

Does having children make you happier? Here's what the research suggests

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The [prevailing belief](#) in many parts of the world is that having children is key to happiness—and that people who don't have children are unfulfilled in their lives.

But is this really the case? The answer to this question is both simple and complex—and the fulfillment you feel in your life, whether you decide to have kids or not, depends on many complex factors.

Let's look first at the simple answer—which is no, you don't need to have [children](#) to be [happy and fulfilled](#).

Studies in [women](#) who are child-free by choice show most feel they have a [good sense of identity and individuality](#). They don't feel defined by their role within the family, and feel they have [more freedom](#) and control over their bodies, life and future. Child-free women also report greater [financial stability](#)—although higher [socioeconomic status](#) isn't necessary to be satisfied with the decision to be child-free.

Women and men who are child-free are also [less stressed](#) on average, and report [greater satisfaction](#) in their marriages.

There's limited research on single men and their experience of being child-free—and even less on the [transgender or queer experience of being child-free](#). But one study of men who were child-free by choice reported most were satisfied with their decision and happy to have more freedom in their life. Only a small number expressed regrets about their decision—largely because they wouldn't [have a legacy](#).

However, there's a risk that child-free men may experience a [reduction in overall life satisfaction](#) in older age if they [lack social support](#).

The parenthood paradox

Things get a little more complicated when we look at the decision to have children.

While parents can certainly be happy and fulfilled in life, the satisfaction

they feel with this decision typically unfolds over time—and can also depend on many factors they can't control.

Initially, many parents actually experience a [temporary decrease in well-being](#) after having a child—a phenomenon known as the "[parenthood paradox](#)". This is because a new baby can come in the way of many basic needs—such as sleep, eating well and seeing friends. This can be a recipe for discontentment.

Straight women also [report more unhappiness](#) when they become parents compared with men. This may be because the burden of care tends to fall disproportionately on women.

But having good [family and social support](#), an [active and equally involved co-parent](#), and living in an area that has [work-family supportive policies](#) can all offset the [stresses and costs of parenting](#).

This probably explains why women in Norway [don't report](#) a [loss of happiness](#) when they have children, as Norway has many family-friendly policies which make it possible for both parents to [raise children and have careers](#).

While parenting can be tough, that doesn't mean it can't still lead to happiness, joy and [greater meaning in life](#). The parenting experience can even lead to a profound form of well-being called eudaimonic well-being. This is the feeling you have lived a life worth living, which is distinct from short-term happiness.

Both men and women can experience [positive eudaimonic well-being](#) when they [become parents](#). But for women, the boost in [eudaimonic well-being](#) they experience also depends on how balanced the parenting duties are with their partner.

Facing regret

Another major thing people worry about is whether they'll regret not having children.

Reassuringly, research in child-free [older adults](#) shows many report [high life satisfaction](#) and [resiliency](#) against poor mental health.

It seems the biggest key in being happy with [your decision](#) to have or not have children depends on whether you [felt in control](#) of that decision. When we feel we've chosen our path, we tend to accept our decisions and be happier about them.

Yet what if that choice has been taken away from you—and you wanted a child but were unable to have one? Can you be happy then? Our research shows the answer is a resounding yes.

We investigated the [impact of childlessness](#) on 161 UK-based women who wanted to have children but couldn't for various reasons—such as not being able to find a partner or infertility. Participants were aged between 25 and 75.

We found that on average, the participants' well-being was no different to that of the general public. While 12% languished (meaning their lives felt aimless), 24% were flourishing psychologically—meaning they reported the highest level of mental health. The remainder experienced moderate levels of well-being.

Interestingly, for some, the struggle to have a child resulted in [post-traumatic growth](#). This refers to positive psychological changes that happen after a traumatic event. Women with the highest levels of well-being said being able to focus on new possibilities in their lives, outside of being a parent, helped them improve their well-being.

Studies in men who have been unable to have children due to infertility show many [experienced sadness](#) as a result—though this sadness did reduce as they got older. But similar to women who are involuntarily childless, finding ways of re-framing their identity and role in society [outside of fatherhood](#) helped many find meaning and satisfaction in their life.

So, does parenthood make us happier? Does childlessness make us miserable? The answer to these questions isn't as simple as it seems. The happiness or fulfillment we experience depends on so many factors, many of which are out of our control. While the way you choose to make meaning in your life is indeed a key factor, so too is the [social support](#) you have to become a parent, and the political climate you live in.

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