.A. & Hagestad, G.O. (2007) illustrates the fact that childless single women have more favorable characteristics than single women with children. Childless adults, as a whole, do not emerge as a "sad bunch," despite preconceptions regarding this label. In fact, older men and women were found to be just as socially active as their peers with children; this suggests that older men and women are not missing their crucial social support networks. These studies imply that childlessness has no direct effect on life satisfaction and well-being for older adults.

Also, recent research highlights the fact that for women, in particular, children do not determine happiness, while other factors play more important roles. Specifically, Reuters, T. (2009) finds that, "women who have not had children seem to be just as happy in their 50s as those who did go down the family path." Instead, single, divorced, or widowed middle aged women exhibited symptoms of vulnerability and loneliness. Overall, marital status, health, education, and relationships with family and friends impacted the well-being of middle-aged women, not children. In fact, the psychological well-being of childless women and mothers was found to be similar. Reuters, T. (2009) claims that teenage mothers, not childless older women, represent the population of women who experience unhappiness due to having children. As a result, Reuters, T.

(2009) argues that older childless women are not at a disadvantage in terms of overall life happiness.

Furthermore, several studies imply that childlessness amongst older adults not only has neutral implications, but can also often prove favorable in terms of happiness. According to Forssén, A.S. & Carlstedt, G. (2009), feelings of success or failure with regard to raising children affects women's experience of health throughout their lives. Likewise, the health of elderly women correlated with the health and happiness of their now adult children. These findings suggest that those with unhealthy children and those who feel that they did not raise their children successfully, internalize this failure. This, in turn proves detrimental to the health and well-being of older adults. Essentially, this finding implies that the well-being of older adults heavily relies on their children, which often proves harmful. This creates a vulnerable situation for women, since they rely on the health and happiness of other people, specifically their children, to make them happy. Parents can impact and contribute to their children's level of happiness through intrinsic and extrinsic means, such as love, familial stability, and exposure to certain positive life circumstances. However, they cannot completely control their children's level of happiness, as other factors undeniably contribute as well. Therefore, this puts them in a vulnerable position. Specifically, according to Forssén, A.S. & Carlstedt, G. (2009), parents cannot solely determine their children's happiness, but their children determine whether or not they are healthy and happy. This imbalance means that older adults who have raised unsatisfied children, a factor of which they cannot fully control, in turn, will become less satisfied with life as a whole.

Childlessness has become an increasingly acceptable option on a global level (Abma, J. & Martinez, G.,2006). Women who previously saw childlessness as a sacrifice for the sake of their careers, now find satisfaction in childlessness without acknowledging a negative sacrifice. In today's society, women are not necessarily forced into childlessness based on their need to establish a career, but, instead, choose childlessness based on free will and their own desires and life goals. This healthier reason to not to have children suggests that childlessness amongst older adults will not interfere with one's well-being and happiness with life as a whole.

### Conclusion:

This project set out to discover the true relationship between parental happiness through raising children. Through the course of researching this topic, this study discovered that while society depicts children as bundles of joy, this unfortunately could not actually be farther from the truth. The reality is that children strain parental relationships and place financial burdens on parents and families, decreasing their quality of life. This tension is especially difficult for women, who from the very beginning are paid less than men, and are expected to remain home and care for the child. It has now also been proven that childlessness later in life has both neutral and positive implications with regard to its impact on happiness. These findings lead us to conclude that children



bring no real substantial happiness when compared with people who choose to remain void of children and desire to live their life independently.

Admittedly, our research was limited. This study based all research on previously conducted case studies. This project was unable to conduct independent case studies from real world parents. Due to the short amount of time given for conducting research, this study chose to forgo real world surveys, and concentrated purely on collaborating the previously researched issues which children present to their parents. Also, many still argue that having children does indeed make individuals happy. Children give individuals a sense of purpose in life, a means to vicariously live through the positive experiences of their children, social networks, and meaningful relationships.

However, despite these limitations of the research and counterarguments, the authors of this project learned that children do not increase life satisfaction for their parents, and in fact serve to hamper parental happiness. While the positive implications regarding having children hold true, there exist positive implications for those who remain childless as well. Also, the negative implications that come with having children seem to outweigh the positive aspects in terms of overall happiness; they interfere with almost every major life arena -- marriage, financial stability, occupation, power, and health. Why then do couples remain having children? The only reasonable answer seems to be that society has instilled in its members that they should have children. Children seem to be an intricate piece of the puzzle to reach a higher level of humanity. Perhaps that level does not include daily happiness. However, we do not wish to sound like heartless cynics. Instead, we should listen to the wise words of Daniel Gilbert. "Rather than deny that fact, we should celebrate it. Our ability to love beyond all measure those who try our patience and weary our bones is at once our most noble and most human quality" (Gilbert 2003 p. 2).

## Tables and Figures

**Table 1. Estimated annual expenditures\* on a child by husband-wife families, overall United States, 2007**

| Age of Child  | Total            | Housing          | Food            | Transportation  | Clothing        | Health care     | Child care and education | Miscellaneous†  |
|---|------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| <b>Before-tax income: Less than \$45,800 (Average = \$28,600)</b>   |                  |                  |                 |                 |                 |                 |                          |                 |
| 0 - 2   | \$7,830          | \$2,970          | \$1,070         | \$930           | \$340           | \$800           | \$1,220                  | \$700           |
| 3 - 5   | 8,020            | 2,930            | 1,190           | 900             | 340             | 570             | 1,370                    | 720             |
| 6 - 8   | 8,000            | 2,830            | 1,530           | 1,050           | 370             | 650             | 810                      | 760             |
| 9 - 11  | 7,950            | 2,560            | 1,830           | 1,140           | 420             | 710             | 490                      | 800             |
| 12 - 14   | 8,830            | 2,850            | 1,930           | 1,290           | 700             | 720             | 340                      | 1,000           |
| 15 - 17   | 8,810            | 2,300            | 2,080           | 1,730           | 620             | 770             | 580                      | 730             |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>\$148,320</b> | <b>\$49,320</b>  | <b>\$28,890</b> | <b>\$21,120</b> | <b>\$8,370</b>  | <b>\$12,060</b> | <b>\$14,430</b>          | <b>\$14,130</b> |
| <b>Before-tax income: \$45,800 to \$77,100 (Average = \$61,000)</b> |                  |                  |                 |                 |                 |                 |                          |                 |
| 0 - 2   | \$10,960         | \$4,010          | \$1,280         | \$1,390         | \$410           | \$780           | \$2,000                  | \$1,090         |
| 3 - 5   | 11,280           | 3,980            | 1,470           | 1,360           | 400             | 750             | 2,210                    | 1,110           |
| 6 - 8   | 11,130           | 3,880            | 1,880           | 1,510           | 440             | 850             | 1,420                    | 1,150           |
| 9 - 11  | 10,930           | 3,600            | 2,210           | 1,600           | 480             | 920             | 930                      | 1,190           |
| 12 - 14   | 11,690           | 3,900            | 2,230           | 1,740           | 820             | 930             | 680                      | 1,390           |
| 15 - 17   | 12,030           | 3,350            | 2,480           | 2,200           | 730             | 980             | 1,170                    | 1,120           |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>\$204,060</b> | <b>\$68,160</b>  | <b>\$34,650</b> | <b>\$29,400</b> | <b>\$9,840</b>  | <b>\$15,630</b> | <b>\$25,230</b>          | <b>\$21,150</b> |
| <b>Before-tax income: More than \$77,100 (Average = \$115,400)</b>  |                  |                  |                 |                 |                 |                 |                          |                 |
| 0 - 2   | \$16,290         | \$6,380          | \$1,690         | \$1,950         | \$530           | \$900           | \$3,020                  | \$1,820         |
| 3 - 5   | 16,670           | 6,340            | 1,910           | 1,910           | 520             | 860             | 3,290                    | 1,840           |
| 6 - 8   | 16,310           | 6,240            | 2,310           | 2,060           | 570             | 990             | 2,260                    | 1,880           |
| 9 - 11  | 15,980           | 5,970            | 2,880           | 2,150           | 620             | 1,060           | 1,580                    | 1,920           |
| 12 - 14   | 16,810           | 6,260            | 2,820           | 2,300           | 1,030           | 1,070           | 1,210                    | 2,120           |
| 15 - 17   | 17,500           | 5,710            | 2,970           | 2,780           | 940             | 1,120           | 2,120                    | 1,860           |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>\$298,680</b> | <b>\$110,700</b> | <b>\$43,140</b> | <b>\$39,450</b> | <b>\$12,630</b> | <b>\$18,000</b> | <b>\$40,440</b>          | <b>\$34,320</b> |

\*Estimates are based on 1990-92 Consumer Expenditure Survey data updated to 2007 dollars using the Consumer Price Index. For each age category, the expense estimates represent average child-rearing expenditures for each age (e.g., the expense for the 3-5 age category, on average, applies to the 3-year-old, the 4-year-old, or the 5-year-old). The figures represent estimated expenses on the younger child in a two-child family. Estimates are about the same for the older child, so to calculate expenses for two children, figures should be summed for the appropriate age categories. To estimate expenses for an only child, multiply the total expense for the appropriate age category by 1.24. To estimate expenses for each child in a family with three or more children, multiply the total expense for each appropriate age category by 0.77. For expenses on all children in a family, these totals should be summed.

†Miscellaneous expenses include personal care items, entertainment, and reading materials.

**Table 2: A survey of women returning to work after raising families found many shifted professional roles:**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Accepted Comparable or lower-level Job | 83% |
| Changed Industries                     | 61% |
| Changed functional role                | 54% |
| Became self-employed                   | 45% |

Table 3. Comparing Effects of Childlessness on Loneliness and Depression Among the Unmarried Groups: Logistic and Ordinary Least Squares Regression Results for Persons Aged 70 and Older, AHEAD, 1993 (N = 6,517)

| Independent Variable                             | Loneliness, Odds Ratio | Depression (Logistic), Odds Ratio | Depression, b |
|--|------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------|
| Divorced childless vs. divorced parents          | 1.255                  | 1.269                             | 0.420         |
| Widowed stepparents vs. widowed parents          | 0.796                  | 0.783                             | -0.138        |
| Widowed childless vs. widowed parents            | 1.203                  | 0.988                             | 0.016         |
| Never married childless vs never married parents | 0.609                  | 0.573                             | -0.349        |

Notes: Divorced parents, widowed parents, and never married parents were each entered as the reference category sequentially into the full models shown in Table 5 . The results were the conditional effects of childlessness, controlling for sex, age, education, physical health, wealth (log), and race. AHEAD = Asset and Health Dynamics Among the Oldest Old.

“If psychological well-being is gauged in terms of depression, the results shown in...Table 6 do not support the idea that childless persons—even those who were not married—were disadvantaged” (Zhenmei, Z. & Hayward, M.D., 2001).

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