

## Americans with and without children at home report similar life satisfaction but more positive and negative emotions

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Americans aged 34 to 46 with children at home rate their life satisfaction at higher levels than those without children at home, according to a report by Princeton University and Stony Brook University published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. However, the researchers say that factors such as higher educational attainment, higher income, better health and religiosity all enhance life satisfaction and that, once these are taken into account, parents and nonparents have similar levels of life satisfaction.

"It is simply a mistake to presume that because people deliberately want children and deliberately bring them into being that those people with children should have better lives," said Angus Deaton, the Dwight D. Eisenhower Professor of Economics and International Affairs at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs.

"Nonparents are not 'failed' parents, and parents are not 'failed' nonparents. Some people like oranges, and some like apples, and we do not think that orange eaters should have better or worse lives than apple eaters."

Regardless of those controlling factors, adults with children at home report experiencing more emotional highs and lows than those without children at home.

Past studies have suggested that nonparents are more satisfied with their

lives than parents, but less attention has been paid to the effects of parents' favorable life circumstances on those rankings, the researchers write. With Arthur Stone, Stony Brook University Distinguished Professor and a visiting research scholar in the Wilson School, Deaton examined data primarily from the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index, a survey of 1.8 million Americans who evaluated their lives and reported daily emotional experiences between 2008 and 2012. The researchers focused on the 34-46 age group because the Gallup data set did not clarify the relationship between children in the home and a parental relationship; a separate survey was used to estimate that 90 percent of adults between 34-46 are parents of the children living with them (as opposed to another familial relationship).

Unlike previous studies, the work by Deaton and Stone examined two components of subjective well-being: participants' overall evaluation of their lives and their daily emotions. Participants were asked such questions as: How close is your life to being ideal? And, to evaluate emotions, such questions as: How did you feel yesterday? Answers included happy, sad, angered, worried or stressed.

The researchers found that all emotions – happiness, smiling, enjoyment, worry, stress and anger – were markedly higher among those who have children at home. Once other important factors were allowed for, their rankings of life evaluation were similar to those without children at home. The only exception to this pattern is for physical pain: Having a child at home is associated with a lower prevalence of pain.

"Life evaluation is not the same as experienced emotions, such as happiness, enjoyment, sadness, worry or stress," said Deaton. "The results show that, no matter what else is taken into account, parents experience more of all of these than nonparents. There are good days and bad, ups and downs."

In terms of people who chose to have children versus those who did not, Deaton and Stone argue that they are different sets of people with different ideas of makes for a good life. For other countries, where there is strong social pressure to become parents, Deaton and Stone say their argument does not apply.

"In such countries, as likely is the case in many poor countries around the world, people may have [children](#) even when it does not increase their own [life evaluation](#), though it may increase that of their parents or communities," said Deaton. "The empirical evidence for those countries does indeed show that [parents](#) have lower life evaluations, on average."

**More information:** The paper, "Evaluative and hedonic wellbeing among those with and without children at home," was published online Jan. 13 in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

[www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1311600111](http://www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1311600111)

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