

# Does parenthood doom you to a life of stress and fatigue? Or are children truly "bundles of joy"?

August 20 2014, by Emily Nauman

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Some studies have suggested that parenthood hurts happiness; others suggest the opposite. However, a paper recently published in the journal *Psychological Bulletin* paints a more nuanced picture: Sometimes parenthood is good for happiness—but not always. The authors suggest that the right question to ask is not whether parenthood leads to happiness but rather when and how it does or doesn't. Context is key.

To reach this conclusion, the researchers, led by S. Katherine Nelson

from the University of California, Riverside, reviewed dozens of studies, primarily of Western cultures. The studies compared the happiness of parents and non-parents, examined changes in well-being during the transition to parenthood, and compared how parents feel while with their children to how they feel during other daily activities.

The upshot? It seems that being happy (or not) as a parent depends on characteristics of the parent and [child](#), such as personality and age, as well as details about their situation, like socioeconomic status and the family's structure.

### **What characteristics of a parent might influence their happiness?**

The [research](#) suggests that a parent's age, gender, and [parenting style](#), and the way they form emotional bonds with others are all linked to happiness.

**Age.** For starters, middle-aged and older parents tend to be as happy or happier than their childless peers, while parents younger than 25 seem to experience less happiness. For instance, older parents report feeling more mature, competent, and less stressed than younger parents, while younger parents report more feelings of restlessness, isolation, and stress about finances. The authors write that older parents may benefit from having more emotional maturity, and more financial and material resources, to cope with the stressors and strain of parenthood.

**Gender.** Fatherhood is consistently associated with more benefits to well-being, though the results for motherhood have been mixed. Fathers also report that time spent with their child is primarily play and leisure time—meaning that, at least in some cultures, mothers likely take on more child-rearing responsibilities than fathers, which could leave them with more daily stress.

**Parenting Style.** The authors emphasize that more research is needed in order to draw strong conclusions about the relationship between parenting style and parental happiness. So far, the results are mixed: Some evidence suggests that parents are happier if they practice "child-centric," intensive parenting, meaning that they strive to be perfect parents, and may put their child's needs above their own. But other research suggests that such a parenting style is associated with lower well-being: Sometimes, according to the authors, intensive parenting might exacerbate stress and anxiety, while other times, intensive parenting might enable people to derive meaning from caring for their kids.

Though more research is needed to explain this discrepancy, the authors suspect that the child's age might have something to do with it. Intensive parenting when children are young may require more effort and vigilance, and thus be linked to more stress, while child-centric parenting of older kids could carry more rewards.

**Emotional Bonds.** How parents form bonds in relationships is also linked to well-being in parenthood. This research draws upon decades of research on "attachment security," which suggests that the bonds we form with caregivers when we're children influence our relationships and general well-being as adults: If we don't feel secure in our attachments to childhood caregivers, chances are we won't feel secure in our adult relationships. In this case, parents who do not feel secure in relationships seem to be more susceptible to declines in their relationship with their spouse during the transition to parenthood. Though more research is also needed here, the researchers suggest that this marital decline could, in turn, lead to less happiness in parenthood.

### **What characteristics of a child might influence their parents' happiness?**

Most people who have ever spent much time around kids could tell you:

Some of them are easier than others. And those differences, according to Nelson and her colleagues, can be strongly associated with parents' happiness.



**Temperament and Problems.** Not surprisingly, parents seem to experience lower well-being when they have a child with a difficult or sensitive temperament—for instance, a child who has intense emotions or cries a lot—but higher well-being when they have a child with an easy temperament—for instance, a child who adapts easily to new situations and is often in a good mood.

And when adult children have problems such as a disability, drug abuse, or serious illness, their parents tend to experience lower well-being—likely because of the stress and negative emotion that arises around their child's problem, and perhaps because of the tension that the problem places on the parent's relationship with their child.

**Child Age.** A child's stage of life seems to matter, too: Some evidence suggests that parents of young children are less happy than parents of older children. In one study, for instance, parents reported a boost in life

satisfaction during pregnancy and immediately after the birth of a child—then saw their life satisfaction decline through age five, at which point it returned to pre-pregnancy levels.

Consistent with that finding, studies have found that parents of young children (up to age seven) report spending more time on housework and feel less able than non-parents to complete tasks and meet their goals. As Nelson and her colleagues point out, having young children tends to mean more sleep disturbance, more housework, and more distress—not a recipe for happiness. They also note that some research suggests parents' well-being stays relatively low until their child leaves home.

However, the research paints a different picture for parents once their kids grow up, particularly when they have positive relationships with those kids. Parents also seem to fare better when their adult children provide them with social support—and grandchildren. "This evidence suggests that if parents can weather the stresses of raising [young children](#)," write the authors, "they will reap benefits when their children are relatively older."

### **What about a family's situation and context are linked to a parent's happiness?**

A family's situation and broader context—from their marital status to the strength of their social network—also seems linked to parents' well-being.

**Social Support, Employment, and Socioeconomic Status.** Overall, parents with greater sources of social support tend to experience greater well-being. The importance of being employed is less clear-cut: Research suggests that employment likely enhances well-being by offsetting the financial strain of having a child, but reduces well-being by adding a time strain that makes it difficult to balance home and work

life. Interestingly, studies also suggest that people of higher [socioeconomic status](#) benefit less from being parents because they often have goals of personal achievement that conflict with the time burdens of parenthood.

**Marital Status and Child Custody.** Married parents also tend to experience greater well-being than single parents—likely, in part, because of the social and economic support that often accompanies marriage.

Parents who do not have custody of their children also tend to experience lower well-being than parents who have custody. This may be because although parents without custody do not have childrearing responsibilities, they miss out on any benefits gained from parenthood, like more social connections, and experience the pain of missing their children.



**Family Structure.** Finally, some studies suggest that biological parents tend to be as happy or happier than adoptive or stepparents, while studies

also suggest that adoptive and stepparents are happier during the transition to parenthood. The researchers write that in becoming a parent, adoptive parents may be more appreciative in gaining a child because of the uncertainty and stress that accompanies adoption. Meanwhile, stepparents who gain a child have also just gotten married, which may boost their [happiness](#).

### **New insights for parents, but no "blanket answers"**

Understanding all of these factors does not simply reveal whether parents are in fact more or less happy than non-parents. Instead, argue the authors, it can help us determine how best to help parents who need it most.

"For example," they write, "mothers may find parenting more rewarding in cultures where the father shares equally in the responsibilities of child rearing, and the stressors of single parenthood may be attenuated if the parent has the support of an extended family."

And as the authors point out, happy parents often mean happy kids: Research has shown that happier parents engage in more positive parental behaviors and also influences positive outcomes in their children, like their child's motivation, achievement, and relationships with peers.

But perhaps the greatest takeaway message from Nelson and her colleague's research is that, despite some popular beliefs that "all parents are miserable," the truth is much more complex.

"Our review of the literature reveals the hazards of providing blanket answers regarding the association between parenthood and well-being at the broadest level," they write, "particularly when those answers involve comparing all types of parents with all types of non-parents."



Readings of prior research may have failed to consider some of the great variation among [parents](#), they argue—and future research, they hope, will help us "fully understand the banes and boons of [parenthood](#)."

**More information:** "The pains and pleasures of parenting: When, why, and how is parenthood associated with more or less well-being?" Nelson, S. Katherine; Kushlev, Kostadin; Lyubomirsky, Sonja. *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol 140(3), May 2014, 846-895. [DOI: 10.1037/a0035444](#)

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