

Most people would be equally satisfied with having one child as with two or three, finds research

February 15 2024, by Arnstein Aassve



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Picture your ideal family. Do you have children? How many?

It's fairly well established that when asked about their ideal family, people [tend to say](#) that [two children](#) is the best number to have. But this regularity has come about from asking the simple question: "Ideally, how many children would you like to have?".

But if two children really was the best number to have, surely most people would have two—but they don't. In South Korea, the average number of children is less than one per woman. In the US it's 1.64.

A huge number of studies have tried to figure out why this is—why there's a gap between the number of children people say they want, and how many they have. But it turns out we may have been asking the wrong questions.

When you take a different approach and ask people to rate different options of family life, you get a far more accurate idea of what people are happy with. [My research](#) with colleagues has done just this. I found that people still valued parenthood. But they valued having one child just as highly as having two or three.

Our paper is published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

Family values

A family isn't just about the number of children. There are a whole range of other things to consider when thinking about what your ideal family might look like. Are you married, cohabiting, or a single parent? Who does the washing up and changes the nappies? What does the work-life balance in your family look like?

When you bring in factors like this, the ideal number of children starts to change.

We carried out research with around 10,000 people in a range of countries: the US, Norway, Italy, Spain, Japan, China, South Korea and Singapore. We showed each person in the study six scenarios with descriptions of different families. Half of the respondents were shown scenarios that included families with no children as well as with children, and the other half saw scenarios that included families with one, two or three children.

These scenarios had further varying factors, such as traditional or egalitarian gender roles and the amount of contact with extended family. In some, family members communicated well, and not in others. We asked the people in our study to rate these different scenarios on a scale from one to ten.

The findings are clear. Looking at all the responses, overall people do feel that a family with no children is not ideal. Parenthood still matters. But there is no discernable difference in how people rated the families with one, two or three children.

The only outlier is China, where people viewed having three children somewhat negatively: understandable after decades of policies curbing fertility. Nowhere in our study was having just one child viewed more negatively.

Importance of communicating

What does come out very strongly is the role of communication, both within the nuclear family but also with grandparents. This characteristic is the most important feature of the ideal family of today.

If you think about it, this finding is not all too unexpected. Good communication means strong emotional support—and that is what most people would like to receive from a family. If communication breaks

down, then why bother with having a family if you can get the necessary support elsewhere through friends and other social networks?

Other features matter too—obviously. Respondents viewed low income negatively (apart from in Norway). More egalitarian gender roles and good [work-life balance](#) are important. But our findings, which are remarkably similar across different countries, show that good communication matters the most in people's vision for good family life—more than the number of [children](#) they might have.

More information: Arnstein Aassve et al, Family ideals in an era of low fertility, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2024). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2311847121](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2311847121)

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Most people would be equally satisfied with having one child as with two or three, finds research (2024, February 15) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-02-people-equally-child.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.