

Another reason to not mix work and family: Money makes parenting less meaningful

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Money and parenting don't mix. That's according to new research that suggests that merely thinking about money diminishes the meaning people derive from parenting. The study is one among a growing number that identifies when, why, and how parenthood is associated with happiness or misery.

"The relationship between [parenthood](#) and well-being is not one and the same for all parents," says Kostadin Kushlev of the University of British Columbia. While this may seem like an obvious claim, social scientists until now have yet to identify the psychological and demographic factors that influence parental happiness.

New research being presented today at the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP) conference in Austin offers not only insight into the link between [money](#) and parental well-being but also a new model for understanding a variety of factors that affect whether parents are happier or less happy than their childless counterparts.

Money creates conflicting goals

Fascinated by research suggesting that parenting is linked to lower well-being, Kushlev and his adviser Elizabeth Dunn sought to determine which aspects of life might influence how much pleasure and pain people got out of being parents. They specifically looked at the influence of wealth on meaning in parenthood.

In one recently published study in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, they found that a having a higher socioeconomic status lowers people's sense of meaning while taking care of their children but not during other daily activities. In a field study in the same paper, they found that showing people images of money while filling out a questionnaire at a festival with their children also reduced their levels of meaning in life.

In a new study, the researchers took the research a step further – showing some participants money while testing the influence of parents' objectives when they were taking care of their children at a festival. The researchers asked one group of parents to read a paragraph about the festival in terms of productivity and achievement, while another group read about the festival in the context of satisfying the needs of their children with no expectation for direct return. They then surveyed both groups about parenting and sense of meaning. "This design allowed us to see whether money compromises meaning because of the conflict between the goals associated with money and the goals and the behaviors that parenting normally demands," Kushlev says.

They found that activating goals for both money-making and satisfying the needs of their children at the same time did indeed form a conflict: It made parents feel that what they were doing was less meaningful.

Furthermore, they found this effect most pronounced in women. "Money seems to compromise meaning for mothers but not for fathers when they are spending time with their children," Kushlev says. "This finding is consistent with other, unpublished research that suggests that money tends to activate achievement and self-promotion motivations more strongly in women than men." Kushlev and Dunn are working to better understand these gender differences.

In the meantime, Kushlev offers some advice: to keep work and family

life as separate as possible, "so that work- or money-related goals are not active when parents are spending time with their children." So try to avoid buying stocks or taking a business call right before or during taking care of your kids. "The less we mix our various goals and motivations, the more meaning in life we may be able to experience from our various [daily activities](#)," he says.

Understanding parental happiness

Like Kushlev and Dunn, Katherine Nelson of the University of California, Riverside, was surprised to learn of research suggesting that parents were largely unhappy. "It seemed as though anecdotal evidence suggested the reverse," she says. "Every parent I talked to said that being a parent was one of the best and most meaningful things they had done with their life."

So she and her adviser Sonja Lyubomirsky, along with Kushlev, reviewed more than 100 studies on parenting and well-being to better understand which aspects of parenthood are most associated with joy and which with stress. This new work suggests that parents are unhappy when they encounter greater negative emotions, magnified financial problems, more sleep disturbance, and troubled marriages. On the other hand, parents find joy when they experience positive emotions, satisfaction of their basic human needs, fulfillment of their social roles, and purpose and meaning in life.

They propose a new model of parents' well-being to explain why so much of the previous research on parenthood and well-being is mixed. "Rather than grouping all parents together to suggest that all parents are happy or all parents are miserable," she says, "we have taken a more nuanced approach by asking 'which types of parents are happy?' and 'which types of parents are miserable?'" A parent's age, gender, marital status, and amount of social support, among other factors, are all

important.

For example, a young or single parent with young children may be sleep-deprived and thus experience more negative emotions – and lower well-being – due to the stresses of raising young children. By contrast, married parents, and parents who are older at the birth of their first child experience relatively high levels of well-being.

In recent work published in Psychological Science, they also found significant well-being differences for mothers and fathers. In general, fathers are happier than men without children, whereas mothers and women without [children](#) experience similar levels of happiness.

"Simply asking whether parents are happier than non-parents is not very meaningful," Nelson says. "Parents have such different experiences that researchers should not take an 'all [parents](#) are created equal' approach."

More information: Kushlev and Nelson are presenting their research in the symposium "The Devil is in the Details: Revealing the Complexities of the Relationship Between Parenthood and Well-Being" on Feb. 14, 2014, at the SPSP annual meeting. www.spspmeeting.org/

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