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Why Are Parents So Unhappy? And Who Would Settle for Happiness, Anyway?

Christians must see children as gifts from God, not as projects, understanding family life as a crucible for holiness, not an experiment in happiness.

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For those interested in the fate of our culture, *New York Magazine* is an indispensable barometer. This single magazine, perhaps more than any other periodical, offers feature articles that catch the cultural conversation. Granted, that cultural conversation is largely Manhattan-centric and geared to the highly educated and economically secure classes. But, since those are the very people who tend to direct the cultural conversation, what interests them will almost surely soon interest the rest of the nation.



This week, the issue is children and happiness. Not the happiness of children, but the debate over whether having children makes for parental happiness. Looking first to the sociological and psychological data, the picture looks bleak. According to the current scholarly consensus, parents are more likely to be depressed than non-parents, and parents report themselves as less happy as well.

In her article, “All Joy and No Fun: Why Parents Hate Parenting,” writer Jennifer Senior wonders aloud why parents seem to be less happy than non-parents, but simultaneously claim that parenthood is such a great thing. What is the disconnect?

“From the perspective of the species, it’s perfectly unmysterious why people have children,” writes Senior. “From the perspective of the individual, however, it’s more of a mystery than one might think. Most people assume that having children will make them happier. Yet a wide variety of academic research shows that parents are not happier than their childless peers, and in many cases are less so.”

Trust me on this — you really do not need to read through those academic research papers. Here is a summary: The “scholarly consensus” is that children and parental happiness just do not go together. According to the data, parents are less happy than non-parents, parents of infants and toddlers are especially not happy, single parents are less happy than married parents, and mothers are less happy than fathers. Except, that is, when it comes to single fathers, who are the most unhappy of all.

And yet, people continue to insist and hope that having children will make them happier. Why? “One answer could simply be that parents are deluded, in the grip of some false consciousness that’s good for mankind but not for men and women in particular,” Senior explains.

There is good reason to doubt the value of much social science research and many psychological studies. Nevertheless, taking the data at face value is an interesting exercise in thinking about the nature of parenthood and the question of human happiness.

In the most important section of her article, Jennifer Senior tellingly suggests that what might have changed is the way we view children and parenthood. In her words, “the possibility that parents don’t much enjoy parenting because the experience of raising children has fundamentally changed.” This is where her article becomes especially important.

She writes:

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

Interestingly, Senior introduces this article with a spectacularly horrifying account of a mother trying to cajole her eight-year-old son away from the computer in order to do his homework. The account comes from the massive film project undertaken by the UCLA Center on Everyday Lives of Families. These hundreds of hours of recorded middle-class family life show over and over again that many, if not most, parents see themselves as constant negotiators with their strong-willed children. The absence of parental authority and control is genuinely horrifying. One UCLA graduate student described the experience of watching the recordings as “the very purest form of birth control ever devised. Ever.”

What Jennifer Senior actually chronicles in her essay is the fact that parents now see children as projects to be developed. These children — especially those in middle and upper-middle class families — are constantly en route to one practice or another, subjected to class after class, and pushed into the level of academic and social success that their parents think absolutely necessary for success in life. These parents feel guilty if they allow a single opportunity for organized play or a learning activity to pass.

Yes, parenthood *has* changed. Many parents *do* see their children as described by Senior — as “subjects to be sculpted, stimulated, instructed, groomed.” Parental authority is replaced by constant power struggles, lest the children be psychologically warped by a parent who stands in authority. Discipline is replaced by never-ending negotiation. The peace of the home is replaced by constant activity and frenetic energy. The earliest years of a child’s life are increasingly filled with organized activity and institutional settings.

No wonder parents are less happy now. Add to this the very important insight Senior offers about the age of parenthood. As she suggests, when couples postpone parenthood for so many years, building careers and social lives and professional profiles, parenthood can seem more an interruption than a blessing.

Senior cites psychologist Jean Twenge, “They become parents later in life. There’s a loss of freedom, a loss of autonomy. It’s totally different from going from your parents’ house to immediately having a baby. Now you know what you’re giving up.”

The Christian understanding of children and parenthood just doesn’t fit these categories. The first problem is the isolation of happiness as the major concern. Interestingly enough, the Bible doesn’t seem overly concerned with human happiness. One reason for this is surely that happiness is just too passing as a perception, and too inadequate as a category. In a fallen world, the wrong things will make us happy or unhappy. Add to this the fact that we seem to be largely incompetent at making ourselves happy, or even at knowing what will make us happy. Go figure.

The second problem is the fact that marriage and children now appear on our cultural screen as personal choices, rather than as the norm and expectation. Once these responsibilities are transformed into choices, the only reason to choose them is if we believe they will make us happy. If we do not find ourselves adequately compensated — especially in emotional terms — for making this choice, we assume it was the wrong choice.

The third problem has to do with the changes in parenting that Jennifer Senior documents in her essay. From a biblical perspective, these are not healthy changes. When children gain control of the household, the home is robbed of order, health, and peace. The child is robbed of what he or she needs most — a loving parent who is undeniably in authority.

Christians must see children as gifts from God, not as projects. We should see marriage and parenthood as a stewardship and privilege, not as a mere lifestyle choice. We must resist the cultural seductions and raise children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and understand family life as a crucible for holiness, not an experiment in happiness.

And when it comes to happiness, we must aim for something higher. Christians are called to joy and satisfaction in Christ, and to find joy in the duties and privileges of this earthly life. Every parent will know moments of honest unhappiness, but the Christian parent settles for nothing less than joy.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Jennifer Senior, "[All Joy and No Fun: Why Parents Hate Parenting](#)," *New York Magazine*, July 4, 2010.

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