

Childless women fare as well psychologically as mothers at mid-life

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For one day each year, motherhood brings flowers, cards and Sunday brunches, but a new University of Florida study asks, how important is it for women's happiness in midlife whether and when they had children?

“Contrary to warnings we hear about being lonely if you don't have children, our study finds that childless women and mothers generally report similar levels of psychological well-being in their 50s,” said Tanya Koropecyj-Cox, lead author and a UF sociology professor.

Whether a woman has children seems less critical than other important factors that shape her life, including education, work and earnings, and relationships with family and friends, Koropecyj-Cox said. “Whether you are socially integrated or have concerns about paying the bills – those things play a more direct role in shaping psychological well-being among women in midlife,” she said.

Being in good health and having a husband or partner gave the biggest boost to older women's psychological well-being, said Koropecyj-Cox, whose study of nearly 6,000 women between the ages of 51 and 61 is scheduled to be published in the June 7 issue of the International Journal of Aging and Human Development.

The study used data from two major national surveys: the Health and Retirement Study, conducted in 1992, which includes women born between 1931 and 1941, and the National Survey of Families and Households, which provides a comparable sample from 1987-88.

“The most vulnerable group in terms of being least happy, loneliest and most depressed are the mothers who were single, divorced or widowed in middle age,” she said.

For mothers, psychological well-being also was heavily influenced by when they had their children. Women who gave birth early, before age 19, reported being least happy, more depressed and lonelier than mothers who had their children later, Koropeckyj-Cox said. Slightly more than one-third – 35 percent – of “early mothers” reported ever feeling lonely, for example, compared with about a quarter — 25 percent to 27 percent — of mothers who had their children in their 20s or later, she said.

For early mothers, unhappiness is related to poorer economic circumstances and the likelihood of being unmarried in midlife. “Early childbearing often means interrupting or dropping out of school, creating economic stress that can last throughout adulthood,” Koropeckyj-Cox said.

Women who became mothers at age 25 or older were happier and less lonely or depressed than either the early or “on-time” mothers, defined for these women who were born in the late 1920s and the 1930s as between 19 and 24, when about half of American women had their first child, she said.

“Those women who delay childbearing and possibly marriage as well are able to spend their early adult years focusing on education and career, which helps them economically and gives them more opportunities later in their 30s and 40s and beyond,” she said.

Besides being better educated and having higher incomes, older mothers may find it rewarding to have children young enough to be at home as they enter their 50s, she said.

Family satisfaction was lower among those who had been single mothers, and more than half of early mothers had been without a partner at some time when their children were under 18, compared with a quarter to a third of women who gave birth on-time or late.

That so few differences in psychological well-being were found between childless women and mothers was significant considering it was this generation that mothered the baby boomers, Koropeckyj-Cox said. “If anyone was going to show disadvantages in being childless, it would be these women,” she said. “They came of age during the 1950s, when motherhood was regarded as the focal point that defined women’s lives.”

Fewer than 10 percent of women of this generation remained childless, compared with nearly a quarter of those who came of age earlier during the Depression, Koropeckyj-Cox said. Today, 16 percent to 19 percent of women in their 40s have not had children, she said.

Source: University of Florida

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