

Parents have very warm feelings toward other parents. Why that could be bad news for the child-free

November 3 2022, by Zachary P. Neal and Jennifer Watling Neal

Parents feel much warmer toward other parents



Credit: Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND Source: Zachary Neal and Jennifer Watling Neal

The aphorism "birds of a feather flock together" describes the fact that people tend to prefer associating with others who are similar to themselves. The phenomenon goes by different names: Sociologists call it [homophily](#), psychologists call it [in-group favoritism](#) and political scientists call it [affective polarization](#). It's observed in [a wide range](#) of demographic and social characteristics including sex, race, religion, age, education and [political party](#).

But what about parental status? Do parents prefer other parents? What

about child-free people who don't want to be parents? Do these preferences even matter?

Pronatalism, a set of beliefs and political policies that promotes and favors [human reproduction](#), is common in many countries. Therefore, it's not surprising that people tend to have more [positive attitudes](#) about parents than they do about child-free people.

For example, people generally perceive parents as [kinder](#) and [more psychologically fulfilled](#) than child-free people. Additionally, [people express](#) feelings of admiration toward mothers and feelings of disgust toward child-free women.

However, these are general attitudes and don't tell us about how people feel about others who have made the same reproductive choices as themselves. That's why, [in a 2022 study](#) of 1,500 Michigan adults, [we asked](#) parents how they felt toward other parents and toward child-free people. We also asked child-free people how they felt toward other child-free people and toward parents.

We found that parents strongly favored other parents, but child-free adults didn't necessarily favor other child-free adults. That is, parents exhibit in-group favoritism, but child-free adults don't.

Measuring interpersonal warmth

A "feeling thermometer" question is one common way to measure how people in one group feel about people in their own group or in other groups. This question asks a person to rate how warmly they feel toward a group on a scale from 0, or very cool, to 100, or very warm.

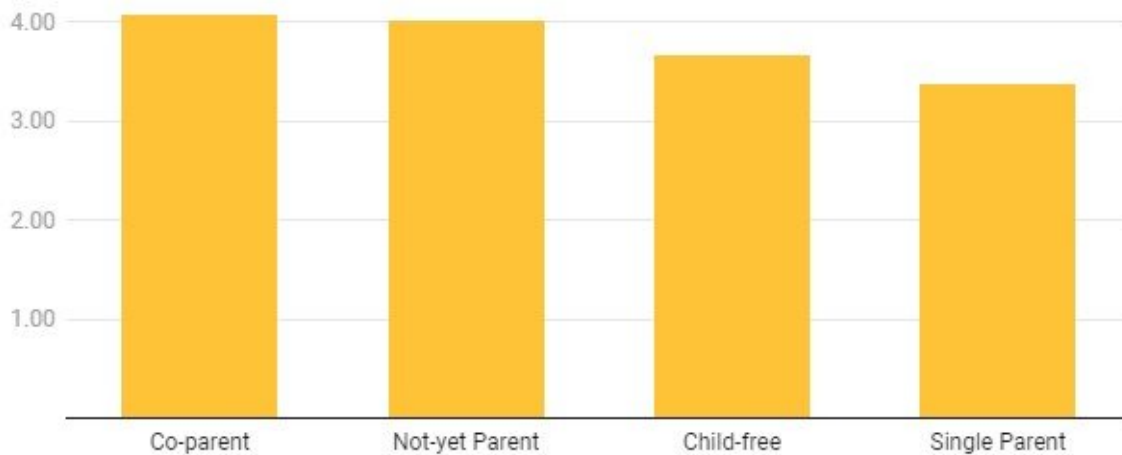
For example, in 2017 the Pew Research Center [asked people](#) how they felt about members of their own religion and members of different

religions. White evangelicals reported feeling very warm toward other white evangelicals, with an average warmth score of 81. Likewise, atheists reported feeling very warm toward other atheists, with an average warmth score of 82.

This is evidence of in-group favoritism. At the same time, evangelicals reported feeling very cool toward atheists, with an average warmth score of only 33. Likewise, atheists reported feeling very cool toward evangelicals, with an average warmth score of only 29. This is evidence of what's called "[out-group derogation](#)"—people dislike members of other groups.

Child-free people and single parents are less satisfied with their neighborhoods

Co-parents and not-yet parents – which refers to people who are planning to have kids – tend to be more satisfied.



Credit: Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND Source: Zachary Neal and Jennifer Watling Neal

We used the same approach to compare parents and child-free adults, and discovered three important patterns.

First, child-free people feel about the same toward other child-free people as they do toward parents. This was surprising because usually people feel warmer toward members of their own group, but we saw no evidence of in-group favoritism among child-free people.

Second, parents feel much warmer toward other parents than they do toward child-free people. This is a classic example of in-group favoritism—parents like other parents.

Finally, both parents and child-free people feel about the same toward child-free people. This is important because it means that although parents really like other parents, they don't dislike child-free people. That is, we saw no evidence of out-group derogation.

Does it really matter?

Although these results weren't as extreme as comparisons between [evangelicals and atheists](#) or [between Republicans and Democrats](#), they may still matter.

[In a related 2022 study](#), we surveyed 1,000 adults living in rural, suburban and [urban areas](#) throughout Michigan, asking them how satisfied they were with their neighborhood. We found that child-free adults [were significantly less satisfied](#) with their neighborhoods than both married parents and people who were planning to become parents.

The strong in-group favoritism among parents might help explain why. Although we did not observe evidence that parents dislike child-free people, their strong preference for other parents could still lead them to inadvertently exclude their child-free neighbors. For example, when it's

time to plan a neighborhood event like a block party, parents may be more inclined to recruit other parents to help. This could lead child-free people feeling out of place in parent and child-focused neighborhoods.

When neighborhoods are focused on [parents](#) and children, as [commenters increasingly suggest they should be](#), they are often described as being "family-friendly." As a result, there are websites offering advice about how to find a family-friendly neighborhood. However, these neighborhoods may be more friendly toward some types of families than others.

With both [fertility](#) and [marriage](#) rates declining in the United States, the numbers of child-free people are likely to increase.

As this new family type becomes more common, it's important to rethink who neighborhoods are for and what it means for a neighborhood to be family-friendly. But it also means rethinking other areas of life too, including workplace [work-life balance policies](#) and [government tax credits](#).

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