

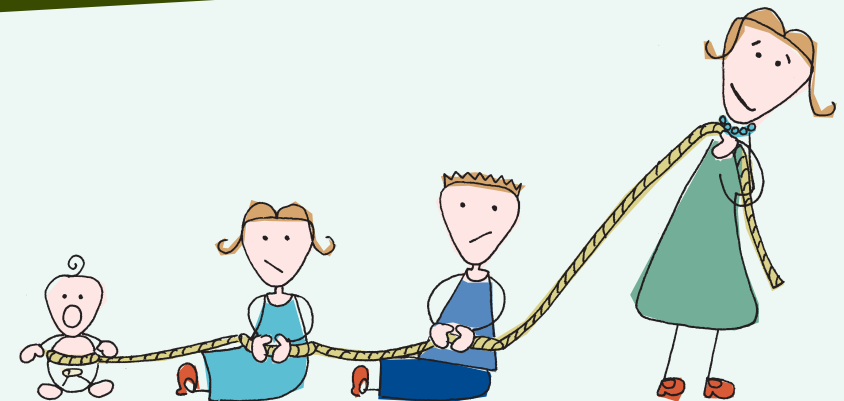
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The Family Report 2003:

Choosing Happiness?

A report commissioned by Lever Fabergé and researched and written by
Kate Stanley, Laura Edwards and Becky Hatch and on behalf of ippr trading ltd



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Foreword



by Keith Weed, Chairman, Lever Fabergé Ltd

'To make cleanliness commonplace; to lessen work for women; to foster health and contribute to personal attractiveness, that life may be more enjoyable and rewarding for the people who use our products.'

It is more than a hundred years since William Hesketh Lever, one of Lever Fabergé's founding fathers, first mapped out his company's mission. Today his words have lost none of their relevance.

As a company with brands such as Persil, Dove and Lynx our future depends on meeting the everyday needs of people. To do that we need to understand their lives, their aspirations and the daily pressures of life.

As such, the Lever Fabergé Family Report mirrors in the wider world the work carried out inside our business each and every day. The report seeks to shed some light on the evolving nature of the British family and the dynamics that are driving change.

Last year the study examined the prospect of Lifelong Parenting unearthing genuine insight into the arrival of the 'Boomerang Kid', where 20-something children - particularly boys - are living at home for longer and returning to the nest more often.

This year's research examines the relationship between happiness and children. It offers new understanding as to why people are delaying parenthood and debunks the myth that women without children become desperate for children as they get older.

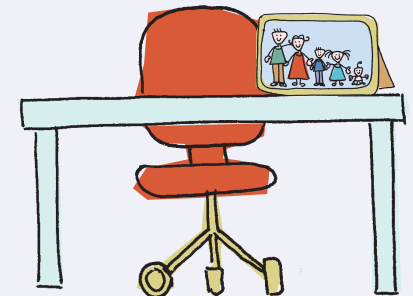
The findings show how people try to offset some of the lifestyle sacrifices that children inevitably bring. They give further support to the notion of 'consumption smoothing' as would-be parents seek to build an income which is large enough to minimise the impact of children on their consumption patterns.

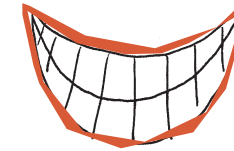
The research creates greater understanding as to why women in particular are choosing to have children later and consequently, why families are getting smaller. The feeling amongst women of a 'mother tax' whereby income, career and lifestyle are all impacted by children is especially salient.

Within the findings there are significant implications for society, helping to explain at least some of the reasons behind falling birth rates and the changing demographic shape of the UK.

These are big issues. For us at Lever Fabergé there are potential ramifications for our brands, retailers, the people who buy our products and of course, our own employees.

We hope this report makes an insightful contribution to what is becoming a pressing debate that will touch us all.





What role do children play in our happiness?

This report examines the relationship between happiness and having children. Over the last thirty years people in Britain have become more affluent but have not become much happier. Over the same period the birth rate has declined. We know that family has an important part to play in happiness¹ but whether the fact that we are having fewer children is in turn connected to how happy we are is unclear. To explore this connection we held a series of focus groups and conducted a survey of 1,500 men and women across Britain.

The decisions we make about when and if we have children are important for individuals and for wider society. These decisions have significant social and economic impacts. The low birth rate in Britain, for example, has contributed to an ageing population. An understanding of these decisions can enable society better to respond to such impacts.

Happiness is...

Happiness is a subjective measure of human welfare, in this report we use it to mean feeling good and enjoying life. **In 2001, almost 90 per cent of British people reported that they were very or fairly satisfied with life².** More British women reported being very happy than men.

The link between children and happiness, however, is little explored. **International survey data on happiness indicates that children have a statistically insignificant impact on our happiness.** This report begins to dig beneath this apparent ambivalence.



Mixed Blessings

The relationship between children and happiness is complex. Children can make their parents both happy and unhappy. Parents in our survey were quick to attribute much of their happiness to their children, although mothers (66 per cent) were significantly more likely to state that their children made them happy than fathers (41 per cent). This is despite the fact that the most acute trade-offs tend to be experienced by women.

However, parents in our study recognised that children had the capacity to make them unhappy too. Fathers tended to point to the difficulties of parenting, mothers to a range of negative impacts such as putting ambitions on hold. Children also have a significant impact on relationships which play a key part in our happiness. Having children can bind couples together yet can equally cause anxiety and strain. Despite these issues parents were quick to affirm that they had no regrets. This was particularly true for mothers, who would joke about the sacrifices they had made, as if to dismiss them.

Those without children can see children as a threat to their lifestyle, finances and relationships and, therefore, happiness. But at the same time they often consider children a natural progression, and an unfulfilled desire for a child can be all-consuming and lead to high levels of unhappiness.

It is important to note that **90 per cent of our survey sample either wanted or had children.** Nonetheless, one in five women in their thirties did not have children and of these women, half didn't want children in the future. One in three men in their thirties didn't have children and of these men, 30 per cent didn't want children in the future.

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Summary

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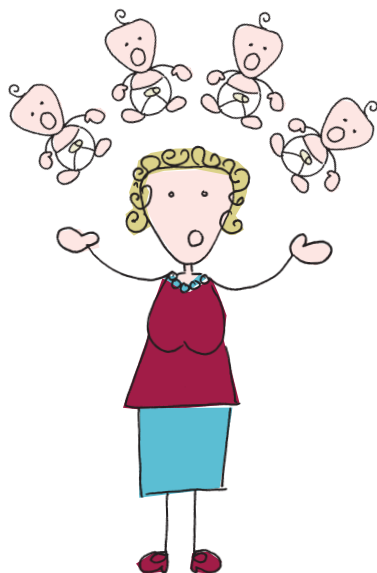
³ Equal Opportunities Commission 2003:1
⁴ Harkness & Waldfogel 1999
⁵ Lutz 2001
⁶ Rendall & Smallwood 2003
⁷ Ibid
⁸ Kohler et al 2002
⁹ Ibid



The trade-offs

In our focus groups there was a strong sense that **women have to make more fundamental changes to their lives when having children than men**. They often move from full-time employment to part-time employment or to being a full-time mother. Whilst some participants commented on the progress that had been made towards child-friendly policies in workplaces, others reported deeply entrenched stereotypes and voiced concerns about the incompatibility of having children and maintaining employment.

Our qualitative evidence strongly indicated the persistence of traditional gender roles in families with children. All the parent participants reported that the mother was the primary carer of their children and that she worked less than her partner (where she had one). Many women had very low expectations of the contribution that they could expect from their partners. **The majority of women assumed that they would substantially reduce their working hours and take on a larger share of the childcare if they had children or did in the future.**



Many of the men we spoke to agreed women generally have the more difficult parenting role and that men are 'getting away with not changing that much', as this man suggested:

'I think it affects women much more... it didn't really affect me that much but my wife's life changed completely.'

(Male with children)

The mother 'tax'

The British labour market is characterised by large wage penalties for having children. Full-time female workers earn on average 18.8 per cent less than the average hourly earnings of their male counterparts³. In addition, mothers tend to work in low-paid, part-time jobs and even full-time working mothers are lower paid relative to women without children⁴. As a result the income lost when a woman has children can be substantial.

In our survey, **33 per cent of women in their twenties without children feared the impact of having a child on their career and 42 per cent feared the impact on their finances if they had a child before the age of 30**. Their fears appeared to be borne out by the experiences of those women who did have children in their twenties, of

whom 25 per cent cited missing out on a career or putting their working life on hold as a disadvantage of having children before the age of 30.

The increase in women's education and work life planning is one of the key explanations for women now choosing to have children later than they have done in the past⁵. In 2001, in Britain mothers were, on average, aged 29.3 years at the time of first birth⁶. This means that the average age at first birth was two and a half years older than it was twenty years earlier⁷. Furthermore, one of the key explanations for the declining birth rate is that the older the age of a woman at first birth, the fewer the total number of children she will have⁸.

The average age of first birth is five years later for women with higher educational qualifications than it is for those without⁹. **This has led to some discernible class differences between the age of becoming a mother with women in lower socio-economic groups tending to have children at a younger age than those in higher groups** as in our survey sample.

We found that women in particular face considerable trade-offs between employment and childbirth and the

precise nature of these trade-offs differ depending on the time at which they occur. If a woman has a child in her twenties this is more likely to lead to trade-offs in terms of her work life development and consequently, her income. If a woman has a child in her thirties this is more likely to lead to trade-offs in terms of her income – and because her income is likely to be higher by then, the actual loss is more substantial. There is nothing inevitable about these trade-offs or that it should be women who face them, but the impact of children on work life and income was unquestionably greater for women in our study.

Consumption smoothing

One of the reasons people are having fewer children is because of their desire to have enough income to be able to afford to have a child without having to forgo other consumption they deem essential, this is known as 'consumption smoothing'. Many people do not want children to cause a significant blip in their consumption patterns:

'You don't want a child to take away the lifestyle you've got.'

(Male without children)





Our survey found that **people in their thirties without children were likely to be more financially stable and able to support a child but paradoxically appeared to be more concerned with the potential impact of having a child on their income and lifestyle.** This desire to minimise the impact of children on quality of life – symbolised by spending and consumption habits – has an impact on those with and without children. It can hold people back from having another child or can mean those without children delay having them.

Planning without control

In our survey, one in five people in their thirties without children who wanted children in the future, were not sure when they would have them.

Children seem to exist as something on the medium term horizon, even well into people's thirties. This may be because there is nothing irreversible about delaying childbirth, so long as it is not delayed beyond biological limits. This flexibility in decision-making is in sharp contrast to the commitment to parenthood, which is irreversible once a child is born¹⁰.

Our study identified **a hope among those who have children later that they can secure the right time, relationship and financial circumstances to accommodate a child and keep their consumption 'smooth'.** However, more planning doesn't necessarily lead to more control, not least because planning is difficult if you don't have a partner with whom you want to have a child or who doesn't want children. Delaying childbirth can reduce some of the uncertainties about finances and the stability of a relationship, yet **the decision about whether or not to have children does not seem to become any easier the longer it is left:**

'I worry that I'd regret having children and I worry that I'd regret not having children.'

(Male without children)

The with or without divide

Children have a big impact on the lives and happiness of their parents. The impact is such that the views and experiences of those with and without children can stand in stark contrast. Parents may find their lives out of step with those of their peers and colleagues without children, they may be less able to go out socialising, they must negotiate a balance between

work, home and childcare and their spending priorities must now incorporate the needs of their children.

Our research shows that **those with and without children appear to value different things in life and give different accounts of happiness,** which was acknowledged by some participants:

'I'm not happier, just different...it's just a different happiness.'

(Female with children)

There were traces of resentment on both sides. **Many with children felt that having children makes you a nicer person.** Those without children sometimes felt defensive, as if their lives were judged as less worthwhile. Some felt that parents were given preferential treatment, for example, over Christmas holiday leave. In turn parents were at times envious of the lifestyle and material affluence of their friends without children who had money and time to socialise and travel.

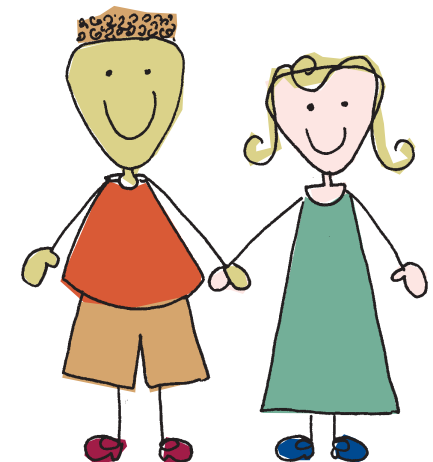
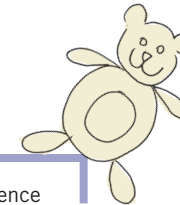
Implications for the future

This is a large and complex area of research. Our study shows that most people still want and have children and most people are pretty happy. You can be happy with or without children,

though the happiness you experience may be derived from different sources. Children bring joy but that joy can be diminished by the trade-offs and penalties parents experience for having them. Given that women tend to face the most acute trade-offs when having children, it is notable that they nonetheless still derive significant happiness from them.

But if we want to be happier – which surely we do – it would make sense to focus on how we can ease these penalties, particularly for women who tend to experience them most acutely. This means trying to minimise the negative impacts of having children and maximising the potential for them to have a positive impact.

There is a role for public policy to help people fulfil their ambitions, including their desire to have children and be happy. Some suggestions include: providing good quality and accessible childcare, supporting working mothers and fathers, supporting parents in their role and providing financial support for parents, particularly those struggling on low incomes.



Introduction

¹¹ For full details of the focus groups and polling see www.leverfaberge.co.uk



‘People in the West have got no happier in the last 50 years. They have become much richer, they work much less, they have longer holidays, they travel more, they live longer, and they are healthier. But they are no happier. This shocking fact should be the starting point for much of our social science.’

(Layard 2003)



In this study we seek to describe the relationship between happiness and having children. Over the last thirty years people in Britain have become more affluent but we have not become much happier. Over the same period the birth rate has declined. We know family has an important part to play in creating happiness but whether the fact that we are having fewer children is in turn connected to our happiness is unclear.



To address this question we explored people’s thinking on happiness and children. We wanted to know why are we having fewer children and what role do children play in our happiness? These are important questions for individuals with implications for the way we live our lives. They also have implications for wider society and for public policy because decisions about having children have significant social and economic impacts. Notably, the low birth rate in Britain has contributed to an ageing population. In 2001, people aged over 60 outnumbered children for the first time. This has implications, for example, for the ability of a smaller working age population to support a bigger pensioner population. An understanding of why people are having fewer children and the role of children in making us happy would enable public policy better to respond to these challenges.

Our study is an initial exploration into this potentially large and significant area. The findings are offered as a contribution to the wider discussion about the happiness of citizens and family life in Britain.

This report is based on original quantitative and qualitative research undertaken in August and September 2003. We carried out a series of eight focus groups and a survey of 1,500 men and women aged 20 to 40 across Britain¹¹. We have set our findings in the context of existing evidence and analysis on demographics and happiness.

In section one, we describe how happiness can be measured and the comparatively high level of happiness in Britain. In section two, we consider the relationship between children and happiness by looking at how they affect different aspects of life from relationships to work to consumption and people’s attitudes towards planning children. Finally, we look at the divide between those who do have children and those who do not. In section three, we examine the implications of the findings set out in section two and make some suggestions how we might respond to them.



Section one: measuring happiness



¹² Most notably through the World Values Survey and the Eurobarometer Survey Series. This data will be referred to as the international survey data in this report

¹³ See Blanchflower & Oswald 2002 for a fuller discussion of the strengths and limitations of the data

¹⁴ Layard 2003

¹⁵ For example, see Shao 1993 referenced in Layard 2003

A. Happiness is...

Happiness is a subjective measure of human welfare. In this report we use it to mean feeling good and enjoying life. Conversely, we take unhappiness to mean feeling bad and wishing things were different. The terms 'life satisfaction' or 'well-being' are sometimes used to describe similar feelings.

Survey data on happiness has been collected across many countries since the 1970s¹². This gives us a strong sense of the levels of happiness in different countries over time and of the different factors and life experiences that affect happiness. The questions used to measure a person's overall happiness tend to be along the lines of: "Taken all together, how happy would you say you are: very happy, quite happy, not very happy, not at all happy?"



This survey data is considered to be robust for a number of reasons¹³. Firstly, there is a strong correlation between the results of happiness surveys and other questionnaires used to measure people's self-reported psychological health or mental stress. Friends, partners and relatives also tend to judge the subject's happiness to be similar to the self-reported measure and those who reply that they are fairly or very happy tend to display happiness in other behaviour such as more genuine smiles. Neuro-science has further shown that the feelings people report, such as happiness, are reflected in a corresponding physical event that can be objectively measured and behaves accurately over time. This indicates that happiness rises and falls over time in the same way as say, blood pressure¹⁴.

It has been suggested that happiness might have different meanings in different languages. However, research has indicated that linguistic differences do not account for the marked national differences in happiness that have been found to exist between different countries¹⁵. It has further been suggested that one individual's concept of happiness might not be comparable to another's. This is quite possible, however, the very large sample sizes used in the surveys help to minimise the risk of such a possibility substantially distorting results. Perhaps most importantly of all, the happiness survey data draws credibility from the high level of correlation it shows between the same life events and levels of happiness across different people, confirming it can be compared between people.

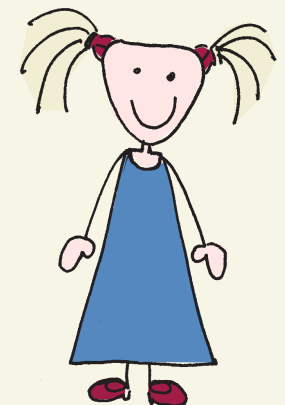


fig.1 Graph to show reported happiness in Britain, 1973 - 2001



Source: Eurobarometer 2001

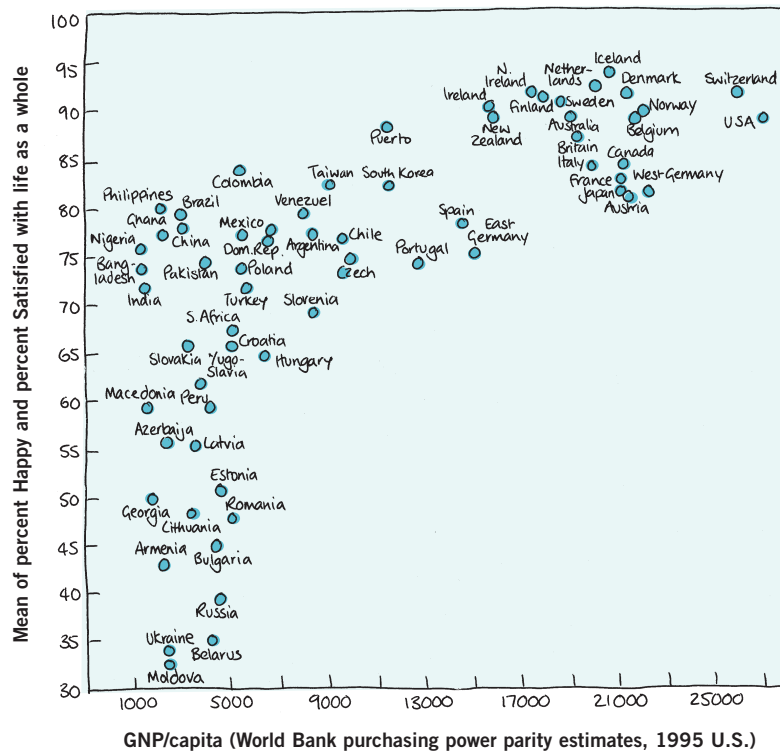


B. Happiness around the world

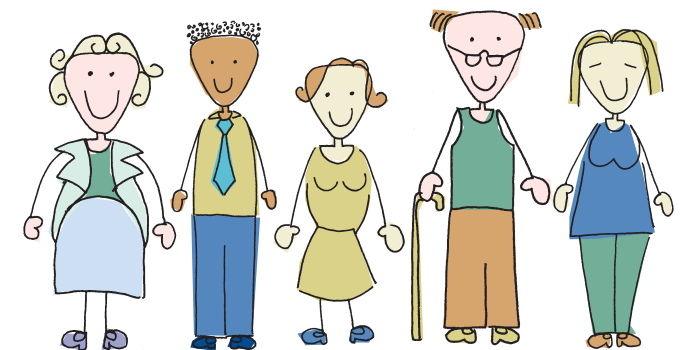
In Britain and many other Western countries levels of happiness are high and have been either stable or risen slightly over the last 30 years (see figure 1). In 2001, the British reported on average a higher level of happiness than the European average with almost 90 per cent of British people reporting that they were satisfied or fairly satisfied with life¹⁶. More British women than men reported being very happy.

Most poor countries have lower levels of happiness than richer nations (see figure 2). However, it is important to note that the positive relationship between the prosperity of a country and the happiness of its population appears to break down once Gross Domestic Product (GDP) reaches a certain point (roughly the level of prosperity Britain reached in the 1950s). Levels of happiness have not risen commensurately with the large increases in GDP in Western nations over the last 30 years. There are many possible explanations for this, including the powerful influence of other factors on happiness. We discuss the importance of a range of these factors on happiness in section two and in particular we consider how these things relate to children.

fig.2 Graph to show reported happiness in different countries compared to income per head in US dollars



Source: World Values Survey using latest year available 1990 or 1995/6



Section two: children and happiness



A. Do we think children make us happy?

‘The family is the most decisive shaper of well being and happiness, the place where our essential humanity – our capacity to reproduce and to be part of the chain of life – finds its purest expression.’

(Mulgan 1998)

The link between children and happiness is little explored. The international survey data on happiness shows that children have a statistically insignificant impact on our happiness. According to this data, whether or not we have children does not correlate with whether or not we are happy.

This is a new area of study, however, and we are only just beginning to understand and build evidence on what makes us happy and the role of children in this needs further investigation. This research begins to unpack some of the attitudes and thinking that underpin how people think and feel about children and what impact children have on the lives of their parents.

Underpinning any research into this area must be the understanding that the majority of people want to have children. Only 11 per cent of our survey sample of people in their twenties and nine per cent of our sample of people in their thirties explicitly did not want children. The majority of people still want children, and the majority of people still have children.

See *fig.3.1* and *fig.3.2*

A starting point is our survey data based on interviews with a representative sample of 1,500 men and women in their twenties and thirties including people with and without children. Respondents were asked ‘What gives you most happiness in your life?’

See *fig.4*

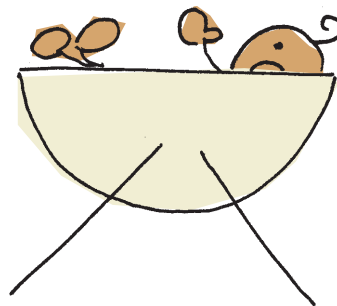


fig.3.1 People in their twenties who had, wanted or did not want children in our survey

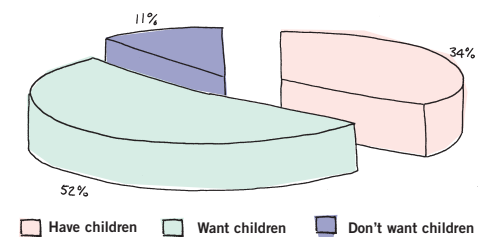


fig.3.2 People in their thirties who had, wanted or did not want children in our survey

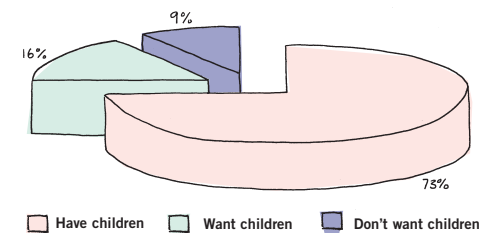
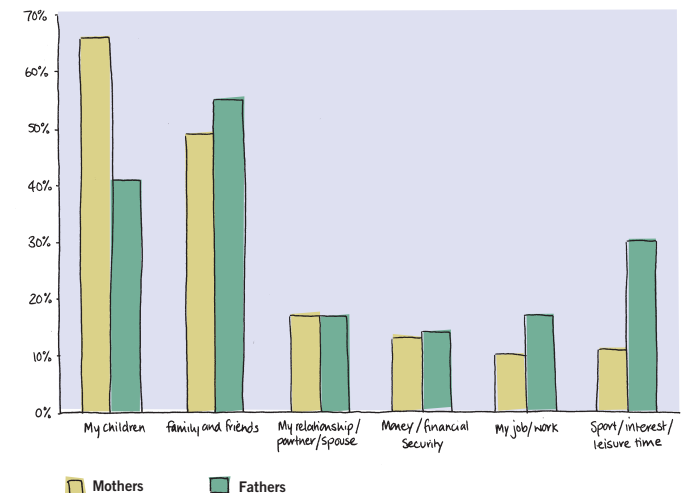
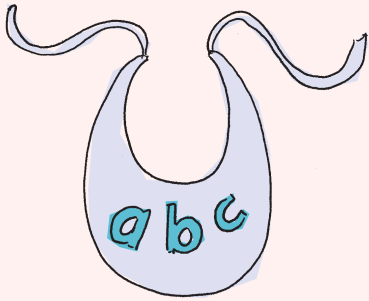


fig.4 Parents responses to the question ‘what gives you most happiness in your life?’





It is important to remember that what we say makes us happy is interpretative and in part conditioned by social norms. It is possible that parents feel that there is an expectation that they should put their children at the top of their list.

There was a gender divide evident in the views of mothers and fathers. **Mothers were significantly more likely to state that their children make them happy than fathers.** Sixty six per cent of mothers stated that their children made them most happy compared to 41 per cent of fathers. Fathers were more likely than mothers to attribute happiness to a wider definition of 'family and friends'. They were also more likely to state that they get happiness from interests outside the family circle including sport and leisure time and their work. Thirty per cent of fathers stated that a sport, hobby or leisure interest was what made them most happy compared to only 11 per cent of mothers. Seventeen per cent of fathers also state that their work gave them most happiness compared with 10 per cent of mothers.



Linked to this were the comments of some women in our focus groups who suggested that mothers have a stronger bond and relationship with their children than fathers. For some there is a feeling that men cannot or are not expected to feel the same way about their children as women:

'Men haven't got a clue. They don't feel, they can't feel, what women feel.'

(Female with children)

Having said this, many men felt their children had had a profound impact on their lives, as this man said:

'Nothing changes your life like your first child.'

(Male with children)

Our qualitative research supported the idea that children can make us happy. Parents gave accounts of what it was about having children that made them happy: spending time with them, seeing them develop and grow, seeing themselves in them, providing a different take on life:

'Seeing them happy, when you've done something with them, they might forget it by the next day but you remember it.'

(Male with children)

'It's good seeing your kids succeeding...like at school. They're succeeding where you haven't.'

(Female with children)

'Seeing yourself in your children...like he's into the same stuff. I like rock music and he's got this little drum kit he plays, it's so cool.'

(Male with children)

But this wasn't the only story to emerge. **Parents recognised that children had the capacity to make them unhappy and could present challenges.** Fathers tended to point to the difficulties of parenting. Mothers pointed more widely to a range of negative impacts. Some felt that being a mother meant that they were defined more narrowly by others and could mean putting ambitions on hold that they had previously set their sights on. Participants also described how children could be hurtful, could test your love for them and could be a potential source of guilt:

'I went to Blackpool with a friend at the weekend. We went out for dinner and I just said to her, 'I feel like a woman, not just a mum doing this'.'

(Female with children)

'If you spend quality time with your children then you don't feel so guilty having your own time.'

(Female with children)

'Sometimes they can say that they don't like me or love me and that hurts.'

(Female with children)

'I mean we all love our kids dearly. But in an ironic way, they probably can cause a lot of the problems in your life as well.'

(Male with children)

'I don't think anyone can say it's easy bringing up kids. They can give you a lot of unhappiness as well. But the happiness they give you makes up for it.'

(Male with children)

Despite these issues parents were quick to affirm that they had no regrets. This was particularly true for mothers, who would often joke about the sacrifices they had made, as if to dismiss them, as in the case of this mother:

'Things you've been prevented from doing? Yes, having a mansion...a Mercedes convertible, holidays – everything! But it doesn't matter.'

(Female with children)



They would say they looked forward to getting their own lives back once the children had left home, or relished time on their own, but most seemed to accept the compromises they described. The Lever Fabergé Family Report 2002 highlighted the extent to which the parenting commitment (and the compromises attached) is being extended as people in their twenties use the parental home as a 'return ticket'. Almost a quarter of the twenty something sample interviewed lived at home and another quarter had returned home to stay twice or more¹⁷. The notion that parents regain their independence and freedom as their children get older may be a false one.



Our survey results suggest that parents do believe children bring happiness and fulfilment. Our qualitative research shows a more nuanced picture in which women state that motherhood can also be limiting, hard and tiring. Interestingly, World Values Survey (2001) data shows that people tend not to define their fulfilment solely in terms of children. In response to the question: 'Do you think that a woman has to have children in order to be fulfilled or is this not necessary?', less than 12 per cent of British women and 20 per cent of British men responded that it was necessary.

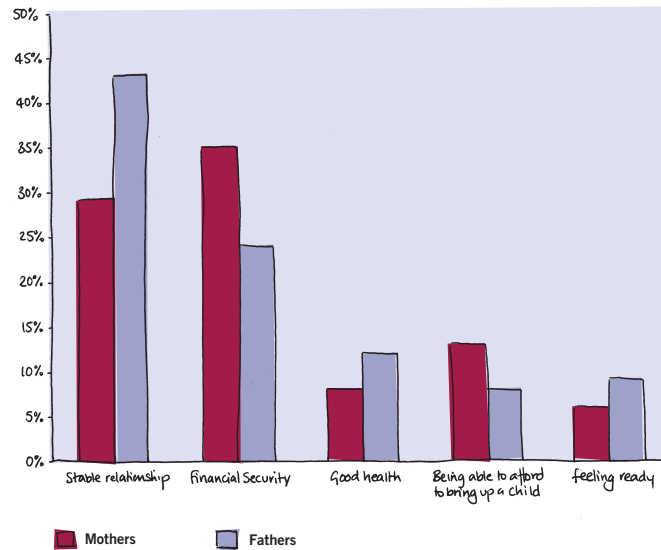
The experience of wanting children, but not being able to have them, has a very real capacity to make people unhappy. The unfulfilled desire for a child can be all consuming and lead to high levels of unhappiness. One woman in the qualitative research who had tried for two years before conceiving a child described the longing as: 'a burning desire' and 'you can't think about anything else'.

Our survey data shows that while only around 10 per cent of people in their twenties and thirties did not want children, 24 per cent of people surveyed in their late thirties did not have children. While some of those in their late thirties may still have children in the future, this data suggests that some women who want children, for whatever reason, don't have them. The extent to which we have control over when and if we have children, and its link to happiness, is further explored in section E.

In this section we have set out some of the different, often contradictory stories, that we tell about children and happiness. Children make us both happy and unhappy. In the following sections we further explore the complex relationship between children and other things that can make us happy – work, money and relationships.



fig.5 What are the most important things to have in place when having a child?



B. Relationships and children

The international survey data shows that marital status and work have amongst the largest and most well-defined effects on happiness. The single greatest depressant of reported happiness is being 'separated'; closely followed by 'widowed'; then being 'unemployed'¹⁸. Blanchflower and Oswald (2002) have calculated the increase in income required to 'compensate' an individual for the negative life events. They suggest that it would be necessary to receive \$100,000¹⁹ extra per annum to 'compensate' for marital separation.

In another study of 1,000 women in Texas, researchers found that women were marginally happier when they were with their spouse than their children²⁰.

Our survey data reinforced the importance of a spouse or partner in determining happiness. It revealed that a partner or spouse is rated in the top three of things that make women with children and those without happy. Men with children placed their partner or spouse as the fourth most important thing in making them happy.

See *fig.5*

Our data also showed that many people consider a stable relationship the most important thing to have in place when having children. **Over a third of all those with children said this was the most important thing to have in place, an even greater proportion of those in their thirties without children agreed.** However, more people in their twenties without children prioritised financial security over a stable relationship. This shift in priorities over time from financial security to a stable relationship may be in part because those in their thirties already have greater financial security. The most important thing to get right for those in their thirties, is the right relationship. The importance of good health plays a bigger part than it does for those in their twenties.



Participants in our qualitative work talked about the impact children can have on a relationship. It was suggested that, to some extent, having children can bind couples together. More prominent though was the observation that having children can also cause anxiety and strain in a relationship, as these people observed:

'My son's been very sickly, we've had three years of it...It has affected our relationship, it would be nice to have some time on our own.'

(Male with children)

'Children can make you happy but 99 per cent of the time there are rows, and 99 per cent of the time it's over the kids.'

(Male without children)

These observations concur with other studies that have found that the birth of a child can be a common trigger for relationship problems²¹. In our interviews those without children prioritised their relationship with their partner and worried that having a child could change a happy relationship for the worse:

'[About having children] he said to me, 'as long as I'm still down as your highest priority then you can do what you want'. But he won't be will he?'

(Female without children)

The case study below further illustrates this point:

CASE STUDY

Donna, aged 33 from Leeds

Donna married her childhood sweetheart. They both agreed that they wouldn't have children. They both have successful careers and a good lifestyle and relationship. A couple of years ago Donna's brother died, leaving two small children. It made her think again about what was important in life. She changed her mind about having children and her husband agreed to have a baby, but only because she wanted one. When it actually came down to trying for a child, Donna suddenly panicked about her decision. 'I kept saying to myself, what am I doing, I'm really, really happy with my life as it is, so why am I doing this?' She is worried that having children will damage her relationship, and that her husband will resent the attention she gives to the child. Although she still plans to have children, it is a decision that causes her anxiety.



Participants did say having children meant people were more likely to work at a relationship, but there was some debate about the extent to which you should remain with a partner, solely for the children's sake:

'You don't just walk away. There's a kid at the end of the day and you've got to try to work things through.'

(Male with children)

'I think you should work harder at it. But I don't know if I'd stay together just for the sake of the children.'

(Male with children)

In several cases, one partner was either preventing the other from having as many children as he or she wanted, or putting pressure on them to have a child they didn't want which could cause significant strain in the relationship:

'I was under pressure from my husband, I had a child out of guilt...We had a huge row about it.'

(Female with children)

'I'm 40 next week and I don't think I'd like to live my life and not have children... but my partner doesn't want them.'

(Male without children)

'My friend ...feels that she was messed up by her childhood and she really doesn't want to have children...Her partner...wants one and they'll probably split up over it.'

(Female with children)

'My wife would like another one or two. It's selfish but more children is going to hold me back. It's quality of life too.'

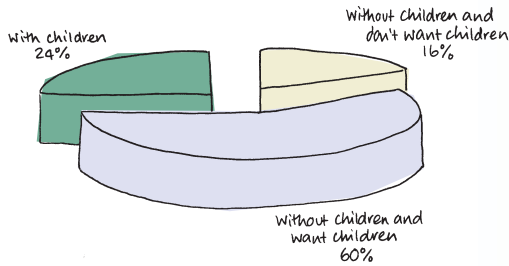
(Male with children)

Relationships clearly have a significant impact on a person's happiness. It would appear though that decisions about having children, as well as life with children, can impose considerable strain on those relationships with consequences for the happiness derived from them.

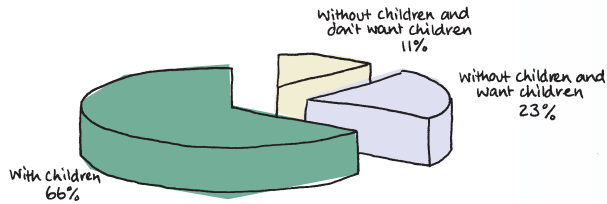


fig.6 Women and men in their twenties and thirties who have, want or do not want children

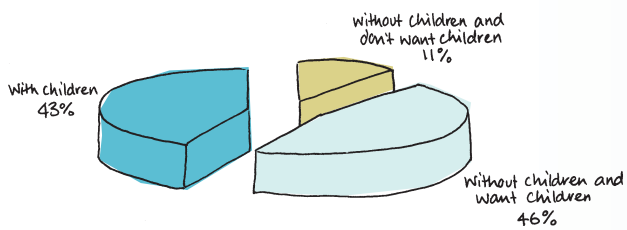
Men in their twenties



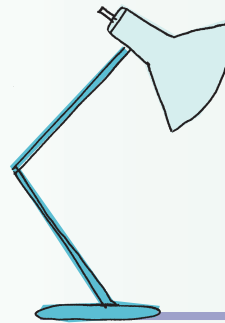
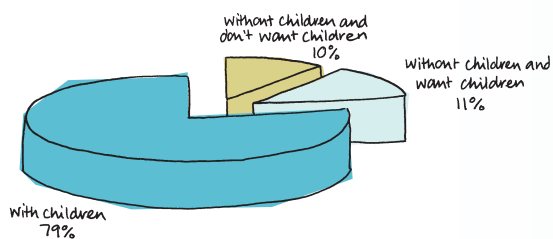
Men in their thirties



Women in their twenties



Women in their thirties



C. Employment and children

The British labour market is characterised by large wage penalties for having children. There is in effect a 'mother tax' that hits women who have children. This is primarily because mothers tend to work in low-paid part-time jobs but also because even full-time working mothers are lower paid relative to women without children²². In addition, full-time female workers already earn on average 18.8 per cent less than the average hourly earnings of their male counterparts²³. As a result the income lost when a woman has children can be substantial.

International survey data shows a positive relationship between job satisfaction and happiness, whilst unemployment is very damaging to happiness. The costs of unemployment are large relative to the costs from just taking a cut in income showing that we derive benefits from employment beyond income²⁴. Our data shows that, as with relationships, here too children have a significant impact. **Having children can have a substantial impact on the employment of women in particular. This is an important factor in influencing people's thinking about if and when to have children.**

The increase in women's education and career planning is one of the key explanations for women choosing to have children later than they have done in the past²⁵. In 2001 mothers in Britain were, on average, aged 29.3 years at the time of first birth, this is two and a half years older than women were on average twenty years ago²⁶.

²² Harkness & Waldfogel 1999
²³ Equal Opportunities Commission 2003
²⁴ Blanchflower & Oswald 2002
²⁵ Lutz 2001
²⁶ Rendall & Smallwood 2003
²⁷ Ibid
²⁸ Class is defined by occupational status

The average age of entry to motherhood is five years later for women with higher educational qualifications than it is for those without²⁷. This has led to some discernible class²⁸ differences in the age of becoming a mother. In our survey, women in lower socio-economic groups tend to have children at a younger age than those in higher groups. **The more skilled and higher status job held, the less likely the person is to have children, the later they are likely have them and, as a result of the delay, the fewer children they are likely to have.**

In our survey 56 per cent of ABC1s in their twenties and thirties did not have children, compared to only 34 per cent of people in social class C2DE without children. Similarly, while 65 per cent of people in social class C2DE had their first child before the age of 25, only 48 per cent of ABC1s had children before this age. There may be two effects at play here. One is that those in higher social classes feel that they have bigger trade-offs to make if they have children, in terms of finances and work. The other effect is that those in lower social classes, particularly women, who have children earlier may be limited in making the transition to better, more well-paid jobs exactly because they have children.



Our qualitative evidence strongly indicated the persistence of traditional gender roles in families with children. All the parent participants reported that the mother was the primary carer of their children and that she worked less than her partner (where she had one). This reflects the picture nationally where, **despite increasing employment rates amongst women with children, only 65 per cent of mothers are in paid employment compared to 89 per cent of fathers**²⁹. The dominant pattern in Britain is for families to have 1.5 earners, most often a full time employed father and a part time employed mother³⁰. For our focus group participants this meant that the effect of having children differed substantially between men and women in relation to employment.

In our survey sample, one in five women in their thirties did not have children. Of these thirty-something women without children, 49 per cent did not want children in the future. One in three men in their thirties don't have children, of these 32 per cent don't want children in the future.

See *fig.6*

In our qualitative work we found women usually had to make a much more fundamental change to their lives when having children, often changing from full-time employment to part-time employment or being a full-time mother. Some women thought it a privilege to be a full-time mother, whereas others would have preferred to work full-time. There have been suggestions that mothers' increasing labour market participation means that they are becoming more rooted in their work life at the expense of their family responsibilities. Our evidence concurs with that of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation³¹ which found that such suggestions are not borne out in reality.

Similarly, like the participants in a recent study by the Equal Opportunities Commission (2003), most mothers and fathers in our qualitative study subscribed to highly traditional and stereotypical views about the gendered division of childrearing responsibilities. This meant that many women had very low expectations of the contribution that they could expect from their partners. Many of the men we spoke to agreed women generally have the more difficult parenting role and that men are "getting away with not changing that much" (male with children), as these men described:

'I think it affects women much more. Apart from in the evenings and a bit of nappy changing it didn't really affect me that much. But my wife's life changed completely.'

(Male with children)

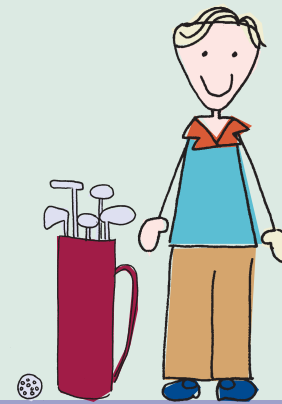
'I would say it is actually harder for the woman 'cause we get to go to work, see all the boys at work and have a bit of a crack and that, and they are at home with the kids all day long.'

(Male with children)

'Women are at home with the children day in and day out. I mean not just physically, but mentally. I would imagine that is tough.'

(Male without children)

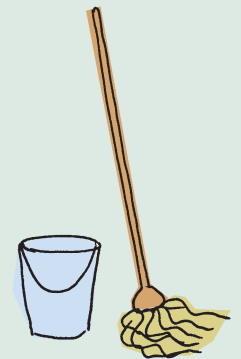
Of the women without children in our focus groups, several intended to have children on their own if they hadn't found a partner within the next couple of years. Another intended to remain in full-time employment whilst her husband took on the primary caring responsibilities for the children. However, the majority still assumed that they would substantially reduce their working hours and take on a larger share of the childcare.



For women who had developed a career and were considering having children, the difficulties of balancing work and childcare were often key factors in delaying childbirth. Our survey found 25 per cent of women in their thirties who did not have children thought that establishing yourself in a job or career was a plus to leaving children until your thirties.

Further, in our survey, **33 per cent of women in their twenties without children feared the impact of having a child on their career and 42 per cent feared the impact on their finances if they have a child before age of 30.**

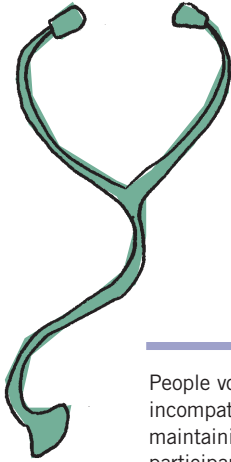
Their fears appeared to be borne out in the experiences of those women who had children in their twenties of whom 25 per cent cited missing out on a career or putting their working life on hold as a disadvantage of having children before the age of 30.



²⁹ Equal Opportunities Commission 2003:1

³⁰ Dix 2003

³¹ Ibid



People voiced concerns about the incompatibility of having children and maintaining employment. Whilst some participants commented on the progress that had been made in work places towards child friendly policies, others reported deeply entrenched stereotypes:

'There's still an old-fashioned attitude...My son got a nail through his foot and I had to take him to hospital, when I rang my boss though he was like 'why are you taking him, why's your lass not taking him?' It's the same with things like sports day, you have to lie and cheat to get to these things...it's like 'why would you even want to go?''

(Male with children)



Such attitudes were reflected in others concerns about their ability to manage without a partner:

'I'd like to think that I'd have the opportunity to do it on my own if I never found the right person, but unless there's change in the whole working environment...I don't know if it's possible.'

(Female without children)

Those women in our focus groups who had children in their twenties or earlier often put their careers on hold, some doing part-time or flexible work. Those women with children, particularly those without a partner, felt that they had been seriously restricted in their choice of work. **Even if women who had their children in their twenties and earlier returned to work later they always felt as if they were playing 'catch up' with those who had developed a career earlier:**

'You put things on hold. I would have been a qualified car mechanic. I'm still 80 per cent sure I want to be...but now it's having the bottle to go back.'

(Female with children)

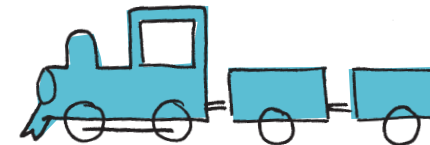
'All through the pregnancy I blamed the child for ruining my so-called career and life. It did ruin it at the time.'

(Female with children)

This evidence makes it clear that women face considerable trade-offs between employment and childbirth. The nature of these trade-offs differ depending on the time of life at which they occur. If a woman has a child in her twenties this is more likely to lead to trade-offs in terms of her career development and consequently, her income. If a woman has a child in her thirties this is more likely to lead to trade-offs in terms of her income – and because her income is likely to be higher by then, the income loss is more substantial. There is nothing inevitable about these trade-offs or that it should be women who face them, but the impact of children on work life and income was unquestionably greater for women in our study.

D. Consumption and children

People with higher incomes are happier than those with lower incomes according to international survey data and an increase in personal income does bring increased levels of happiness. However, the size of the positive effect of an increase in income is small compared to the positive or negative effect of other life experiences such as marriage, divorce and unemployment. Furthermore, there is strong evidence that it is relative income that matters once basic needs have been met, so what is important is how people compare themselves to others around them³². Clearly, having children has an effect on family income through the costs of childrearing as well, often, as a loss of earned income.





In our qualitative work a distinction was evident between those who had children before they were thirty and those who had delayed parenthood until their thirties, or had chosen not to have children at all. The divide is in essence one about how they talk and think about money and quality of life. It is also more broadly about the divide between those with and without children whose lifestyles and spending priorities can contrast sharply and sometimes rub-up against each other.

Those focus group participants who had children younger often found virtue in 'getting by' and making compromises in order to accommodate a child in their life. The things that they put on hold (such as a bigger house, new car, career) can be returned to at a later date. In our survey, 32 per cent of those without children said that financial security was the second most important thing to have in place when having children; whereas, 22 per cent of those with children agreed.

Some suggested that those leaving it until later were spending too much time thinking about the consequences and were too focused on trying to create something unattainable – the perfect time and situation to start a family. They also implied that people are over-concerned with having enough money to bring up a child and suggest too much focus is placed on being able to afford material things.

Those without children in their thirties can be wary of compromise and had a high level of awareness of the kinds of trade-offs involved in having children. Some are nervous of the impact that a child might make on their quality of life and are keen that they have the financial security to support a child. These people mostly still want children but they put them on hold whilst they concentrate on the other areas of their life that make them happy.

Many of those without children were keen to build up money before having children. In our survey, 42 per cent of people without children stated that a disadvantage of having children in your twenties is less money. They also placed the impact on their career and social life high on list. By contrast 53 per cent of people without children said greater financial security is an advantage of having children in your thirties. The tables below illustrate the stark contrast between those with and without children in terms of the extent to which they identify the impact of children on lifestyle and finances.

See *fig.7*

See *fig.8*

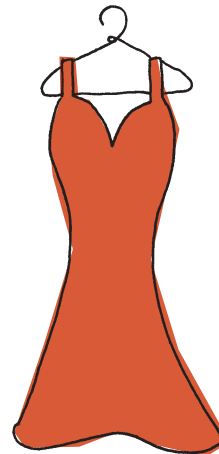


fig.7 'What are the disadvantages of having children in your twenties?'

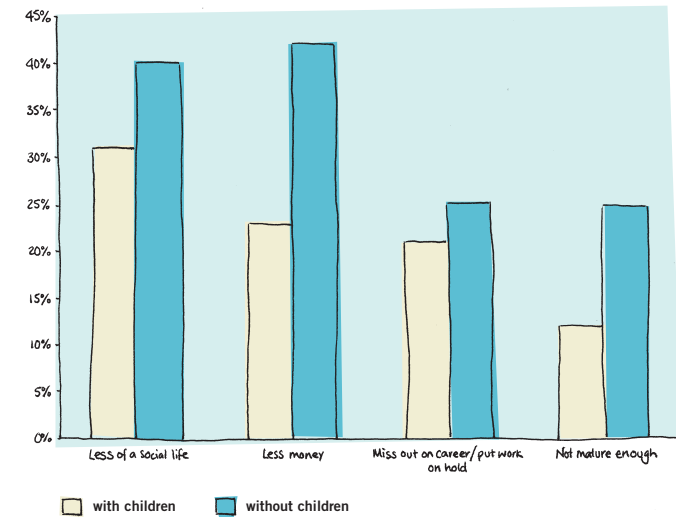
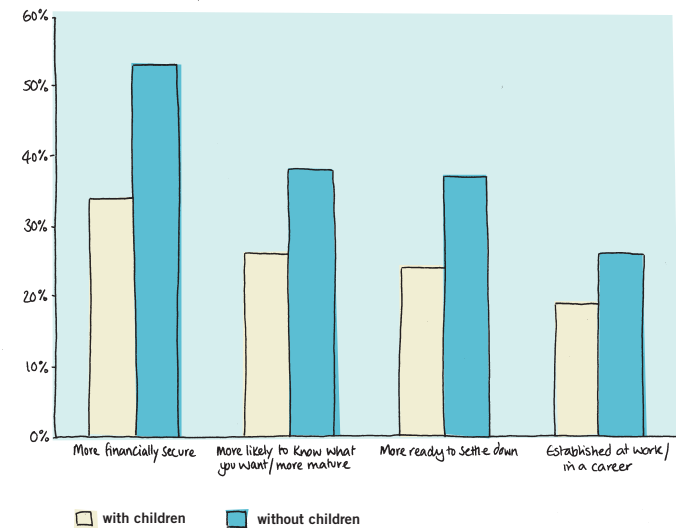
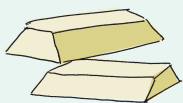


fig.8 'What are the advantages of having children in your thirties?'



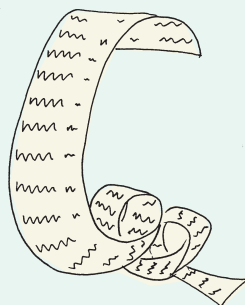


A growth in materialism was blamed for making having children more stressful.

This was described both by those planning to have children through their anxieties about whether they could afford them, and by parents struggling to keep up with the latest fashions and Christmas lists. As this man says, such things can make people fear the costs of children:

'People want the best for their kids...we're seeing a lot more available for our kids now, and I think that frightens a lot of people...start[ing] a family.'

(Male with children)



Similarly, when considering having a second or third child, parents were conscious of the financial cost of having more children and in some cases income was the key factor in not having more children, again this was apparent across social class:

'People want a better quality of life and to do that you have to have less kids.'

(Male with children)

'Money does stop us having more.'

(Male with children)

One of the reasons people are having fewer children is because they want to preserve their consumption habits and not compromise on quality of life. This is known as **'consumption smoothing'**, that is, the desire of would-be parents to have enough income to be able to afford having a child without having to forgo other consumption that they find essential, or as one focus group participant put it:

'You don't want a child to take away the lifestyle you've got.'

(Male without children)

In our qualitative work we found that for those who had planned when to have their children, money was the key planning factor. However, many participants with children, regardless of their social class, generally thought that you can't wait to have enough money because that day will never come:

'You can never afford kids and we got to a stage when we thought 'when's enough, enough?' We couldn't be bothered waiting any more and you find you just get by somehow.'

(Male with children)

'You can be a millionaire and still feel like you aren't giving your kids enough.'

(Male with children)

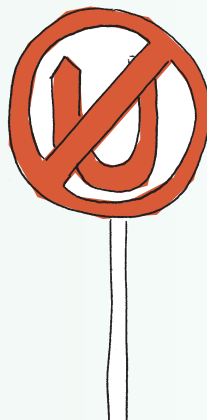




E. Planning and children

People are used to having control over life choices but it doesn't always work like that with children. Those having children later appeared more likely to plan but no more likely to be in control. There are trade-offs to having children in both your twenties and thirties. Consideration of the trade-offs can give rise to the impression that all is a calculated and rational decision but actually to what extent are we planning or in control?

Our qualitative research suggested that those who had children younger were more likely not to have planned their pregnancies, particularly with their first child. This is most noticeably true for children born when their parents were in their teens and early twenties. Second children appeared more likely to have been planned although there was also evidence of a number of 'surprise' late pregnancies. For some whose pregnancies were unplanned there was a sense of pride in the fact that they had just 'got on with it'. They felt that some people planned far too much and that it was often better to let nature take its course and relax:



When it happens it happens...you just get by and you never look back.

(Male with children)

For those who go through with unplanned pregnancies in their teens and twenties, weighing up different factors in relation to having children becomes an unnecessary task. The decision has been made for them. Instead they fit everything else in their life into the new arrangement (rather than the other way round). This is likely to mean that they make sacrifices such as putting a career on hold, spending more time at home and less time socialising or making their money stretch further. Having made the leap they seemed well able to adapt to the implications of having a child, or at least to live with the consequences, as the following case study illustrates:

CASE STUDY

Nicole, aged 32, from the Wirral

Nicole found out that she was pregnant when she was aged 17. She was training to be a hairdresser at college. During the pregnancy she resented the baby for ruining her life and career. She was in a relationship, but the father gave her little support and they split up shortly after the birth. She said: "My husband was always in the pub with his friends anyway. In my eyes I was always on my own."

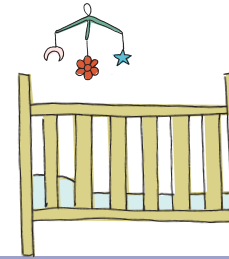
However, she said she loves her son and has a fantastic relationship with him. She has been able to grow with him, and he sees her more as a best friend than a mother. She is looking forward to re-starting her career in a couple of years once he has left school, although admits it will take 'a lot of bottle' to go back. She says she has no regrets.

By contrast, for those in their thirties without children, planning played a much bigger part. The issue of having or not having children was much more of an active dilemma with many different factors influencing people's attitudes and decisions. Those in stable relationships often wanted to wait until the circumstances were absolutely right to start a family and tended to delay trying for a baby until everything was in place. They appeared to assume that the decision was completely in their control, as suggested by these participants:

'If we had children we'd have to move, and I'd like to be married for a year or so first, so probably [we'll have children] in the next couple of years.'

(Female without children)

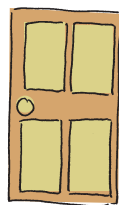




'It's a lot more about planning. People make much more of a conscious choice. It used to be that you courted, you got married and you had kids. Now people make a choice either way.'

(Male without children)

People did not want to make a decision about having children in their thirties lightly. They are used to short-term, flexible planning and making decisions that can be reversed. Consumer culture has developed the idea that people can always take something back if we don't like it. Marriage too can be undone if it doesn't work out. Similarly, there is nothing irreversible about delaying childbirth, so long as it is not delayed beyond biological limits. This flexibility in decision-making is in sharp contrast to the commitment to parenthood, which is irreversible once a child is born³³. The decision about having or not having a child stands out as a permanent decision. It represents a commitment that can be hard to comprehend.



This may be why people without children in our survey often tended to say they would have children in the short to medium term future. Half of those in their twenties said they expected to have a child in the next five years and 35 per cent in the next five to ten years. **Of those in their thirties without children who wanted them, 68 per cent expected to have a child in the next five years but almost 19 per cent weren't sure when they will have a child. This means that one in five people in their thirties without children, who wanted children in the future, were not sure when they will have them.** It would seem that children exist as something on the medium term horizon, even well into people's thirties.

Delaying childbirth can reduce some of the uncertainties about finances and the stability of relationships and yet the decision whether or not to actually have children does not seem to become any easier or more straightforward the longer it is left. In the end it can feel like a gamble either way, as one man put it:

'I worry that I'd regret having children and I worry that I'd regret not having children.'

(Male without children)

Those in their thirties are likely to be more financially stable and able to support a child but paradoxically appear to be more concerned with the impact of having a child on their income and lifestyle. **More planning does not necessarily lead to more control, not least because planning is difficult if you do not have a partner with whom you want to have a child or who does not want children.** There was also an awareness though among those in their thirties, particularly women, that they had a limited time slot in which to have a child and this wasn't something that you could take for granted, as these participants acknowledge:

'I chose my time but it took me a long time to get pregnant.'

(Female with children)

'We're trying at the moment and I'd like kids but if we're not lucky enough then we'll just have to deal with it.'

(Male without children)

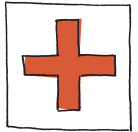
'I must admit when I hit thirty, I freaked out big time and it did worry me, you know you see on the television all the statistics, the percentage of birth defects going up and that kind of stuff.'

(Female without children)

People told anecdotes about hospital charts not going above the age of 36 for pregnant women but then they would counter these with the fact that they felt fit and healthy and with tales of the way in which the media loves scare stories:

'The media...they love a...good health scare. Some people have children when they are 50. How old was Cherie Blair?'

(Female without children)



The following case study illustrates the difficulties of planning with precision:

CASE STUDY

Jack, aged 35, from Surrey

Jack and his partner decided not to have a child until their 30s. His partner checked out maternity arrangements at work, and they moved to a house in a nice area with enough space for children. John said: 'It was all very, very planned.' They were unable to conceive but eventually had a healthy child through IVF. His partner is keen to have another child, but after three and a half more years of IVF, he wants to give up and stop going through all that stress. He said it's also too expensive. He worries that his son will be an only child, but thinks that sometimes you can put too much emphasis on being an ideal family. He said my son 'wants a sister, but then he also wants a parrot!'

'I think I changed massively...between twenty and thirty about what I wanted out of life, about the type of work that I wanted to do, the type of person that I wanted to be...I'm glad I never really settled down with whoever I was with at that age.'

(Female without children)

'I had my little boy when I was 35, personally I was ready to settle down. I felt I'd got all of the stuff I wanted to do out of the way...going to football, different women, going on holiday.'

(Male with children)

People also felt they had a better sense of themselves and what they wanted:

'If you don't feel you've really got to grips with yourself then it's very hard to then feel that you can be a decent parent.'

(Female without children)

Many women in their thirties were conscious of conflicting messages about the 'best' time to have children and on that basis often focussed on the importance of things such as emotional maturity:

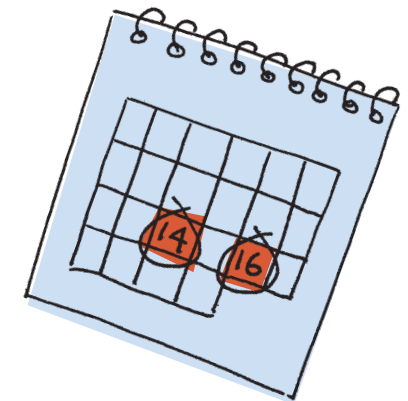


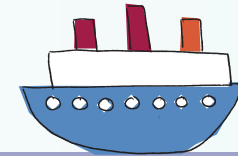
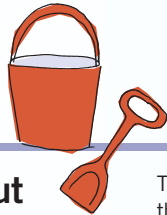
However, those people who'd had children in their twenties were very unlikely to think that 'not being mature enough' was an issue. Only four per cent of these women thought this, compared to 24 per cent of women without children in their twenties who cited this as a major disadvantage.

It is important to note that those who already have a child are also going through the same process of weighing up pros and cons when thinking about whether to have another child. The process does not end at the first birth. **One of the key explanations for the declining birth rate in Britain is that there is a causal link between delayed maternity, having children later in life, and the number of children a woman will have.** The later the age of a woman at first birth the fewer the total number of children she will have³⁴. This link was evident in our survey sample with only six per cent of women who had their first child in the thirties having more than two children and 58 per cent of these women did not want any more. This is compared to women who had their first child in their twenties of whom 22 per cent had more than two children (with 69 per cent who did not want more).

Some participants were explicit in stating that they didn't want another child. The reasons they gave were often the same reasons that others without children gave – not wanting to compromise their quality of life, not have the financial support in place, wanting to fulfil other ambitions, or wanting time to focus on their relationship. There was also a sense amongst some that they had 'done their bit' and 'wouldn't want to go through all that again.'

Our participants had a general preference for more than one child. Although participants did feel that there was no ideal number of children and that it very much depended on personal circumstances and preferences and a child could grow up happy and healthy in a family of any size.

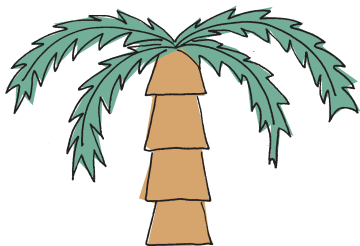




F. With or without children

Children have a big impact on the lives of their parents. The impact is such that the views and experiences of those with and without children can stand in stark contrast. Parents may find their lives out of step with those of their peers and colleagues without children, they may be less able to go out socialising, they are forced to negotiate a balance between work, home and childcare, their spending priorities must now incorporate the needs of their children. The contrast appears to be most pronounced for women, reflecting the greater changes women have to make to their lives upon becoming mothers.

Our research shows that those with and without children appear to value different things in life and give different accounts of happiness. Despite the growing social acceptability of not having children, those without children can feel defensive about it, as if their lives are being judged as less worthwhile. In turn, those with children tend to reinforce a sense of awe about the depths of love and meaning that parenthood brings to their lives.



The relationship between those with and those without children can be uneasy. As more women delay childbirth or remain without children, the contrast between those with and without children may become deeper.

When those with or those without children were talking about one another, they generally began by saying that all choices were equally valid showing a tolerance and respect for different lifestyles and choices:

'It's just a different, a different lifestyle.'
(Female without children)

'I'm not happier, just different...it's just a different happiness.'
(Female with children)

However, there were traces of resentment on both sides. **Those without children sometimes felt that parents were given preferential treatment**, for example, over Christmas holiday leave. **In turn parents were at times envious of the lifestyle and material affluence of their friends without children who had money and time** and were more able to socialise and travel. Some quickly reverted to accounts of those without children as selfish, inflexible, unfulfilled and lonely:

'Some people are too selfish, aren't they, to have children?'
(Female with children)

'In their own little world they're fine, they're quite happy, quite comfortable. [People without children] don't have any responsibilities, they don't have anyone else to worry about apart from themselves.'
(Male with children)

'[People without children] want things when they want them, they're not prepared to meet you half way.'
(Female with children)

'I don't know what I used to do with my life before...I don't know how we used to fill our time!'
(Male with children)

'[People without children] have dogs instead!'
(Male with children)

To some extent those without children adhered to descriptions of themselves as concerned with their own quality of life. They recognised that they were freer to pursue their own interests and enjoyment, but did not see why they should be criticised for it.

They also stated that those with children could be neglectful of those outside their immediate family circle. A number of the participants without children had felt let down and left out by friends with children and become solely focussed on 'their own little nest'. They felt that those with children could be inward-looking and dull. Parents too recognised a tendency to get absorbed in the lives of your children:

'Sometimes they can get...focused completely on their own family to the exclusion of everything else really.'
(Female without children)

'Before I had children, all my friends had kids and I would go out with them and all the conversation was about kids and I felt like I had a big sign over my head saying 'I've got no kids'. That was very uncomfortable.'
(Female with children)

'I was pretty self-centred, had a great lifestyle going...I used to pop off around the world at a whim...then my daughter came along about ten years ago...It is undoubtedly the best thing that has ever happened to me.'
(Male with children)

fig.9 'What gives you most happiness in your life?'



'I don't go out with my other friends who are mothers that much because I find them boring. With the drinking group [who don't have children] I feel like a teenager again.'

(Female with children)

These different attitudes to pleasure and responsibility are borne out by the polling data. Less than a quarter (21 per cent) of those who had had children in their twenties agreed with the statement that 'Having children before your thirties means giving up too many things that you enjoy'. In contrast, double the number (42 per cent) of those without children, agreed with the statement. Those without children appeared less convinced that it is possible to have children and have a fulfilling social and work life, particularly if you have children before you reach 30. When we asked respondents what made them most happy, those without children placed greater importance on their partner, work, socialising, sports and other leisure activities. Balancing these things against having children is a key part of their decision-making when thinking about if and when to have children.

See **fig.9**

The crux of the with-without divide is the sense that having children is the natural and somehow 'best' choice. **Many with children felt that having children makes you a nicer person.** There was a feeling of sympathy for people without children, who they felt could have no real concept of what they were missing. The overriding sense was still that having children is the right thing to do - a natural progression. **Not having children was considered unusual, or even "freakish"** as one person said, as these participants suggest:

'I always feel sorry for people who don't have children. They say 'oh, we like our life the way it is,' but I feel like saying to them 'you don't know.'

(Female with children)

'I've got a friend [who] doesn't have children...and her life is not complete...She does have a different lifestyle but she's always saying that she would swap [hers] for mine.'

(Female with children)

'I feel more settled, like my life is progressing. Once you've got family, you know where you are going.'

(Female with children)

This message stands against the backdrop of fewer people having children. One in ten women born in 1950 remained childless, whereas one in five born in the early 1960s are likely to remain childless³⁵. Despite this change, having children is still considered the norm. It is still considered unusual not to have or want children as you reach your forties. In our own study, those without children resented the expectation on them to reproduce. They resented judgements about their life choices and the expectation that they would produce a child once they reached a certain stage in life:

'It feels almost like people want you to be all the same so it doesn't make them question their own life.'

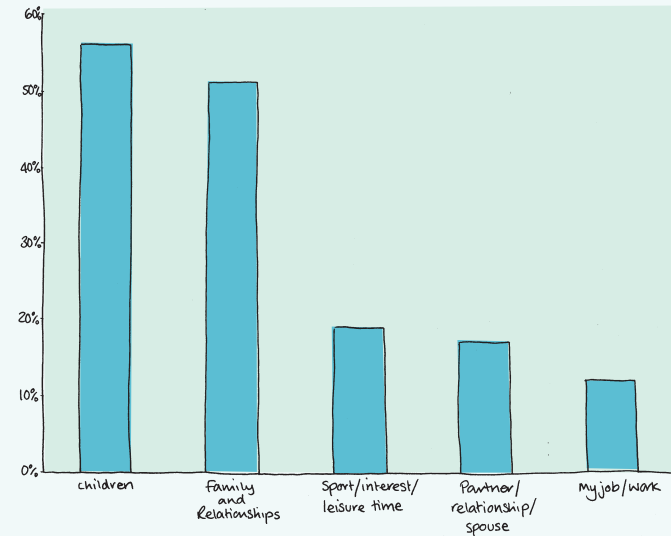
(Female without children)

'A lot of people do it because it's the time to have children. They've got married and their friends are having children.'

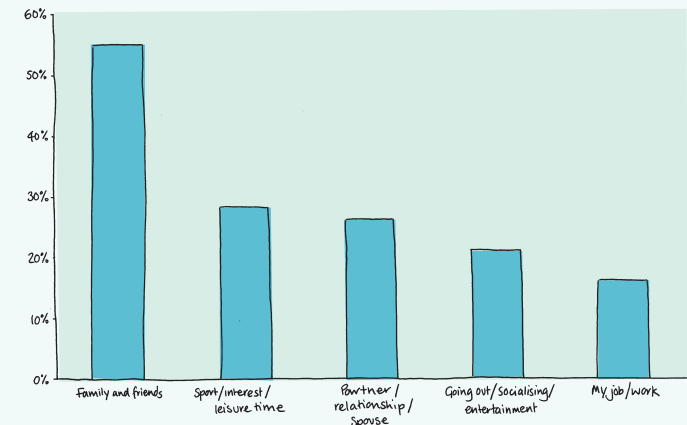
(Female with children)

But most of those without children did nonetheless want children at some point. Ninety per cent of those we polled, either had children or wanted to have them in the future.

Those with children



Those without children



Section three:

Implications for the future



A. How should we respond?

Children have the potential to make us happy. Most of us still want and have children, even if we are choosing to have them later and are having fewer of them. But it is also clear that children can have a negative impact on happiness. They can put a strain on relationships, disrupt our working lives, force our income to stretch further and may mean that we have to give up things we enjoy and which contribute to a good quality of life. For women the financial impact of children can be particularly acute. They are more likely than men to have to compromise their progress in the workplace and their independence if they become parents.

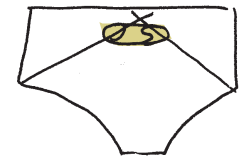
At present, public policy focused on the family is primarily framed in terms of increasing the happiness and well-being of children and by default their parents because they play a major part in the well-being of their children. Although some would argue that the happiness of parents is in itself a worthwhile objective to pursue.

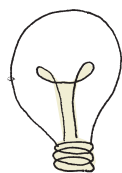
There are policies that will enable us to address both the needs of children and their parents, such as efforts to eliminate child poverty. However, other policies require difficult decisions to be made and the needs of one group will have to be prioritised over another. This might mean prioritising children over parents or parent over non-parents.

One example is the complex, and sometimes conflicting, evidence on whether it is better that the parents of young children work or not. If the evidence were to conclude decisively that parents should not work during the early years; this might lead to the development of policies that support the needs of the family over those of the labour market.

Policies designed to support parents may even have the effect of increasing the birth rate. This would ensure Britain avoids the risks associated with 'lowest-low fertility', that is, a fertility rate below 1.3 births per woman, as is currently being experienced in some European countries such as Italy. 'Lowest-low' fertility leads in a relatively short length of time to population decline in the absence of substantial immigration and constant death rates. However, whether Government intervention should be used explicitly to increase the birth rate is an important question - but one for another report. There is clearly though a role for public policy to help people fulfil their ambitions, including their desire to have children.

Doing right by children and by parents is important to the well-being of society. It fundamentally impacts on how well we function as individuals, as families and communities. This means trying to minimise the extent to which having children leads to negative trade-offs, particularly for women, and maximising the potential for them to have a positive impact. This report has exposed many of the issues around gender inequality in the home and workplace. These are issues that affect everyone and their solutions are the responsibility of both women and men.





There are different ways in which the negative impacts of having children might be minimised. Some suggestions include:

- *Providing good quality and accessible childcare*

There is currently one childcare place for every five children in the UK. It has been argued by some commentators³⁶ that the birth rate is higher in countries with greater universal childcare and that the improvement of childcare in the UK would increase the birth rate in the UK.

- *Supporting working mothers and fathers*

There is a challenge in creating a culture in the workplace where it is acceptable and feasible for women and men to find a balance between work and family.

- *Supporting parents in their role*

Parents can feel under pressure, stressed and unsure of the best way to act yet are frequently unaware of where they can turn to for reassurance and support. Programmes like Sure Start aim to deliver such support. There are arguments for making such provision universal.

- *Providing financial support for parents, particularly those struggling on low incomes.*

Bringing up children is costly. We also know how financial pressures impact negatively on happiness. There is continuing scope to explore how the social security system can best meet the needs of poor families.

B. Where next?

This report has begun to unpick how we think and feel about children and whether or not they make us happy. This is a large and complex area of research and we haven't been able to cover everything. It also an area that raises interesting and challenging questions for debate and for further study. The following questions are just a start:

- Who 'owns' children - the family or society as a whole? Who has most responsibility for their well-being? How can children's well-being best be ensured?
- What are the particular issues for lone parents and how might they be supported?

- How do those in their forties and beyond who have never had child reflect on their decisions? To what extent should fertility treatment be made available to those who have delayed childbirth beyond biological limits?

- In an ageing population, how should public spending be distributed between young and old? Or in a period of declining fertility, how should spending be distributed between those with and without children?

- How can we ensure that those who do not have children don't lose out on improved employment practices? What is the role of employers in promoting choice, for example, about when people have career breaks, and diminishing the trade-offs associated with having children?

- What is the relationship between consumerism and happiness?

- What is the link between class and income and when and how many children you have? To what extent are children, and the number of children you have, a determinant of class, particularly for women?

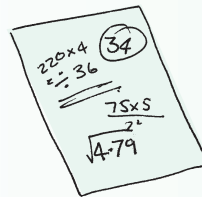


Conclusion

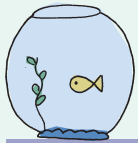


What our study has shown is that **most people still want and have children and most people are pretty happy**. We have shown that those factors which have a strong relationship with happiness – personal relationships, employment and income - all have clear, though complex, impacts on decisions about having children and subsequent experiences of having children. This means that children can have a substantial impact on people's overall happiness. Even those who do not have children feel this effect as a result of society's expectations on them to have children eventually.

Children bring joy but that joy can be diminished by the trade-offs and penalties parents experience for having them. What this means is that if we want to be happier – which surely we do – **society needs to focus on how we can ease the trade-offs and penalties of having children, particularly for women who tend to experience these penalties most acutely.**



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Appendix 1



Focus group profile of respondents

The table below shows the profile of the groups for this study. There were six or seven participants in each focus group and all participants were between the ages of 30 and 40.

	Target group	Age	Gender	Social Class*	Location
1	No children	30-40	Female	ABC1	Surrey
2	No children	30-40	Male	ABC1	Manchester
3	No children	30-40	Male	C2DE	Wirral
4	Young parents (children born when aged 20 years or under)**	30-40	Female	C2DE	Leeds
5	Parents	30-40	Female	ABC1	Wirral
6	Parents	30-40	Female	C2DE	Manchester
7	Parents	30-40	Male	ABC1	Leeds
8	Parents	30-40	Male	C2DE	Surrey

All respondents were recruited by experienced recruiters through the market research agency Criteria. A screening questionnaire was used to reach the target audience. Respondents were paid a cash incentive for giving up their time to participate in the discussions.

The focus group discussions lasted for an hour and a half and followed similar, flexible discussion guides. They took place during August 2003. The focus groups were conducted and analysed by the report authors.

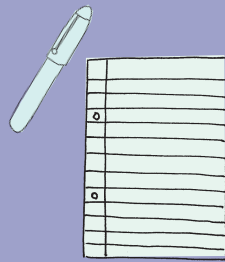
* ABC1s make up just under half the population. C2DEs make up just over half the population.
 ** We had intended to speak to females in social class C2DE who did not have children, however, the recruiters found it very difficult to recruit people who met this criteria. To avoid talking to a very unrepresentative sample, we made the decision to change the recruitment criteria and instead talk to those who had had their first child before they were 20 years old.



Appendix 2

Survey profile of respondents and questions

ICM Research interviewed a random sample of 1500 adults between the ages of 20 and 40 by telephone from 22nd to 28th September 2003. Interviews ICM conducted were across the country and the results have been weighted to the profile of all adults in this age group.



The questions asked were as follows:

- 1 *What gives you most happiness in your life?*
- 2 How many children, if any, do you have?
- 3 What age were you when you had your first child?
- 4 Do you want to have a/another child?
- 5 When do you think you will have a/another child?
- 6 What are the two most important things to have in place when having a child?
- 7 What are the advantages of having children in your 20s?
- 8 What about the disadvantages of having children in your 20s?
- 9 What are the advantages of having children in your thirties?
- 10 What about the disadvantages of having children in your thirties?
- 11 To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Having children before your thirties means giving up too many things you enjoy.

Full tables of the responses to these questions can be accessed at website address for Lever Fabergé.

