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Think having children will make you happier? Think again. Only IDIOTS have kids!

It is no surprise that financially squeezed young people are choosing not to become parents

Getting married and having children has long been considered the cornerstone of a “good” life, or simply the done thing.

Yet around the world, women are choosing to have fewer children and there is no consensus on why.

In England and Wales, [fertility rates](#) have sunk to the lowest level on record, at 1.41 children per woman – well below the replacement level of 2.1.

This clearly brings challenges for society. The most obvious is for public finances: if fewer future taxpayers are being born, who will pay for public services?

The implications for airier concepts such as personal happiness are less clear. Will a society where [fewer people opt to have children](#) be more unhappy? Not necessarily.

“Parents tend to fare a little bit worse on life satisfaction than those without children,” says Ansgar Hudde, a German sociologist who is currently a visiting scholar at Harvard.

He has studied the experience of 43,000 people across 30 European countries, including the UK, to understand how parenthood affects happiness.

When asked how satisfied people feel with their lives, parents, on average, tend to feel slightly worse than their child-free peers.

However, much also depends on your circumstances.

Among women from richer backgrounds, [having a child](#) has little effect on life satisfaction. The same goes for men, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Meanwhile, mothers from poorer backgrounds are notably less satisfied than women without children in the same situation.

“The more challenging the overall circumstances, the worse having a child is for your wellbeing,” says Hudde.

“Being a single parent, having a lower social class, lower income, lower education and having a child at a very young age – those are all the factors that make parenthood more challenging.”

In general, women who opt for children also experience bigger emotional highs and lows, adds Nattavudh Powdthavee, an economist focused on behavioural science and happiness at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

“Mothers on average experience a lot more daily volatility in terms of emotional wellbeing compared to non-parents. That can contribute to why they report not so high life satisfaction on average,” he says.

Similarly, parents also tend to feel far more anxious than their child-free peers.

It suggests that if you want to optimise your happiness, focusing on good health, financial security and finding a good partner may matter more than having children or not.

“People are generally very bad at predicting what will make them happy in the future. What we know from the research is that people do adapt to having children. It is just that they’re not as happy as they thought they probably would be,” Powdthavee says.

“Their expectations and reality might be very different. That’s what we know for sure.”

Measuring what makes people content is complicated. Happiness can be hard to define and ultimately may not be the most important thing for everyone.

“If purpose is the holy grail dimension of wellbeing you want to optimise, then maybe children would make you feel that your life is a bit more meaningful compared to non-parents ... despite the fact that it might lower your [day-to-day] happiness,” Powdthavee says.

This is what Hudde concludes too. Disrupted sleep, frequent illnesses and childcare costs do often make life more stressful for parents, but many still feel it is worth it.

“Life satisfaction is one thing but that’s not everything that people are looking for. That’s what people would tell you who have children. Many would not say that every day is a joy but what it gives is a sense of purpose and meaning,” Hudde says.

“We find that throughout social groups – no matter the age, education level or country – people with children generally experience their life as a little bit more meaningful than those without children.”

This trade-off – a greater sense of purpose in return for lower daily wellbeing – is not inevitable, according to Hudde’s study.

In the Nordics, parents report both a greater sense of meaning and higher overall happiness than their child-free peers.

That is because it is easier and cheaper to raise children there, he believes.

“The Nordic countries [are] generally quite generous in terms of parental leave, having childcare facilities that are high quality and cheap, and also having a general social normative context that emphasises the importance of parenthood,” says Hudde.

In the UK, polling by YouGov found that only 8pc of parents said they regretted having children, while another 6pc had regrets at one point but no longer do. Most claim to never have felt that way. It is far more common for parents to wish they’d had more children.

“The idea that children don’t make you happy doesn’t make any sense. Because why would you have more than one?” says David Blanchflower, an economist at Dartmouth College in the US. He was previously a rate-setter at the Bank of England.

He has studied this question and also found that parents reported lower wellbeing – but that this could largely be explained by the financial burden of raising children. Once he accounted for that, parents mostly reported greater happiness, he says.

It is perhaps no wonder that politicians are struggling to convince financially squeezed young people to have kids. Many will rightfully observe that, at least in the short term, they will only feel more miserable and stressed.

Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that life satisfaction and happiness plunge in the late 30s and 40s – around the time many enter parenthood.

This reverses for people in their 60s and 70s, who become significantly happier at an age associated with becoming a grandparent.

While young people deciding against having children may argue it's to preserve their happiness, those who do opt for parenthood may be playing the long game.

