
The Parenthood “Happiness Penalty”: The Effects of Social Policies in 22 Countries

Jennifer Glass, Robin W. Simon and Matthew A. Andersson

INTRODUCTION

A large body of research has established that parents are less happy than nonparents. The main explanation for this “happiness penalty” is that stressors associated with parenthood – time and energy demands; sleep deprivation; work-family conflict; difficulty finding high-quality, affordable child care; and financial strain – may outweigh the personal gratification that parenthood can bring. But is it always true that parents are less happy than nonparents?

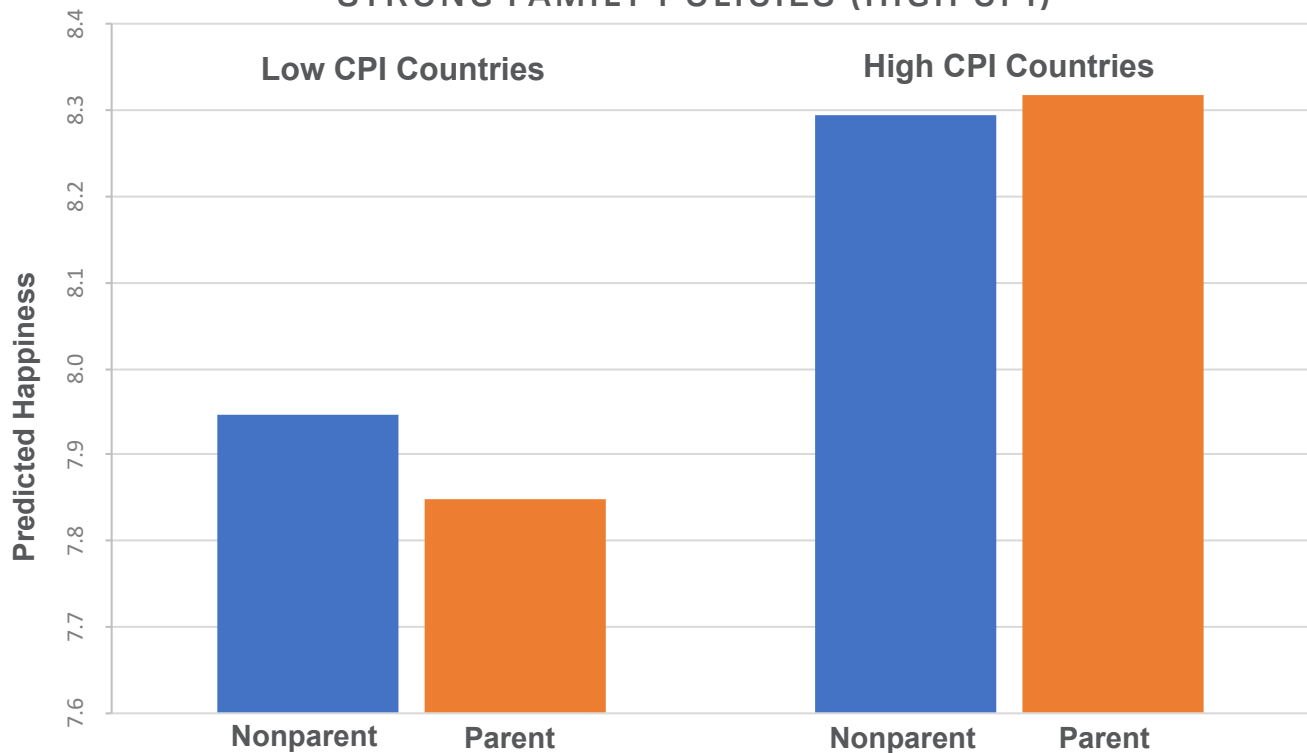
These stressors can be alleviated with public policies such as paid time off, child care subsidies, and work schedule flexibility. Using data from the 2006 and 2008 European Social Survey (ESS) as well as the 2007 and 2008 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), the authors investigate the impact of these policy solutions across 22 European and English-speaking countries on self-reported happiness for parents and nonparents.

Because levels of happiness may vary across countries for cultural and other reasons, the researchers measure the cross-national variation in the difference, or gap, in happiness between parents and nonparents. In addition to exploring the impact of individual family-friendly policies, they also create a comprehensive policy index (CPI) that combines the availability of these policies into a single indicator to determine the impact of the policy “packages” on the happiness gap between parents and nonparents.

KEY FINDINGS

- > The United States had the largest happiness penalty for parenthood among the 22 developed nations, even after controlling for a host of individual-level variables that affect parental happiness.
- > The negative effects of parenthood on happiness were entirely explained by the presence or absence of social policies that allow parents to better combine paid work with family obligations (see figure). This was true for both mothers and fathers.
- > Policies that helped parents the most also improved the happiness of everyone in that country, whether they had children or not. It turns out that policies like guaranteed minimum paid sick and vacation days make everyone happier, but particularly parents of minor children.
- > The same pattern held even for policies like subsidized child care. Countries with cheaper out-of-pocket costs for child care had happier nonparents as well as parents, perhaps because everyone benefits when children are well socialized and their cognitive development is prioritized in early childhood.

PREDICTED HAPPINESS FOR PARENTS AND NONPARENTS IN COUNTRIES WITH WEAK FAMILY POLICIES (LOW CPI) AND STRONG FAMILY POLICIES (HIGH CPI)



This figure compares estimated happiness, on a 0-10 scale, for parents and nonparents among countries with weak family policies (with a low comprehensive policy index, or CPI) and among countries with strong family policies (or high CPI).

There is no happiness gap in countries with strong family policy “packages” – policies that cover multiple objectives such as paid time off, work schedule flexibility, and child care subsidies. On the other hand, parents are less happy than nonparents in countries with weak family policy “packages.”

Data source: ESS and ISSP, 2006-8; All control variables at the individual- and country-level are held at the sample mean.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Policies that allow parents the time and support to earn enough to take care of their children create more personal happiness. And this is true of both mothers and fathers. The social policies that support parents raise parents’ happiness rather than lowering nonparents’ happiness. Indeed, the stronger a country’s comprehensive policy “package,” the happier their general population appears to be.

Since the U.S. is the only major industrialized nation left without guaranteed parenting leave, paid sick and vacation days, and one of few rich countries that fails to subsidize child care, it is not surprising that U.S. parents have the biggest happiness gap compared to nonparents. The U.S. simply asks too much of parents at a time when the economic costs of supporting children are enormous and the time to raise them effectively has been whittled away by employers that favor long hours and no breaks.

Funding strategies that lower the costs for employers to provide paid leave and child care, as is the case in many European countries, might be key to their wider adoption in English-speaking countries such as the U.S. In addition, state-level policies recently introduced in New York, California, and Georgia that create paid parenting leave, sick leave, and public pre-K programs for everyone suggest broadening popular support for these initiatives.

REFERENCE

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