

# Study: A quarter of adults don't want children—and they're still happy

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The study reveals differences in life satisfaction and limited differences in personality traits between child-free individuals and parents, not-yet-parents, or childless individuals. Credit: Creative commons via Pexels

Parenting is one of life's greatest joys, right? Not for everyone. New research from Michigan State University psychologists examines characteristics and satisfaction of adults who don't want children.

As more people acknowledge they simply don't want to have kids,

Jennifer Watling Neal and Zachary Neal, both associate professors in MSU's department of psychology, are among the first to dive deeper into how these "child-free" individuals differ from others.

"Most studies haven't asked the questions necessary to distinguish 'child-free' individuals—those who choose not to have [children](#)—from other types of nonparents," Jennifer Watling Neal said. "Nonparents can also include the 'not-yet-parents' who are planning to have kids, and 'childless' people who couldn't have kids due to infertility or circumstance. Previous studies simply lumped all nonparents into a single category to compare them to parents."

The study—published June 16 in *PLOS ONE*—used a set of three questions to identify child-free individuals separately from parents and other types of nonparents. The researchers used data from a representative sample of 1,000 adults who completed MSU's State of the State Survey, conducted by the university's Institute for Public Policy and Social Research.

"After controlling for demographic characteristics, we found no differences in life satisfaction and limited differences in [personality traits](#) between child-free individuals and parents, not-yet-parents, or childless individuals," Zachary Neal said. "We also found that child-free individuals were more liberal than parents, and that people who aren't child-free felt substantially less warm toward child-free individuals."

Beyond findings related to life satisfaction and personality traits, the research unveiled additional unexpected findings.

"We were most surprised by how many child-free people there are," Jennifer Watling Neal said. "We found that more than one in four people in Michigan identified as child-free, which is much higher than the estimated prevalence rate in previous studies that relied on fertility to

identify child-free individuals. These previous studies placed the rate at only 2% to 9%. We think our improved measurement may have been able to better capture individuals who identify as child-free."

Given the large number of child-free adults in Michigan, more attention needs to be paid to this group, the researchers said. For example, the researchers explained that their study only included one time point, so didn't examine when people decided to be child-free—however, they hope forthcoming research will help the public understand both when people start identifying as child-free as well as the factors that lead to this choice.

**More information:** *PLOS ONE* (2021). [journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0252528](https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0252528)

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