

# Having kids makes you unhappy, right?



Research suggests that people with children are less happy than those without. Commentator Betsy Stevenson suggests maybe we're looking at it all wrong.

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## TEXT OF COMMENTARY

**Kai Ryssdal:** If you have kids, there are probably times when you feel a little overwhelmed. Yeah, you love them and all, and they are really cute. But you look around, and you realize you and your spouse don't have enough quality time. You don't get out much any more for a dinner or a movie, much less to the gym. Your life is their life, and you're not quite completely happy. Research actually backs that up.

But commentator Betsy Stevenson suggests that maybe we're looking at it the wrong way.

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**Betsy Stevenson:** There is an unhappy fact to ponder this Mother's Day: Women with children are less happy than similar women without. The same is true for men.

When people hear this fact they immediately suspect that happiness gains from children must exist somewhere. Aren't people who are religious happier when they have kids? No. Aren't people with kids much happier later in life? No. Is this only true for those in a specific education or income group? Nope and nope.

So why do people have children if the data suggest they make us less happy? There are two possible answers: People are making mistakes, or there is more to life than happiness.

Perhaps children offer a sense of fulfillment or something else not captured by surveys assessing happiness or even life satisfaction. Understanding what these survey questions capture animates a current debate among researchers: Does self-assessed happiness capture our total well-being, or is there something more? To date, most economists have considered these measures equivalent to

total well-being. But there are some pretty forceful critics who think that happiness is just one component of a good life.

And because people choose to have children, these critics argue that children must make us better off. It's an old assumption of economists: If I choose it, I like it.

However, more recently, psychology-inspired economists have suggested that sometimes we choose things that make us worse off; we make mistakes. So are people making mistakes by having children?

How can we answer this question? Psychologists encourage you to look for someone like yourself who is currently experiencing the new life you're contemplating to see how they're feeling. But we know the answer to this question: They are less happy. So perhaps we need to ask a different question: Knowing what you now know, would you still choose to have kids?

Most of the people I know give a resounding yes to this question and that was enough for me. I'll be celebrating my first Mother's Day as a mother this weekend. And if you ask me, I'll tell you that I'd do it all over again.

**RYSSDAL:** Betsey Stevenson is an assistant professor of economics at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.