



FocusFamilyINSIGHT

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To: Focus Colleagues
Re: **Does Parenting Decrease Happiness? A Research Analysis**

“Feeling the Holiday Blues? Then You Must Have Children”

Perhaps you have seen headlines in the last six months similar to this one warning that if you want happiness, then by all means, don't have children!

What does the research really say about the link between parenthood and happiness?

This is a critically pertinent topic for all of us at Focus to be able to speak intelligently to, as our third pillar, as well as Scripture states that children are a rich blessing from the Lord (Psalm 127:3-5).

So what's the truth; are children really a blessing or merely cute little joy-stealers? Actually three things must be understood concerning this question.

- 1) There are significant inconsistencies across the studies, with some finding mild to strong happiness and life-satisfaction benefits from parenting and others showing declines.
- 2) This is a relatively new field of scientific inquiry, beginning in earnest in the late 1980s and only a few studies conducted and published since then.
- 3) Conclusions matter greatly relative to what happiness measures are being examined as well as the marital status of the parents.

The most recent published study on the topic, conducted by an economist at the University of Glasgow, finds that parenthood brings marked levels of happiness, but only for certain parents. The study explains, “Previous research failed to identify these positive effects because it did not consider the key role of individual characteristics, marital status in particular.”¹

Marital status of parents makes all the difference, seeing that for “the average person, having children has a small or zero effect on life satisfaction.” But for the average *married* person, the impact of children on life satisfaction “is large, positive and increasing in the number of children.” And this is a remarkable finding given that they only surveyed parents with children less than 16 years of age currently at home, the time when parenting is usually most demanding.

Married couples with only one child had happiness levels just slightly greater than married couple without children. But the happiness of married parents increased significantly as their family grew to two, three and four children. However, for these British parents, three children seemed to be the number which provided the greatest life-satisfaction among parents.

Luis Angeles, the study's author, explains that married “people with three or four or more children receive a large boost in their life satisfaction...similar in magnitude to the effect of getting married or improving your health.”²

Angeles found that these parenting boosts in life-satisfaction are not seen among divorced, cohabiting or single-parents. Interestingly, widowed parents see an even greater increase in life-satisfaction than married couples do. Possibly because children can serve as a very real comfort in a time of loss, but also as a meaningful connection to the deceased spouse.

And he finds that female life-satisfaction increases more than male life-satisfaction in the presence of children and becomes quite sizable for women as the number of children increases.³



Considering income differences among married parents, poorer parents show *low but positive* life satisfaction measures. Middle-class parents had *significant rising* life-satisfaction levels with the greater number of children. Interestingly, wealthy parents have a *mild* life-satisfaction bump with one child, but it decreases slightly with two or more children, indicating the wealthy could be likely to be more self-centered.

Curious Questions on Studies Showing Parental Unhappiness

Some studies do indeed indicate declines in parental happiness, but there are some curious questions about these studies. One of the most recent, which received a good bit of media attention, concludes that “Parenthood is not associated with enhanced mental health since there is no type of parent who reports less depression than non-parents.”⁴ They do admit, consistent with Angeles’ finding that unmarried parenting is associated with more depression than married parenting.

However, the junior author of that study Robin Simon, explains in an article published by the American Sociological Association that, “While studies indicate parents derive more purpose, more meaning, and greater satisfaction from life than non-parents, they also reveal parents experience lower levels of emotional well-being, less frequent positive emotions, and more frequent negative emotions than their childless peers.”⁵

Confused? See if these two contradictory statements, each a page apart in Simon’s study, clear things up for you:

- “[W]e find that as a group, parents report significantly *higher* levels of depression than non-parents...”⁶
- “Once again, there is no significant difference in the mean level of depression between childless adults and either full-nest or empty-nest parents.”⁷

Does it really seem reasonable that empty-nesters are *no happier or content* with life than no-nesters? Wouldn’t they clearly have an increased sense of satisfaction after successfully raising their children and launching them from the nest, as well as having more time, energy and money to themselves now, ready to anticipate possible grandchildren?

What is more, this study found that step-parents have significantly less depression than parents raising their own children, which is soundly contrary to nearly everything we know about step-parenting, a problem which the authors admit.

It is also interesting that the authors frequently use the word “onerous” in describing the duties involved in raising children.

Luis Angeles brings a vital observation to bear on the question of whether parents derive delight, happiness and contentment from parenting:

“Surely children involve a lot of work and it is likely that the typical everyday experience with our children is rather negative. But when asked about the most important things in their lives, most people would place their children near or even at the top of the list.”⁸

If parenthood does indeed contribute to more depression, why is it that most people still intentionally become parents, and increasingly at large costs for infertility treatments or adoption? Do they just not know any better?

It’s a most basic truth of humanity: children bring both strain *and* joy. Our lives and the world are all the better for it and nearly everyone throughout history experiences this with the greatest of emotions.

Sources

¹ Luis Angeles, “Children and Life Satisfaction,” *Journal of Happiness Studies*, October 2009, p. 15.

² Angeles, 2009, p. 8.

³ Angeles, 2009, p. 10.

⁴ Ranae J. Evenson and Robin W. Simon, “Clarifying the Relationship Between Parenthood and Depression,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 46 (2005) 341-358.

⁵ Robin W. Wilson, “The Joys of Parenthood Reconsidered,” *Contexts* 7 (2008): 40-45, p. 42.

⁶ Evenson and Simon, 2005, p. 349.

⁷ Evenson and Simon, 2005, p. 347.

⁸ Angeles, 2009, p. 2.