

What makes a happy working mom?

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Credit: Vera Kratochvil/Public Domain

A happy working mom feels competent in interacting with her child, experiences a sense of freedom and choice in her actions, while having a warm and affectionate relationship with her baby. She is also not too

hard on herself about how she is faring as a mother. So says Katrijn Brenning of the University of Ghent in Belgium who led research that investigated what affects a working mother's sense of well-being. The study is published in Springer's *Journal of Happiness Studies*.

Brenning and her colleagues showed that a mother's sense of well-being drops when she feels inadequate, under pressure, and is alienated from her social circle by her efforts to get to work and be a good parent all at once. Her own baby's temperament has little influence on her sense of well-being, but having a more extrovert child does help some women to feel more positive about motherhood, and to be less hard on themselves.

"Our findings point to a complex interplay between parent and child characteristics in the prediction of maternal wellbeing," says Brenning.

The research team analyzed five days of diary entries made by 126 mothers after their [maternity leave](#) ended and they had to leave their babies at a day-care facility for the first time. This tends to be a particularly stressful episode in the life of working mothers because it is often the first time that they are separated from their children. With maternity leave over, they also need to learn how to balance their work and family lives effectively.

Although the temperament of their children did not have much influence on the mothers' [sense](#) of well-being, Brenning says: "More positive perceptions of the child's temperament were found to buffer to some extent against the affective difficulties associated with a lack of need satisfaction, high need frustration and maternal self-criticism."

Brenning believes that in their interaction with their children, mothers should seek out experiences that also help to satisfy their own daily psychological needs. Mothers should not be too hard on themselves about how they are faring as a mother, search for activities with their

baby that they enjoy, and create opportunities to spend with their offspring in a warm and affectionate way. The positive influence and energy this creates could be beneficial in that it allows [mothers](#) to interact with their child in a more sensitive, patient, and positive fashion.

The researchers also believe that clinical counsellors should highlight to their female patients how important it is to ensure that their own psychological needs are met, amid the pressures of motherhood and work.

"Need frustration relates to daily distress and to more cold and intrusive parent-child interactions," she says.

The findings highlight how difficult it is for women whose personalities tend to veer towards the depressive and the self-critical to adjust to parenthood. Brenning therefore thinks that prevention and intervention strategies should be in place to help such women cope in their first few months of parenthood.

More information: Katrijn Brenning et al, Ups and Downs in the Joy of Motherhood: Maternal Well-Being as a Function of Psychological Needs, Personality, and Infant Temperament, *Journal of Happiness Studies* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/s10902-017-9936-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-017-9936-0)

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