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the joys of parenthood, reconsidered

by robin w. simon

Hallmark stores stock baby cards filled with happy wishes for new parents, acknowledging and celebrating their long-awaited and precious bundle of joy. Too bad their selection doesn't include cards that recognize the negative emotions that often accompany parenthood.

Perhaps they should. Sociologists find that as a group, parents in the United States experience depression and emotional distress more often than their childless adult counterparts. Parents of young children report far more depression, emotional distress, and other negative emotions than non-parents, and parents of grown children have no better well-being than adults who never had children.

That last finding contradicts the conventional wisdom that empty-nest parents derive all the emotional rewards of parenthood because they're done with the financially and psychologically taxing aspects of raising young kids.

These research findings, of course, fly in the face of our cultural dogma that proclaims it impossible for people to achieve an emotionally fulfilling and healthy life unless they become parents. And that's a problem, because the vast majority of American men and women eventually have children, yet conditions in our society make it nearly impossible for them to reap all the emotional benefits of doing so.

the greatest gift life has to offer

Americans harbor a widespread, deeply held belief that no adult can be happy without becoming a parent. Parenthood, we think, is pivotal for developing and maintaining emotional well-being, and children are an essential ingredient for a life filled with positive emotions like happiness, joy, excitement, contentment, satisfaction, and pride. Even more than marriage and employment, our culture promotes the idea that parenthood provides a sense of purpose and meaning in life, which are essential for good mental health.

As a result, we encourage men and women to have children in a variety of subtle and not so subtle ways. Then, we congratulate them when they become parents with baby showers, flowers, balloons, and cigars. These and other cultural celebrations of the transition to parenthood reflect, reinforce, and perpetuate Americans' beliefs that there's no better guarantee of achieving an emotionally fulfilling and healthy life than having children.

And most fall right in step. The vast majority of men and women in the United States become parents either through birth, adoption, or marriage. The 20th century witnessed important changes in the timing of parenthood (men and women are now deferring it until they're older, compared to previous generations), yet demographers have found that sooner or later about 80 percent of the adult population has biological children. Nothing indicates a decline in the near future as cohorts of young adults who are currently childless are still in their childbearing years.

These cultural beliefs about the importance of parenthood for achieving a happy and emotionally healthy adulthood extend

to the way we respond to adults who either can't or choose not to have children. Because our culture equates childlessness with feelings of sadness, loneliness, emptiness, purposelessness, and meaninglessness—particularly as men and women approach the golden years, when the emotional rewards of parenthood are assumed to be at their peak—we feel sorry for and pity childless adults. We assume it's difficult, if not impossible, for them to have an emotionally fulfilling life without offspring. We also assume that those who are voluntarily child-free are selfish, unhappy, and will regret their decision after it's too late.

In her 1995 book on childlessness and the pursuit of happiness, Elaine Tyler May writes that in light of our cultural

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idealization of children, many reproductively challenged Americans subject themselves to expensive and invasive medical procedures in order to procreate. Heterosexual women and lesbians are increasingly conceiving offspring through *in vitro* fertilization, while heterosexual couples and gay men often turn to adoption and sometimes surrogacy to become parents. Culturally, we encourage those who can't have biological children to adopt—an idea buttressed by the highly publicized recent overseas adoptions among the Hollywood elite. There are no reliable estimates of the percentage of conceptions through artificial insemination or surrogacy, but between 2 percent and 4 percent of adults in the United States adopt children at some point in their lives.

Only in recent years have the media provided an alternative to the idealized portrayal of parenthood that has dominated the cultural landscape since the 1950s—a period marked by a strong, positive outlook on having children. Television shows like *Roseanne* and films like *Parenthood* that appeared in the 1980s debunked the overly romanticized conceptions of parenthood that had loomed large in our culture, portraying parents of young children as exhausted, frustrated, and at their wits end. Some recent films like *Meet the Parents* and television shows like *Everyone Loves Raymond* and *Brothers and Sisters* also depict strained relationships between empty-nest parents and their adult children.

But we're not deterred. These darker, though perhaps more realistic, portrayals of parenthood notwithstanding, most of us still adhere to the cultural belief that there's no better guarantee of a happy, healthy, and emotionally rich and rewarding life than having children, who are presumed to be "worth" the

financial and psychological costs associated with raising them. Although most people today would probably agree that parenthood is often challenging, sometimes difficult, and involves continual self-sacrifice, periodic disaster, and occasional heartache—particularly when children enter the tumultuous adolescent years—our culture continues to promote the idea that the emotional rewards associated with parenthood far outweigh the personal costs.

numbers show otherwise

Contrary to all of this, sociological research based on national surveys of American adults finds an association between parenthood and depression, emotional distress, and other negative emotions. While studies indicate parents derive more purpose, more meaning, and greater satisfaction from life than non-parents, they also reveal parents experience lower

parents their own age. Several other studies based on different national surveys of adults also indicate that parents currently raising children are significantly more depressed and emotionally distressed than childless adults. Many others have found that living with minor children is associated with significantly lower levels of psychological well-being. The details of these studies can be found in a 2005 *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* article I wrote with Evenson, as well as McLanahan and Adam's 1987 *Annual Review of Sociology* article.

Additionally, Leda Nath and I studied Americans' everyday emotional experiences as reported on the General Social Survey, a nationally representative sample of more than 1,400 adults. It revealed that parents residing with minor children report significantly less frequent positive feelings (calm, contentment) but significantly more frequent negative feelings (fear, anxiety, worry, anger) than adults not living with young



levels of emotional well-being, less frequent positive emotions, and more frequent negative emotions than their childless peers. Sara McLanahan and Julia Adams first summarized the evidence on parental status differences in mental health 20 years ago, but similar findings are evident in more recent research.

For example, a recent study I conducted with Ranae J. Evenson based on the National Survey of Families and Households—which includes a nationally representative sample of more than 10,000 adults in the United States—revealed that parents report significantly more symptoms of depression (feelings of sadness, loneliness, restlessness, and fear) than non-

children. We further found that full-nest parents don't report more frequent feelings of happiness, excitement, joy, and pride than adults not residing with dependent offspring. Based on another national survey, Catherine E. Ross and Marieke Van

Sociological research finds an association between parenthood and depression.

Willigen also found that parents with young children in the home are angrier than adults not living with kids.

Conventional wisdom tells us the emotional rewards of having children are fewest during the “full-nest” stage and

greatest during the “empty-nest” stage of parenthood. Free of the onerous financial and psychological responsibilities associated with raising young offspring, empty-nest parents are ostensibly able to focus on the love, friendship, companionship, emotional support, and all sorts of assistance they receive from their adult children. Indeed, Debra Umberson’s research on parent-adult child interaction in the United States indicates that most parents have frequent contact with their non-resident adult children, often speaking with them at least once a week.

However, studies based on recent national surveys indicate that empty-nest parents report similar levels of well-being as childless adults their own age. As a matter of fact, Evenson and I



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found *no* group of parents that reports significantly greater emotional well-being than people who never had children. This goes for married parents, cohabiting parents, single parents, non-custodial parents, and stepparents, as well as for fathers versus mothers, despite the fact that epidemiological research documents women’s less frequent positive emotions, more frequent negative emotions, and higher levels of depression and emotional distress than men in general.

It’s important to emphasize that while parents aren’t any emotionally better off than their childless counterparts, parents’ other social statuses—particularly their marital, employment, and socioeconomic status—influence the association between parenthood and mental health.

Parents experience lower levels of emotional well-being, less frequent positive emotions, and more frequent negative emotions than their childless peers.

For example, research finds that single parents report higher levels of depression and emotional distress than married and cohabiting parents. Unemployment exacerbates the negative emotional effects of parenthood involving young children,

particularly for men. Parents with lower levels of education and household income also experience higher levels of depression and emotional distress than their more advantaged peers. And, not surprisingly, parents who enjoy satisfying relationships with their children report greater emotional well-being than parents who have unsatisfying relationships with their offspring.

But, while these social characteristics influence or moderate the association between parenthood and mental health, little evidence exists that parenthood actually improves adults’ emotional well-being. In fact, most evidence seems to point to the contrary.

the stresses of parenthood

Why doesn’t parenthood have the positive emotional effects on adults that our cultural beliefs suggest? The answer to this question lies in the social conditions in which Americans today parent—they’re far from ideal for allowing them to reap the full emotional benefits of having children. Parents are exposed to a number of different stressors that cancel out and often exceed the emotional rewards of having children. Making matters worse, parents and others perceive this stress as a private matter and reflective of their inability to cope with the “normal” demands of having children.

In their research examining change in the association between parenthood and psychological well-being from the 1950s to the 1970s, McLanahan and Adams found parenthood was perceived as more stressful and was more closely associated with emotional distress in the 1970s than in the 1950s. Much of this trend was due to changes in the employment and marital status of parents, they said.

A significant source of parental stress stems from the extraordinarily high financial cost of raising a child to adulthood these days. Even the basics such as food, clothing, and (for those who have it) healthcare are expensive, not to mention extracurricular activities parents feel compelled to provide their kids. Although the figures vary depending on parents’ household income, the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates families spend anywhere from \$134,370 to \$269,520 raising a child from birth through age 17. These figures don’t

include the astronomical cost of a college education; the College Board reports tuition alone is presently more than \$20,000 at state universities, more than \$80,000 at private universities, and continues to rise by an average of 6 percent to 7 percent each year.

Indeed, the increasing cost of raising kids is one factor that contributed to the large number of mothers who joined the labor force in the second half of the 20th century. Demographers estimate 70 percent of children in the United States are currently being raised in households in which all adults work outside the home. However, as Jennifer Glass and others point out, there's a fundamental incompatibility between employment and raising children, which makes juggling parenthood and paid work highly stressful.

Arlie Hochschild was the first to document that the lack of flexible work schedules, high-quality and affordable child care for preschool-aged children, and after-school care for elementary-aged children all contribute to stress from what's now commonly referred to as the "second shift" for employed parents, particularly employed mothers, who leave their jobs at 5 o'clock only to start another job caring for children at home. However, there are few policies or programs to alleviate the stress. In the end, our collective response to "stressed out" employed parents is that they need to become better organized.

Although financial stress and the stress of the second shift subside as children age and become independent, the majority of parents continue to be involved in their adult offspring's lives and worry about them. Among other things, parents worry about their grown children's financial well-being, their social relationships, their happiness, and both their mental and physical health. These observations have led sociologists to conclude that parenthood is the quintessential job that never ends.

Parents also shoulder the daunting responsibility for the development and well-being of another person, and our culture places high expectations on them for the way children "turn out." Irrespective of their children's age, we question parents' childrearing skills when they have problems. In fact, the way children turn out seems to be the only measure our culture offers for assessing whether men and women are "good" parents.

Alice S. Rossi has argued that unlike other societies, Americans receive relatively little preparation for parenthood and most parents raise their children in relative social isolation with little assistance from extended family members, friends, neighbors, and the larger community. At the same time, parents alone are accountable for raising children to be moral, responsible, intelligent, happy, healthy, and well-adjusted adults, and this awesome responsibility doesn't end when children are grown.

shifting the reward-cost analysis

Children provide parents with a sense of immortality, an important social identity, and emotional connections to extended family members and people in their communities. Children

We need to reevaluate existing cultural beliefs that children improve the emotional health and well-being of adults.

fulfill some basic human desires—including having someone to love and nurture, carrying on family traditions, and allowing us to become grandparents. Watching children grow and develop is enjoyable and parents feel comforted by the per-



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ception that they won't be alone to fend for themselves in old age. The parent-child relationship is perhaps the most important and enduring social bond in the lives of individuals, which is probably why parents derive more purpose and meaning in life than adults who never had children.

At the same time, the emotional benefits of having children are often overshadowed by the onerous demands and stressors associated with the role. Although experienced by mothers and fathers at a deeply personal level, the stressfulness of contemporary parenthood is firmly rooted in the social conditions in which people parent as well as our current social, economic, and cultural institutions.

In America we lack institutional supports that would help

ease the social and economic burdens—and subsequent stressfulness and emotional disadvantages—associated with parenthood. Instituting better tax credits, developing more and better day care and after school options, as well as offering flexible work schedules for employed mothers and fathers would go far toward alleviating some of the stress for parents raising children.

However, providing these forms of assistance is only part of the solution, since parents whose children are grown don't report higher levels of emotional well-being than childless adults their own age. Affordable health care would insure individuals' basic health needs are met and would, therefore, lessen this lingering source of stress for all parents—irrespective of their children's age. Although there are no existing studies that systematically compare the mental health of parents and childless adults in other countries, it's likely that parents residing in societies with family-friendly and other social welfare policies enjoy better mental health than parents in the United States.

Of equal importance is the need to take stock of and reevaluate existing cultural beliefs that children improve the emotional health and well-being of adults. These cultural beliefs—and our expectations that children guarantee a life filled with happiness, joy, excitement, contentment, satisfaction, and pride—are an additional, though hidden, source of stress for all parents. Indeed, the feelings of depression, emotional distress, and other negative emotions parents experience on a daily basis may cause them to question what they're doing wrong. These negative emotions may also lead parents with children of all ages, especially mothers, to perceive themselves as inadequate since their feelings aren't consistent with our cultural ideal.

To this end, reducing the enormous and unrealistic cultural expectations we have for parenthood is as important as greater cultural recognition of the unrelenting challenges and difficulties associated with having children of all ages. Although there's no guarantee these changes would drastically improve the emotional lives of American mothers and fathers, at least they would help minimize the emotional costs and maximize the emotional benefits of parenthood in the United States today.

recommended resources

Jennifer Glass. "Envisioning the Integration of Family and Work: Toward a Kinder, Gentler Workplace," *Contemporary Sociology* 29 (2000): 129–143. A provocative discussion of the incompatibility between raising children and women's success at work in the United States and factors underlying it.

Sara McLanahan and Julia Adams. "The Effects of Children on Adults' Psychological Well-Being: 1957–1976," *Social Forces* 68 (1989): 124–146. A classic study comparing the mental health of parents between the 1950s and 1970s.

Elaine Tyler May. *Barren in the Promised Land: Childless Americans and the Pursuit of Happiness* (Harvard University Press, 1995). An engaging historical analysis of public attitudes about the link between happiness and parenthood.

Kei M. Nomaguchi and Melissa A. Milkie. "Costs and Rewards of Children: The Effects of Becoming a Parent on Adults' Lives," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 65 (2003): 356–374. A comparison of six dimensions of adults' lives between childless adults and adults who transitioned to parenthood.

Catherine E. Ross and Marieke Van Willigen. "Gender, Parenthood, and Anger," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58 (1996): 572–584. A study showing that economic stress and stress associated with child care increase feelings of anger among parents—particularly among mothers.

Viviana A. Zelizer. *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Basic Books, 1985). The seminal historical account of change in the value of children to parents from being economic assets to being emotionally priceless.

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