

Family planning and the fear of missing out

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Keeping up with the Joneses—social envy—can push people toward things they might otherwise avoid, like buying a car they can't afford or building an extension they don't need.

It also might be a motivator for becoming a parent, a new Rutgers

University study finds.

Roughly one in every 14 parents in the United States, about 7%, say they wouldn't have children if they could do it over again. Rates of parental regret are even higher in parts of Europe, such as Germany (8%) and Poland (13.6%). One of the main reasons that regretful parents have children in the first place may be fear of missing out, more colloquially known as "FOMO."

"Why do you really want to have a child? What are your motivations?" said Kristina M. Scharp, an associate professor in the Rutgers School of Communication and Information and co-author of the [study](#) in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. "In the context of what it means to be a parent, FOMO could be a valuable consideration."

Parental regret is antithetical to how parents are expected to feel about their children. Social norms suggest that parents, and especially mothers, are "supposed to love their children unconditionally from conception to eternity," the researchers wrote.

To understand what moved regretful parents to start a family, the researchers collected narratives from Reddit's /r/childfree subreddit, an online community of 1.5 million child-free users. Moderators allow parents who express regret about having children to post to the subreddit, which has cataloged 85 such testimonies between 2011 and 2021.

Scharp and her colleagues coded the Reddit posts with items such as "investment of time" and "relationship sacrifices." Codes were then grouped into themes—such as "resource-intensive work"—which helped illuminate so-called discourses. Three discourses from regretful [parents](#) emerged: parenting as heaven; parenting as hell; and parenting as (the only) choice.

Finally, the researchers examined how these discourses interacted to guide decision making about having [children](#). What they found was a new, previously unconsidered, driver: FOMO.

The findings have broad implications for [family planning](#).

"By better understanding potential motivations for their actions, people might be more inclined to make value-concordant, autonomous reproductive decisions," the researchers wrote.

With access to abortion in the United States increasingly restricted, the potential for parental regret should be included in reproductive counseling services, they added.

"Because of [social norms](#), anyone who doesn't subscribe to dominant views on parenting gets marginalized or stigmatized," said Scharp. "Sometimes social norms are good: We know it's wrong to steal. But sometimes social norms have unintended consequences and punish people for their choices—including people who want to be child-free."

More information: Elizabeth A. Hintz et al, "I hate all the children, especially mine": Applying relational dialectics theory to examine the experiences of formerly childfree regretful parents, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/02654075231194363](https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075231194363)

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