

Parenting can't bring you happiness

But what it brings to your life is much more than that, shares a mother

■ By Pamela Haag

A few decades ago, children were 'just there', and something that almost every adult was expected to have. Since it was considered unavoidable, no one asked whether they augmented overall happiness or wellbeing. Even in the United States, it was a powerful expectation just 60 years ago that marriage came with children, and child-free couples were very much the suspicious exception.

It's obvious, at least in my mind, that having a choice about parenthood, and choosing parenthood, is indisputably better than not having it. But as it always happens when we have alternate options, we try to discern and make the best choice, we measure. We do brand comparison. We shop around to see what our options are. We do what can be described as 'lifestyle comparison shopping.' And we suddenly have research studies suggesting that parenthood diminishes marital happiness, and even happiness overall. Other, more pragmatic studies that produce horrifying bottom-line estimates of how much money a child will cost from birth through college, probably send many an undecided couple back to the pharmacist for their less expensive birth control.

Right answer, wrong question

There's a luxury simply in asking the question whether marriages with children are happier, since the question assumes that children have, or should have, an emotional benefit and dividend. Besides these studies use the most slippery metric for parenthood—happiness. The question also reflects the unsentimental reality that children no longer have the economic utility that they once had. The social safety net takes care of us in old age, children aren't expected to help out on the farms that we no longer own, and they don't go out to contribute wages to the family coffers when they turn 12. To put things in the most unsentimental, blunt terms, what is a child 'good' for, now, in the global middle class, except to provide a more emotional and existential fulfillment?

I think this is absolutely the right answer to absolutely the wrong question.

It's the right answer, because the conditions of modern parenthood would logically diminish our happiness dividend. With parental choice comes the agony and ecstasy of having choice. We acquire all the potential for analysis



Pamela Haag, PhD is an award winning writer, cultural critic and commentator who's work spans a wide, and unusual, spectrum, all the way from academic scholarship to memoirs. In her critically acclaimed book *Marriage Confidential: Love in the Post-Romantic Age*, she gives a riveting glimpse of what the future of marriage might look like. You can read more about her work at www.pamelahaag.com

paralysis, buyer's remorse, fears, and second-guessing. We no longer have the fatalistic nonchalance of our parents' generation. When we do opt to have children, we're also more likely to pour every effort into making good on that choice. We 'invest' in the process, and aim for perfect outcomes. Sometimes this results in notorious hyper-parenting and helicopter parenting, when you constantly hover around your children doing everything and anything for them, as if once you're a parent, you can only be a parent. The fashion of hyper-parenting isn't a recipe for mental wellbeing or happiness. Instead, it can make for exhaustion, anxiety, and frustration when, invariably, children prove to have lives and minds of their own, that weren't entirely in our control to begin with.

In this sense, the research resonates with my observations that parenthood might not make you happier. While I agree with the answer, I disagree with the question. If it's advisable, or possible, to put the calipers to parenthood, then 'happiness' isn't the most pertinent emotion to measure.

The complete picture

"To be a parent is to suffer," a therapist friend of mine says. But he meant that in a contented way. There's a happy masochism to the exercise. The stream of potential worry—and suffering—of parenthood is always there. Our children's small heartbreaks, to say nothing of the larger ones, break our hearts too. That same therapist says wisely that although all of the millions of moments, details and responsibilities of parenthood might not make us happy, the overall experience so often satisfies, through a mysterious arithmetic where the sum exceeds the parts.

In this sense, parenthood reminds me of a pointillist painting from the 1800s: Up close, in the details, it doesn't look like as much. Sometimes you can't even discern the benefits or the value of what you're doing as a parent. Is anything sinking in? Does this routine help, or is it all futile? Especially with a baby, it can be a series of sometimes monotonous, sometimes tedious days. When you step back, however, the painting looks like something—not only that, it looks charming and beautiful. It has substance, structure and theme.

For better or worse

In her astonishingly brilliant novel 'We Need to Talk About Kevin', which describes a worst case scenario of parenthood [child is born somewhat psychopathic, destroys your life,

and executes a mass killing in his high school after murdering your husband and daughter], author Lionel Shriver writes that the 'modern incentives' to have children are 'like dirigibles—immense, floating, and few; large-hearted, even profound, but ominously ungrounded.' She might have added that those reasons are like dirigibles because they're 'full of hot air.' The greeting-card version of parenthood promises things that it doesn't deliver. But, all the while, parenthood delivers unanticipated things of more complex, unpredictable, and deeper beauty.

I'm not an extraordinary parent. I'm an earnest, well-intentioned, and most likely mediocre one. But even I, an unsentimental person by nature, think children bring to your life and your marriage something more profoundly consoling and pleasingly solid than happiness—something to die for, a place in the world that's fixed and unchanged, the capacity to have your heart broken and repaired. Parenthood gives you a 100 opportunities to be consequential each day, to make a right move—or sometimes a misstep—that matters to someone, even if it's a small thing.

A useful thing about these studies is that they puncture a sentimental illusion about parenthood that can be quite damaging—the myth that, generically, parenthood or marriage 'should' make us feel a particular way. There's nothing wrong with feeling ambivalent about marriage and parenthood [it's probably inevitable], so long as that feeling can be acknowledged, named, and managed. Any relationship as formidable and intense as parenthood is likely to elicit a whole range of feelings, of children toward parents, and parents toward children.

When ambivalent and moodier feelings fester in secrecy, however, and go underground, they can generate parental guilt or feelings of distance, failure, self-recrimination, and hopelessness. At that point, the myths that we shouldn't feel ambivalent about parenthood, or should aspire for an impossible perfection, can be damaging, indeed, to both parent and child.

Children may not consistently make us happier in quantifiable ways, but in my experience they make us more alive, and in my opinion feeling more alive is better than feeling 'more' happy.



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