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All Joy and No Fun

Why parents hate parenting.

By [Jennifer Senior](#) Published Jul 4, 2010



*Pictured throughout are Harper; her husband, Christopher; and their twins, Nicholas and Marshall.
(Photo: Jessica Todd Harper)*

There was a day a few weeks ago when I found my 2½-year-old son sitting on our building doorstep, waiting for me to come home. He spotted me as I was rounding the corner, and the scene that followed was one of inexpressible loveliness, right out of the movie I'd played to myself before actually having a child, with him popping out of his babysitter's arms and barreling down the street to greet me. This happy moment, though, was about to be cut short, and in retrospect felt more like a tranquil lull in a slasher film. When I opened our apartment door, I discovered that my son had broken part of the wooden parking garage I'd spent about an hour assembling that morning. This wouldn't have been a problem per se, except that as I attempted to fix it, he grew impatient and began throwing its various parts at the walls, with one plank very narrowly missing my eye. I recited the rules of the house (no throwing, no hitting). He picked up another large wooden plank. I ducked. He reached for the screwdriver. The scene ended with a time-out in his crib.

As I shuffled back to the living room, I thought of something a friend once said about the Children's Museum of Manhattan—"a nice place, but what it *really* needs is a bar"—and rued how, at that moment, the same thing could be said of my apartment. Two hundred and 40 seconds earlier, I'd been in a state of pair-bonded bliss; now I was guided by nerves, trawling the cabinets for alcohol. My emotional life looks a

lot like this these days. I suspect it does for many parents—a high-amplitude, high-frequency sine curve along which we get the privilege of doing hourly surfs. Yet it's something most of us choose. Indeed, it's something most of us would say we'd be miserable without.

From the perspective of the species, it's perfectly unmysterious why people have children. From the perspective of the individual, however, it's more of a mystery than one might think. Most people assume that having children will make them happier. Yet a wide variety of academic research shows that parents are not happier than their childless peers, and in many cases are less so. This finding is surprisingly consistent, showing up across a range of disciplines. Perhaps the most oft-cited datum comes from a 2004 study by Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel Prize-winning behavioral economist, who surveyed 909 working Texas women and found that child care ranked sixteenth in pleasurability out of nineteen activities. (Among the endeavors they preferred: preparing food, watching TV, exercising, talking on the phone, napping, shopping, *housework*.) This result also shows up regularly in relationship research, with children invariably reducing marital satisfaction. The economist Andrew Oswald, who's compared tens of thousands of Britons with children to those without, is at least inclined to view his data in a more positive light: "The broad message is not that children make you less happy; it's just that children don't make you *more* happy." That is, he tells me, unless you have more than one. "Then the studies show a more negative impact." As a rule, most studies show that mothers are less happy than fathers, that single parents are less happy still, that babies and toddlers are the hardest, and that each successive child produces diminishing returns. But some of the studies are grimmer than others. Robin Simon, a sociologist at Wake Forest University, says parents are more depressed than nonparents no matter what their circumstances—whether they're single or married, whether they have one child or four.

The idea that parents are less happy than nonparents has become so commonplace in academia that it was big news last year when the *Journal of Happiness Studies* published a Scottish paper declaring the opposite was true. "Contrary to much of the literature," said the introduction, "our results are consistent with an effect of children on life satisfaction that is positive, large and increasing in the number of children." Alas, the euphoria was short-lived. A few months later, the poor author discovered a coding error in his data, and the publication ran an erratum. "After correcting the problem," it read, "the main results of the paper no longer hold. The effect of children on the life satisfaction of married individuals is small, often negative, and never statistically significant."

Yet one can see why people were rooting for that paper. The results of almost all the others violate a parent's deepest intuition. Daniel Gilbert, the Harvard psychologist and host of *This Emotional Life* on PBS, wrote fewer than three pages about compromised parental well-being in *Stumbling on Happiness*. But whenever he goes on the lecture circuit, skeptical questions about those pages come up more frequently than anything else. "I've never met anyone who didn't argue with me about this," he says. "Even people who believe the data say they feel sorry for those for whom it's true."



(Photo: Jessica Todd Harper)

So what, precisely, is going on here? Why is this finding duplicated over and over again despite the fact that most parents believe it to be wrong?

One answer could simply be that parents are deluded, in the grip of some false consciousness that's good for mankind but not for men and women in particular. Gilbert, a proud father and grandfather, would argue as much. He's made a name for himself showing that we humans are pretty sorry predictors of what will make us happy, and to his mind, the yearning for children, the literal mother of all aspirations for so many, is a very good case in point—what children *really* do, he suspects, is offer moments of transcendence, not an overall improvement in well-being.

Perhaps. But there are less fatalistic explanations, too. And high among them is the possibility that parents don't much enjoy parenting because the experience of raising children has fundamentally changed.

"I'm going to count to three."

It's a weekday evening, and the mother in this videotape, a trim brunette with her hair in a bun and glasses propped up on her head, has already worked a full day and made dinner. Now she is approaching her 8-year-old son, the oldest of two, who's seated at the computer in the den, absorbed in a movie. At issue is his homework, which he still hasn't done.

"One. Two ..."

This clip is from a study conducted by UCLA's Center on Everyday Lives of Families, which earned a front-page story in the *Sunday Times* this May and generated plenty of discussion among parents. In it, researchers collected 1,540 hours of footage of 32 middle-class, dual-earner families with at least two

children, all of them going about their regular business in their Los Angeles homes. The intention of this study was in no way to make the case that parents were unhappy. But one of the postdoctoral fellows who worked on it, himself a father of two, nevertheless described the video data to the *Times* as “the very purest form of birth control ever devised. Ever.”

“I have to get it to the part and then pause it,” says the boy.

“No,” says his mother. “You do that *after* you do your homework.”

Tamar Kremer-Sadlik, the director of research in this study, has watched this scene many times. The reason she believes it’s so powerful is because it shows how painfully parents experience the pressure of making their children do their schoolwork. They seem to feel this pressure even more acutely than their children feel it themselves.

The boy starts to shout. “It’s not going to take that long!”

His mother stops the movie. “I’m telling you no,” she says. “You’re not hearing me. I will *not* let you watch this now.”

He starts up the movie again.

“No,” she repeats, her voice rising. She places her hand firmly under her son’s arm and starts to yank. “I *will not* have this— ”

Before urbanization, children were viewed as economic assets to their parents. If you had a farm, they toiled alongside you to maintain its upkeep; if you had a family business, the kids helped mind the store. But all of this dramatically changed with the moral and technological revolutions of modernity. As we gained in prosperity, childhood came increasingly to be viewed as a protected, privileged time, and once college degrees became essential to getting ahead, children became not only a great expense but subjects to be sculpted, stimulated, instructed, groomed. (The Princeton sociologist Viviana Zelizer describes this transformation of a child’s value in five ruthless words: “Economically worthless but emotionally priceless.”) Kids, in short, went from being our staffs to being our bosses.

“Did you see *Babies?*” asks Lois Nachamie, a couples counselor who for years has run parenting workshops and support groups on the Upper West Side. She’s referring to the recent documentary that compares the lives of four newborns—one in Japan, one in Namibia, one in Mongolia, and one in the United States (San Francisco). “I don’t mean to idealize the lives of the Namibian women,” she says. “But it was hard not to notice how *calm* they were. They were beading their children’s ankles and decorating them with sienna, clearly enjoying just sitting and playing with them, and we’re here often thinking of all of this stuff as labor.”

This is especially true in middle- and upper-income families, which are far more apt than their working-class counterparts to see their children as projects to be perfected. (Children of women with bachelor degrees spend almost five hours on “organized activities” per week, as opposed to children of high-school dropouts, who spend two.) Annette Lareau, the sociologist who coined the term “concerted cultivation” to describe the aggressive nurturing of economically advantaged children, puts it this way: “Middle-class parents spend much more time talking to children, answering questions with questions, and

treating each child's thought as a special contribution. And this is very tiring *work*." Yet it's work few parents feel that they can in good conscience neglect, says Lareau, "lest they put their children at risk by not giving them every advantage."



(Photo: Jessica Todd Harper)

But the intensification of family time is not confined to the privileged classes alone. According to *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life*—a compendium of data porn about time use and family statistics, compiled by a trio of sociologists named Suzanne M. Bianchi, John P. Robinson, and Melissa A. Milkie—all parents spend more time today with their children than they did in 1975, including mothers, in spite of the great rush of women into the American workforce. Today's married mothers also have less leisure time (5.4 fewer hours per week); 71 percent say they crave more time for themselves (as do 57 percent of married fathers). Yet 85 percent of all parents still—still!—think they don't spend enough time with their children.

These self-contradictory statistics reminded me of a conversation I had with a woman who had been in one of Nachamie's parenting groups, a professional who had her children later in life. "I have two really great kids"—ages 9 and 11—"and I enjoy doing a lot of things with them," she told me. "It's the drudgery that's so hard: *Crap, you don't have any pants that fit?* There are just So. Many. Chores." This woman, it should be said, is divorced. But even if her responsibilities were shared with a partner, the churn of school and gymnastics and piano and sports and homework would still require an awful lot of administration. "The crazy thing," she continues, "is that by New York standards, I'm not even overscheduling them."

Mothers are less happy than fathers, single parents are less happy still.

I ask what she does on the weekends her ex-husband has custody. "I work," she replies. "And get my nails

done.”

A few generations ago, people weren't stopping to contemplate whether having a child would make them happy. Having children was simply what you did. And we are lucky, today, to have choices about these matters. But the abundance of choices—whether to have kids, when, how many—may be one of the reasons parents are less happy.

That was at least partly the conclusion of psychologists W. Keith Campbell and Jean Twenge, who, in 2003, did a meta-analysis of 97 children-and-marital-satisfaction studies stretching back to the seventies. Not only did they find that couples' overall marital satisfaction went down if they had kids; they found that every successive generation was more put out by having them than the last—our current one most of all. Even more surprisingly, they found that parents' dissatisfaction only grew the more money they had, even though they had the purchasing power to buy more child care. “And my hypothesis about why this is, in both cases, is the same,” says Twenge. “They become parents later in life. There's a loss of freedom, a loss of autonomy. It's totally different from going from your parents' house to immediately having a baby. Now you know what you're giving up.” (Or, as a fellow psychologist told Gilbert when he finally got around to having a child: “They're a huge source of joy, but they turn every other source of joy to shit.”)

It wouldn't be a particularly bold inference to say that the longer we put off having kids, the greater our expectations. “There's all this buildup—as soon as I get this done, I'm going to have a baby, and it's going to be a great reward!” says Ada Calhoun, the author of *Instinctive Parenting* and founding editor-in-chief of Babble, the online parenting site. “And then you're like, ‘Wait, *this* is my reward? This nineteen-year grind?’ ”

When people wait to have children, they're also bringing different sensibilities to the enterprise. They've spent their adult lives as professionals, believing there's a right way and a wrong way of doing things; now they're applying the same logic to the family-expansion business, and they're surrounded by a marketplace that only affirms and reinforces this idea. “And what's confusing about that,” says Alex Barzvi, a professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at NYU medical school, “is that there *are* a lot of things that parents can do to nurture social and cognitive development. There *are* right and wrong ways to discipline a child. But you can't fall into the trap of comparing yourself to others and constantly concluding you're doing the wrong thing.”

Yet that's precisely what modern parents do. “It was especially bad in the beginning,” said a woman who recently attended a parents' group led by Barzvi at the 92nd Street Y. “When I'd hear other moms saying, ‘Oh, so-and-so sleeps for twelve hours and naps for three,’ I'd think, *Oh, shit, I screwed up the sleep training.*” Her parents—immigrants from huge families—couldn't exactly relate to her distress. “They had no academic reference books for *sleeping*,” she says. (She's read three.) “To my parents, it is what it is.”

So how do they explain your anguish? I ask.

“They just think that Americans are a little too complicated about everything.”

One hates to invoke Scandinavia in stories about child-rearing, but it can't be an accident that the one superbly designed study that said, unambiguously, that having kids makes you happier was done with

Danish subjects. The researcher, Hans-Peter Kohler, a sociology professor at the University of Pennsylvania, says he originally studied this question because he was intrigued by the declining fertility rates in Europe. One of the things he noticed is that countries with stronger welfare systems produce more children—and happier parents.

Of course, this should not be a surprise. If you are no longer fretting about spending too little time with your children after they're born (because you have a year of paid maternity leave), if you're no longer anxious about finding affordable child care once you go back to work (because the state subsidizes it), if you're no longer wondering how to pay for your children's education and health care (because they're free)—well, it stands to reason that your own mental health would improve. When Kahneman and his colleagues did another version of his survey of working women, this time comparing those in Columbus, Ohio, to those in Rennes, France, the French sample enjoyed child care a good deal more than its American counterpart. “We've put all this energy into being perfect parents,” says Judith Warner, author of *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*, “instead of political change that would make family life better.”

MOMS: Ever feel alone in how you perceive this role? I swear I feel like I'm surrounded by women who were once smart & interesting but have become zombies who only talk about soccer and coupons.

This was an opening gambit on UrbanBaby this past April. It could have devolved into a sanctimommy pile-on. It didn't.

I totally feel this way.

I am a f/t wohm—Work Outside the Home Mom—have a career, and I don't feel smart or interesting anymore! I don't talk about soccer or coupons, but just feel too tired to talk about anything that interesting.

I freely admit that I have gained “more” than I have lost by becoming a parent, but I still miss aspects of my old life.

More generous government policies, a sounder economy, a less pressured culture that values good rather than perfect kids—all of these would certainly make parents happier. But even under the most favorable circumstances, parenting is an extraordinary activity, in both senses of the word *extra*: beyond ordinary and *especially* ordinary. While children deepen your emotional life, they shrink your outer world to the size of a teacup, at least for a while. (“All joy and no fun,” as an old friend with two young kids likes to say.) Lori Leibovich, the executive editor of Babble and the anthology *Maybe Baby*, a collection of 28 essays by writers debating whether to have children, says she was particularly struck by the female contributors who'd made the deliberate choice to remain childless. It enabled them to travel or live abroad for their work; to take physical risks; to, in the case of a novelist, inhabit her fictional characters without being pulled away by the demands of a real one. “There was a richness and texture to their work lives that was so, so enviable,” she says. (Leibovich has two children.)

Fathers, it turns out, feel like they've made some serious compromises too, though of a different sort. They feel like they don't see their kids *enough*. “In our studies, it's the men, by a long shot, who have more work-life conflict than women,” says Ellen Galinsky, president of the Families and Work Institute. “They

don't want to be stick figures in their children's lives."

And couples probably pay the dearest price of all. Healthy relationships definitely make people happier. But children adversely affect relationships. As Thomas Bradbury, a father of two and professor of psychology at UCLA, likes to say: "Being in a good relationship is a risk factor for becoming a parent." He directs me to one of the more inspired studies in the field, by psychologists Lauren Papp and E. Mark Cummings. They asked 100 long-married couples to spend two weeks meticulously documenting their disagreements. Nearly 40 percent of them were about their kids.

"And that 40 percent is merely the number that was explicitly about kids, I'm guessing, right?" This is a former patient of Nachamie's, an entrepreneur and father of two. "How many other arguments were those couples having because everyone was on a short fuse, or tired, or stressed out?" This man is very frank about the strain his children put on his marriage, especially his firstborn. "I already felt neglected," he says. "In my mind, anyway. And once we had the kid, it became so pronounced; it went from zero to negative 50. And I was like, *I can deal with zero. But not negative 50.*"

This is the brutal reality about children—they're such powerful stressors that small perforations in relationships can turn into deep fault lines. "And my wife became more demanding," he continues. "'You don't do this, you don't do that.' There was this idea we had about how things were supposed to be: *The family should be dot dot dot, the man should be dot dot dot the woman should be dot dot dot.*"

This is another brutal reality about children: They expose the gulf between our fantasies about family and its spikier realities. They also mean parting with an old way of life, one with more freewheeling rhythms and richer opportunities for romance. "There's nothing sexy or intimate between us, based on the old model," he says. "The new model, which I've certainly come to adopt, is that our energy has shifted toward the kids. One of the reasons I love being with my wife is because I love the family we have."

Studies have found that parents' dissatisfaction only grew the more money they had, even though they could buy more child care.

Most studies show that marriages improve once children enter latency, or the ages between 6 and 12, though they take another sharp dive during the war zone of adolescence. (As a friend with grown children once told me: "Teenagers can be casually brutal.") But one of the most sobering declines documented in *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life* is the amount of time married parents spend alone together each week: Nine hours today versus twelve in 1975. Bradbury, who was involved in the UCLA study of those 32 families, says the husbands and wives spent less than 10 percent of their home time alone together. "And do you think they were saying, 'Gee honey, you look lovely. I just wanted to pick up on that fascinating conversation we were having earlier about the Obama administration?'" he asks. "Nope. They were exhausted and staring at the television."

"I'm not watching it," insists the boy. We're back to the videotape now, and that den in Los Angeles. Mother and son are still arguing—tensely, angrily—and she's still pulling on his arm. The boy reaches for the keyboard. "I'm putting it on pause!"

“I want you to do your homework,” his mother repeats. “You are not— ”

“I know,” the son whines. “I’m going to pause it!”

His mother’s not buying it. What she sees is him stalling. She pulls him off the chair.

“No, you’re *not*,” says his mother. “You’re still not listening!”

“*Yes I am!*”

“No, you’re not!”

Children may provide unrivaled moments of joy. But they also provide unrivaled moments of frustration, tedium, anxiety, heartbreak. This scene, which isn’t even all that awful or uncommon, makes it perfectly clear why parenting may be regarded as less fun than having dinner with friends or baking a cake. Loving one’s children and loving the act of parenting are not the same thing.

Yet that’s where things get tricky. Obviously, this clip shows how difficult and unpleasant parenting can be. What it doesn’t show is the love this mother feels for her son, which we can pretty much bet has no equal. Nor does it convey that this unpleasant task she’s undertaking is part of a larger project, one that pays off in subtler dividends than simply having fun. Kremer-Sadlik says that she and her fellow researchers were highly conscious of these missing pieces when they gathered each week to discuss their data collection. “We’d all remember the negative things,” she says. “Whereas everything else was between the lines. So it became our moral dilemma: How can we talk about the good moments?” She pauses, and then asks the question that, to a parent (she herself has two children), is probably most relevant of all: “And why were the good moments so elusive?”

The answer to that may hinge on how we define “good.” Or more to the point, “happy.” Is happiness something you *experience*? Or is it something you *think*?

When Kahneman surveyed those Texas women, he was measuring moment-to-moment happiness. It was a feeling, a mood, a state. The technique he pioneered for measuring it—the Daily Reconstruction Method—was designed to make people reexperience their feelings over the course of a day. Oswald, when looking at British households, was looking at a condensed version of the General Health Questionnaire, which is best described as a basic gauge of mood: *Have you recently felt you could not overcome your difficulties? Felt constantly under strain? Lost much sleep over worry?* (What parent hasn’t answered, yes, yes, and God yes to these questions?) As a matter of mood, there does seem to be little question that kids make our lives more stressful.

But when studies take into consideration how *rewarding* parenting is, the outcomes tend to be different. Last year, Mathew P. White and Paul Dolan, professors at the University of Plymouth and Imperial College, London, respectively, designed a study that tried to untangle these two different ideas. They asked participants to rate their daily activities both in terms of pleasure and in terms of reward, then plotted the results on a four-quadrant graph. What emerged was a much more commonsense map of our feelings. In the quadrant of things people found both pleasurable *and* rewarding, people chose volunteering first, prayer second, and time with children third (though time with children barely made it into the

“pleasurable” category). Work was the most rewarding not-so-pleasurable activity. Everyone thought commuting was both unrewarding and unfun. And watching television was considered one of the most pleasurable unrewarding activities, as was eating, though the least rewarding of all was plain old “relaxing.” (Which probably says something about the abiding power of the Protestant work ethic.)

Seven years ago, the sociologists Kei Nomaguchi and Melissa A. Milkie did a study in which they followed couples for five to seven years, some of whom had children and some of whom did not. And what they found was that, yes, those couples who became parents did more housework and felt less in control and quarreled more (actually, only the women thought they quarreled more, but anyway). On the other hand, the married women were *less depressed* after they’d had kids than their childless peers. And perhaps this is because the study sought to understand not just the moment-to-moment moods of its participants, but more existential matters, like how connected they felt, and how motivated, and how much despair they were in (as opposed to how much stress they were under): *Do you not feel like eating? Do you feel like you can’t shake the blues? Do you feel lonely? Like you can’t get going?* Parents, who live in a clamorous, perpetual-forward-motion machine almost all of the time, seemed to have different answers than their childless cohorts.

The authors also found that the most depressed people were single fathers, and Milkie speculates that perhaps it’s because they wanted to be involved in their children’s lives but weren’t. Robin Simon finds something similar: The least depressed parents are those whose underage children are in the house, and the most are those whose aren’t.

This finding seems significant. Technically, if parenting makes you unhappy, you should feel *better* if you’re spared the task of doing it. But if happiness is measured by our own sense of agency and meaning, then noncustodial parents lose. They’re robbed of something that gives purpose and reward.

When I mention this to Daniel Gilbert, he hardly disputes that meaning is important. But he does wonder how prominently it should figure into people’s decisions to have kids. “When you pause to *think* what children mean to you, of course they make you feel good,” he says. “The problem is, 95 percent of the time, you’re not thinking about what they mean to you. You’re thinking that you have to take them to piano lessons. So you have to think about which kind of happiness you’ll be consuming most often. Do you want to maximize the one you experience almost all the time”—moment-to-moment happiness—“or the one you experience rarely?”

Which is fair enough. But for many of us, purpose *is* happiness—particularly those of us who find moment-to-moment happiness a bit elusive to begin with. Martin Seligman, the positive-psychology pioneer who is, famously, not a natural optimist, has always taken the view that happiness is best defined in the ancient Greek sense: leading a productive, purposeful life. And the way we take stock of that life, in the end, isn’t by how much fun we had, but what we did with it. (Seligman has seven children.)

About twenty years ago, Tom Gilovich, a psychologist at Cornell, made a striking contribution to the field of psychology, showing that people are far more apt to regret things they *haven’t* done than things they have. In one instance, he followed up on the men and women from the Terman study, the famous collection of high-IQ students from California who were singled out in 1921 for a life of greatness. Not one told him of regretting having children, but ten told him they regretted not having a family.

“I think this boils down to a philosophical question, rather than a psychological one,” says Gilovich. “Should you value moment-to-moment happiness more than retrospective evaluations of your life?” He says he has no answer for this, but the example he offers suggests a bias. He recalls watching TV with his children at three in the morning when they were sick. “I wouldn’t have said it was too fun at the time,” he says. “But now I look back on it and say, ‘Ah, remember the time we used to wake up and watch cartoons?’” The very things that in the moment dampen our moods can later be sources of intense gratification, nostalgia, delight.

It’s a lovely magic trick of the memory, this gilding of hard times. Perhaps it’s just the necessary alchemy we need to keep the species going. But for parents, this sleight of the mind and spell on the heart is the very definition of enchantment.