

Having children is not the formula for a happy life



After we wrote a book about the [sacred cows of marriage and divorce](#), we were asked to tackle one of the [sacred cows of American parenting](#). The article generated a dismaying volume of hate mail from those who perceived it as an attack on parenthood, but it also sparked a conversation among readers about society's attitudes toward childless individuals and couples, a conversation that deserves to be continued.

At a certain age, somewhat younger for women than for men, adults who have failed to reproduce stop being viewed by our society as future parents and start being viewed as childless. At first, social pressure mounts for them join the rest of us for afternoons at the playground and umpteen readings of *Goodnight Moon*, and then social pressure ebbs as it becomes evident that offspring will not be forthcoming due to choice, circumstance or both. Once our society has given up hope for babies, it adopts an attitude of pity mixed with disapproval for those who remain childless.

It is no coincidence that the label applied to childless couples, Dual Income No Kids, gets shortened to the unflattering acronym DINK. With larger disposable incomes and flexible schedules, DINKs spend more time eating at fancy restaurants and tanning their pilates-sculpted bodies on Hawaiian beaches than couples with children. Even those who cannot afford trips to Hawaii get more sleep and [have more leisure time](#) than parents. It might be more accurate to find a label for them that spells the acronym SMART, but as parents of four children, we confess that it feels better to call them something that sounds unflattering. DINK implies that they are more selfish than us, less concerned about the welfare of others, probably the sort of people who would cut in line at Walmart. Not that they ever shop at Walmart. Dinks.

But do childless people actually deserve our pity?

One popular narrative is that parenthood makes us happy. Happiness is tough to measure and even tougher to define—science will never definitively prove that narrative—but the bulk of evidence tilts [heavily in one direction](#). If you ask parents about [their mental well-being](#), [happiness](#), or [marital satisfaction](#), they generally report

lower levels than non-parents. Not every survey [confirms these findings](#), but the majority of academic research shows that parents are not happier than their childless peers, and in [many cases are less so](#).

Of course, happiness in the moment does not necessarily correlate with life satisfaction. If someone were to ask you about your happiness as you were climbing Mount Everest and losing fingers to frostbite, you might well rate your happiness as lower than when you were eating popcorn and watching *Breaking Bad*. That doesn't mean that both activities make you feel just as good about yourself and your life, however. When researchers Mathew White and Paul Dolan asked British study participants to rate daily activities for level of reward as well as pleasure, [they found that](#) activities such as work and time with children rated low of the pleasure scale but high on the reward scale.

The science of happiness is imprecise at best, but the picture that emerges from existing data is that parenthood does not make people happy on a moment-to-moment basis, and while parenthood may be rewarding, it is [not necessarily more rewarding](#) than career accomplishments, volunteer activities or religion. Childlessness does not appear to be an intrinsically less happy state than parenthood. This is not to minimize the suffering of those who cannot have the children they desperately want, but merely to point out that existing evidence, weak and circumstantial as it might be, does not support the notion that having children is a formula for a happy life.

So if we can't pity the childless can we call them selfish? That label is predicated on the social belief that children are good for society. In its extreme, that belief is a tautology: Without children, there would be no society. There are more than seven billion of us on this beautiful planet, however, a number that clearly exceeds the minimum required for functioning human societies. More is not always better.

Perhaps more is not the issue, and quality is more important than quantity. We all like to believe that our children will be above average, and therefore, worthwhile contributions to the world. But if this were true, if each new generation of children exceeded the average qualities of the prior generation, we would by now have evolved into a race of superhumans.

If you are considering having children, or if your children have not yet graduated from elementary school, try this exercise: Think about each of your relatives and your spouse's relatives. Think about your angelic mother, your artistic brother-in-law, your narcissistic Uncle Joe, your cousin who used to pull the legs off of spiders. Now tell yourself that your children are going to be a lot like those people. Are you really doing society a favor by having children? Do we really need another Uncle Joe?

Of course your child may turn out to be kind, hardworking and creative like your brother-in-law, and somebody's child has to become the next President of the United States. We're not saying that parenthood is going to make you miserable or that nobody should have kids. But when you consider that your child is much more likely to turn out like Uncle Joe than to be the next Einstein, it's at best unclear that bringing her into the world is an act of generosity to society.

Before you hit "send" on the hate mail you just composed, we should tell you that we love our children with all of our hearts. We cry at their music recitals, make glitter art love notes for their lunches and worry when they fail their math tests. They are imperfect, but no more imperfect than us, or our parents, or our parents' parents. After they grow up, even knowing that it might not make them happiest, we won't be able to stop ourselves from hoping that they will have children of their own. Some studies show that [grandchildren bring happiness](#), and we are pretty certain that *those* studies must be true.

Follow Astro on Twitter [@astroteller](#). We welcome your comments at ideas@gz.com.