

Bundles Of . . . Misery

Parenting Got You Down? You're Not Alone, Says Study

By Elizabeth Agnvall
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Just as we're taking down the tree, organizing the new toys and stepping onto the scale comes a study finding that may make us wonder why we do it all: Parents are more likely to be depressed than people who do not have children.

Published last month in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, the study of 13,000 U.S. adults found that parents, from those with young children to empty nesters, reported being more miserable than non-parents. The researchers analyzed data from a national survey of families and households that asked respondents how many times in the past week, for example, they felt sad, distracted or depressed.

Unlike earlier studies, this one found moms and dads equally unhappy.

So: After all the sleepless nights and drowsy mornings, the cycles of feeding and throwing up, the American Girl doll accessories bought on credit, the toothpick models of the solar system and the algebra tutors . . . we would have been happier without it all?

In a word, says study author Robin Simon, an associate professor of sociology at Florida State University, yes.

"Parents don't do as well as non-parents," she said.

Simon's own kids -- she has an adult daughter and a teenage son -- were unimpressed by the study results. "They're like 'Whatever,'" she said.

For her part, Simon felt oddly cheered: "It's validating and consoling to know that you're not alone."

But how can the findings stand? Politics, culture and history -- to say nothing of those annoying Baby Gap ads -- all reinforce the message that having children is the greatest pleasure in life.

Michael Lewis, professor of pediatrics and psychiatry and director of the Institute for the Study of Child Development at the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in New Brunswick, N.J., says that the idea of parenthood as pure joy "was always a bit of a wonderful myth." He said he's surprised the study findings were not even more negative.

Over the last 150 years, he said, children have moved from being an economic advantage to an economic burden in the United States. We used to be able to send children to work in the fields; older kids tended to the babies. When not pressed into service, they mostly stayed out of the way.

With the advent of Dr. Spock, the parenting industry, obligatory music and soccer lessons and a colossal marketplace that propels kids to desire and parents to guilt, children have become the center of the household.

Consider the "Mom's Letter to Santa" e-mail that went zapping around just before Christmas: the mom is hiding in the laundry room using a crayon to write her wish list on the back of a receipt while the laundry is between cycles: She wants a car with fingerprint-resistant windows, a radio that plays only adult music, a television that won't broadcast programs with talking animals and a place where she can talk on the phone in peace.

"It would be helpful if you could coerce my children to help around the house without demanding payment as if they were the bosses of an organized crime family," she writes to St. Nick.

It's Not You -- Really

Lewis himself has somehow worked through all of this with his four kids.

While he's sure he had the messiest children in town -- he once found the skeleton of a decayed mouse under his son's bed -- he's raised a doctor and a lawyer. One child is in college and the fourth is in high school.

Still, he notes, even when children are doing well, "there are always issues to deal with. One hopes that it gets better. Parenting is never done. It's an endless task. Lots of pleasure, but a lot of pain."

His advice: If life as a parent leaves you gloomy, realize that it's not you. It's your . . . situation.

"Don't think you are crazy" for feeling low, he said. This study shows that "lots of people are feeling the same way."

Meredith Small, a Cornell University anthropologist and author of "Kids: How Biology and Culture Shape the Way We Raise Our Children," sees cultural forces conspiring to make life lousy for parents.

"Western culture is the worst place to be if you want to be a parent," she says. "If you look at any other culture, people would think that this is nutty."

She said parents have never been as alone as they are in the United States today. In places like India, lots of people sleep in one big house. When the baby wakes up at 2 a.m., six people are available to help. Higher birth rates mean there are older children to take care of the younger ones. Worldwide, she says, 90 percent of child care is done by other children.

Even in many European countries, things are better; working mothers -- and sometimes fathers -- are paid a portion of their salaries to stay home during the first year or more with their young children. Parents get six weeks of vacation and extra time off to take care of sick kids. Good child care is subsidized by the government. College and graduate schools are paid for by the government.

Here, Small said, nuclear families aren't large enough. "Parents are tired, they are overworked, they are extended, they are irritated and they've got nobody to help them."

A Dissenting Voice

So short of sending the kids back into the fields, having more babies, inviting the neighbors to live with us or charging the kids rent, what's an overwhelmed parent to do?

Family therapist Neil Bernstein, who has offices in the District and Virginia, offers this simple advice: "Get a life."

For the record, he doesn't necessarily accept the study's conclusion that people with children are more depressed. Still, "What parents need to know and should take away from this is that it's important to look after your own mental health, not to live vicariously through your child," he said.

People should have their own interests and look after their relationships the same way they look after their children. And if it all seems too overwhelming, it's worth seeking help from a professional.

"Being a good parent does not mean being totally absorbed in your children," he said.

Bernstein, who has been treating Washington area children and families for 25 years and has grown children, cites his own experience.

"Not only did parenting not make me depressed, but it was without question the happiest years of my life," he says. "I wouldn't trade them for anything, and I couldn't imagine being anywhere near as comfortable or happy with myself had I not been a parent."

And for those who have chosen not to have children? Simon said her study validates that their choice might just be the healthiest one of all.

"At least if you're going to do it," she says to those contemplating parenthood, "know what you're getting into."

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