

# DO CHILDREN REALLY MAKE US HAPPY?



From TV brats to natural born serial killers, prospective parents have been given stark warnings about the dark side of child-rearing. So, asks **Bettina Arndt**, are the naysayers about parenthood right?

**I**T'S A MESMORISING image. The gaunt mother stands stock still surrounded by road workers, clutching her baby pram right next to the booming rat-a-tat-tat of a pneumatic drill. Relief sweeps over her face as her baby's screaming is momentarily drowned out. This is actress Tilda Swinton in her recent movie, *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, as she engages in a teeth-grinding struggle to mother a malevolent son who ultimately commits a high-school massacre.

It's hardly fun entertainment and most disconcerting for anyone toying with the

idea of having a baby. Prospective parents would also hardly have been reassured by the ABC's recent drama series, *The Slap*, where an angry man slaps an obnoxious child at a family barbecue. Here, the monster is more clearly of the parents' making, as needy, self-absorbed, volatile adults fail dismally to provide the consistent, loving care that the child needed.

In the wake of all this gloom, who would take on the tough job of parenting? For years now, there's been a steady stream of research suggesting it's just all too hard. Parents aren't happy. The

daily grind of screaming fits, nappy changes, runny noses and wars over bedtimes and homework gets them down. Let alone the damage to their bank balance. Research on happiness has long shown that parents are less happy than their childless peers. One famous study, by Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel Prize-winning behavioural economist, surveyed a large group of Texas women and found they preferred almost anything to childcare – preparing food, watching TV, shopping, even doing housework. How about that? Doing the ironing is more fun than having your ►

Right: Tilda Swinton and John C. Reilly explore the dynamics of parenting in the 2011 drama, *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, while Melissa George (below, right) played an indulgent mother in the controversial TV drama *The Slap*.



little poppet on your knee for the 32nd reading of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*.

People with kids generally show up as less happy, showing less satisfaction with their day-to-day lives compared to non-parents, with happiness declining soon after having a child. Parenting also has a marked effect increasing marital strife. More recently, however, there have been challenges to this persistently negative research, with American economists Chris Herbst and John Ifcher questioning the way the previous studies were done. Their research shows non-parents recently showing a strong drop in happiness compared to people with children, which they suggest may be due to parents having more social connectedness, which protects them during stressful economic times.

Local expert Deakin University psychology professor Robert Cummins dismisses the research of many economists into happiness as simply “fishing trips”, trawling huge amounts of data for patterns that can be quite coincidental. His work, which aims to tease out factors which impact on parental happiness, finds well-resourced parents with partners are just as happy as non-parents. “If you’re



an unemployed single mother living with two children in a Fitzroy high-rise, is another child going to increase your happiness? Probably not. But it’s a different story for a well-heeled person in a loving relationship.”

Professor Cummins points out there are clear losers in this lottery, such as the parents who find themselves caring for severely disabled children. He’s studied their wellbeing, using volunteers from Carers Australia, and found little joy in their daily grind. “Carers have the lowest levels of wellbeing of any group we’ve studied. Parents looking after disabled children often have appalling lives, without adequate resources, few friends, no support, and their relationships frequently break up under the strain.”

Such worrying issues aside, most parents simply don’t buy the notion that child-rearing means they lose out in the happiness stakes. Harvard psychologist and author of *Stumbling On Happiness*, Daniel Gilbert, reports that whenever he goes on the lecture circuit and presents the negative findings, he gets challenged by parents. “I’ve never met anyone who didn’t argue with me about this,” he reports.

The real question is why would parents keep having children if the first

one made them feel so bad? If the gloomy picture was right, surely people would stop at one child, argues journalist Shankar Vedantam writing for Slate.com. He explains, “It’s one thing to claim a stubbed toe doesn’t hurt and quite another to aim a second kick at a chair.”

Martin Seligman is one of America’s best known psychologists and the man who kick-started much of the research on personal wellbeing through his book, *Authentic Happiness*. Recently, he’s started thinking about this very issue –

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why is it that people keep having children if it makes them so miserable? That prompted a major revision in his approach to happiness research. His latest book, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding Of Happiness And Well-being*, suggests

there is a lot more to the good life than being in a cheerful mood. Seligman, a father of seven, now argues that the way we take stock of life isn’t by how much fun we are having. “I chose to listen to my six-year-old’s excruciating piano recital last night, not because it made me feel good, but because it is my parental duty and part of what gives my life meaning.”

Seligman is proposing we need to consider the meaning of life as part of the true measure of happiness. This is not exactly a new idea. In fact, >

Seligman describes this notion using the ancient Greek term “eudaimonia”, drawing on Aristotle’s ideas about living a full, productive life. It adds a vital extra dimension to current happiness research to talk not just about how we feel at the moment, but rather about life’s purpose. Family is one way of achieving that meaningful life, says Seligman, just as other institutions such as religion allow people to serve something they believe is bigger than the self. Things that matter most, like caring for children, are not always conducive to short-term happiness, but may give a real sense of fulfilment.

“People find meaning in providing unconditional love for children,” says Arthur C. Brooks in his book, *Gross National Happiness*. “Paradoxically, your happiness is raised by the very fact you are willing to have your happiness lowered through years of dirty diapers, tantrums and back-talk. Willingness to accept unhappiness from children is a source of happiness,” he says.

Well, perhaps not “happiness”, but certainly a sense of achievement in looking beyond one’s own needs and maybe delight in finding qualities in ourselves – patience, endurance, abundant love – that we didn’t know we had.

Anne Roiphe is a wonderful American writer, who for years has been writing about critical issues such as motherhood and marriage, including her own challenges with her children. She writes of her three year-old, highly anxious daughter, who can’t sit still. “She didn’t seem quite like other children and I could feel the disapproving, self-satisfied sigh of other parents on the playground, at her nursery school, in the supermarket.” From her nervous wait in the early hours of the morning for errant teenage children to return long after curfew, to the

challenges of a drug-addicted child infected with HIV, she reveals it all.

Roiphe sniffs at the idea that children invariably bring joy to a marriage. “What they do is drag the adults into the thick of the forest where adventures lie, where demons lurk, where wildflowers bloom around moss-covered rocks, where mettle is tested and courage is needed, and life is lived at its fullest.”

Living life at its fullest may well be more important than day-to-day happiness. It’s so very different from the comparative calm and control enjoyed by couples without children. As a parent, life is a series of transitions: from the nervous thrill of parenting a newborn, to the challenging social world of a school parent and the jolt when they finally depart.

I’m only now getting a hang on the business of being a parent of grown-up children, learning when to offer advice and when to zip it, as prickly young adults prefer to do their own thing. Yes, parenting forces you to dig deep, but I wouldn’t have missed it for quids.

Some years ago, I was asked to speak at a career night at my daughter’s school. I talked a little about the great life I have had as a sex therapist, journalist and writer, but my major message was simple, “Don’t forget to have babies,” I said, telling the girls that motherhood is not to be missed. The careers adviser was thrilled. “No one has ever told them that before,” she said.

How sad is that?

There’s no denying that many people enjoy happy, fulfilled lives without children, but it would be a great shame if the negative talk about parenting put people off embarking on this thrilling life adventure – the ultimate white-water rafting.

I’ll leave the last word to Anne Roiphe. “There is no boredom with children in the home. The risks are high. The voltage crackling. I would not confuse this with joy. But it is as far from the silence of the grave as one can go.” ■

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