

## Chapter X: The Parenting Decision

“Being in a good relationship is a risk factor for becoming a parent.”<sup>1</sup>

– Father and UCLA psychology professor Thomas Bradbury

This chapter – for people considering becoming parents – has six sections: “Parenting won’t make you happy,” “Is the problem parenting or over-parenting?” “Parenting doesn’t bring happiness but does bring satisfaction,” “Don’t have kids when young,” “Don’t have too many kids,” and “For young kids, quality parenting is somewhat better than daycare.”

### ***Parenting won’t make you happy***

Many studies have found that parents are moderately less happy, less satisfied with life, less satisfied with their marriages and moderately more stressed and likely to suffer from mental illness. For example: “[P]arents in the United States experience depression and emotional distress more often than their childless adult counterparts. Parents of young children report far more depression, emotional distress, and other negative emotions than non-parents, and parents of grown children have no better well-being than adults who never had children.”<sup>2</sup>

The net effect of children on parental happiness is relatively small and negative, but parents with adult children feel greater life satisfaction. Raising children requires hundreds of thousands of dollars, plus tremendous investments of time. But children are a source of pride and love. A meta-analysis found 62% of childless women are highly satisfied with their marriages versus just 38% of mothers with infants.<sup>3</sup> Overall, “55% of people without children have high marital satisfaction compared with 45% of people with children.”<sup>4</sup> The study found parental marriage satisfaction has fallen over time – suggesting parenting has become more stressful. Parental marriage satisfaction is lower for parents with young children. It’s also lower for parents with high socioeconomic status, likely because wealthy, educated parents have tremendously increased the time, effort and money they spend with/on their children.

Parenting is hard work. Though we romanticize parenting, studies say parents – especially busy moms – are less happy. Sociology professor Robin Simon says, “No group of parents, whether married,

single, step or empty-nesters, reported significantly greater emotional wellbeing than non-parents. Of the three major components of adult life – employment, friendship and parenthood – raising children is the only one that doesn't promote wellbeing.”<sup>5</sup>

In Daniel Gilbert's 2006 book *Stumbling on Happiness*, the Harvard professor of psychology looks at several studies and concludes that marital satisfaction decreases dramatically after the birth of the first child—and increases only when the last child has left home. He also ascertains that parents are happier grocery shopping and even sleeping than spending time with their kids. Other data cited by 2008's *Gross National Happiness* author, Arthur C. Brooks, finds that parents are about 7 percentage points less likely to report being happy than the childless...

“Parents experience lower levels of emotional well-being, less frequent positive emotions and more frequent negative emotions than their childless peers,” says Florida State University's Robin Simon.<sup>6</sup>

Kids will change your life in magical ways. I love watching our kids dance and play together nicely. I smile hearing them laugh together. I've been continually amazed watching their ability to think and communicate develop. And I love (some of) their art, like my 5-year-old's Kandinsky-styled painting. (He has a budding career in art forgery.) But kids also bring many headaches, cost a small – perhaps even large – fortune, and greatly limit the time you have to do things – travel, read, do crossword puzzles, watch movies, etc. – you would choose to do, individually or as a couple, without children: “I have been a mother for five years... But when I tried to think of ways I spent time before my kids... it came flooding back – the ski trips, tennis matches, scrapbooking marathons. Then I got bummed out that all three of those enjoyable tasks have happened exactly zero times since I've given birth.”<sup>7</sup> Your children's school and friends limit your ability to relocate to take a new job, and you must plan your lives around school vacations and snow days. And some kids develop a knack for driving their parents insane.

Ronni Prior wisely advises: “the only reason to have children is because you want them, very badly. It's hard enough to make a go of child-rearing under those ideal circumstances. IMO, too many have children without really knowing what they are getting into. I did. I made a hash of it, too! It's a wonder any of my children even speak to me!”<sup>8</sup>

If you really want children, please have children... but don't expect them to magically fill your life with joy while dressing themselves, picking up after themselves, always complying with your wishes, playing only with children you approve of, etc. Kids will bring you large doses of both joy and

headache, in roughly equal measure. In your later decades, you'll likely feel proud you raised children to adulthood. But the next 20+ years will be a rough river raft with both thrills and spills. The parenting lifestyle isn't better or worse than the childless lifestyle; it's just very, very different.

If you already have children and don't want them, you're reading this too late. Sorry, no refunds! But we will now dig into exactly how and why children bring parents approximately equal doses of pain and pleasure and develop some strategies for mitigating their negative impacts.

### ***Is the problem parenting or over-parenting and mom's excessive chores?***

To me, the data suggest the real problem is a combination of over-parenting and the tendency for moms to do so many of the unpleasant family chores. A huge clue is that fathers are much happier than other men but mothers are somewhat less happy than other women. A superb 2012 study, titled "In Defense of Parenthood: Children Are Associated With More Joy Than Misery," measured happiness and satisfaction three ways:

- First, a national survey of 6,906 people found "parenthood was associated with greater satisfaction ( $b = 0.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and happiness ( $b = 0.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ) only among fathers."<sup>9</sup>
- Second, a study that randomly interrupted 329 adults during their day and asked about their current emotions found "Fathers scored higher than childless men on all well-being indicators (all  $t$ s  $> 2.30$  and  $r$ s  $> .23$ ). Mothers only reported fewer depressive symptoms ( $t[127] = 2.06$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $r = 0.18$ ) and marginally more daily positive emotion ( $t[171] = 1.86$ ,  $p = .065$ ,  $r = .14$ ) than childless women."<sup>10</sup>
- Third, a study of 186 parents found "parents reported more [good feelings]... and a stronger sense of meaning in life... during episodes when they were taking care of their children than when they were not. Sex did not significantly moderate these results."<sup>11</sup>

No matter how you measure happiness and satisfaction, dads are much happier and satisfied than their unmarried counterparts, but moms are, if anything, less happy than childless women. Given that fathers and mothers report equal increases in happiness when taking care of their children, it seems likely mom's too stressed out doing the shopping and dishes and laundry and middle-of-the-night

breastfeedings and driving kids to activities to derive net happiness from her kids, whereas dad's happier because he spends quality time with his kids without the related chores. Complains one mom: "when I was propped up in bed for the second time that night with my new baby... My husband acknowledged the ripple in the nighttime peace with a grunt, and that's about it. And why should he do more? There's no use in both of us being a wreck in the morning. Nonetheless, it's hard not to seethe."<sup>12</sup>

This theory is strengthened by another finding: "married parents did not differ in satisfaction... or happiness... from married people without children, but unmarried parents reported lower happiness ( $b = -0.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and satisfaction ( $b = -0.21$ ,  $p = .006$ ) than their childless counterparts."<sup>13</sup> Because unmarried parents must handle all chores themselves – leaving less time to enjoy playing with their kids – they suffer more of the burdens of parenthood while deriving fewer of the psychological benefits. Though married moms have it rough, single moms suffer even worse.

American over-parenting is another likely culprit. UCLA's Center on the Everyday Lives of Families videotaped 1,540 hours of life inside 32 families. They found "a fire shower of stress, multitasking and mutual nitpicking."<sup>14</sup> A researcher on the project called the videotape "The very purest form of birth control ever devised. Ever."<sup>15</sup>

The problem may not be parenting per se but child-centric "soccer mom" parenting, in which parents act like servants to their helpless, emotionally fragile demigods. American parents coddle our children, rushing to help them when they shout for us and doing their homework with – sometimes even for – them. A cross-cultural parenting comparison found stark differences:

In [other] cultures, young children were expected to contribute substantially to the community, says Dr. Ochs. Children in Samoa serve food to their elders, waiting patiently in front of them before they eat, as shown in one video snippet. Another video clip shows a girl around 5 years of age in Peru's Amazon region climbing a tall tree to harvest papaya, and helping haul logs thicker than her leg to stoke a fire...

In 22 of 30 [U.S.] families, children frequently ignored or resisted appeals to help, according to a study published in the journal *Ethos* in 2009. In the remaining eight families, the children weren't asked to do much. In some cases, the children routinely asked the parents to do tasks, like getting them silverware. "How am I supposed to cut my food?" Dr. Ochs recalls one girl asking her parents.

Asking children to do a task led to much negotiation, and when parents asked, it sounded often like they were asking a favor, not making a demand, researchers said. Parents interviewed about

their behavior said it was often too much trouble to ask.

For instance, one exchange caught on video shows an 8-year-old named Ben sprawled out on a couch near the front door, lifting his white, high-top sneaker to his father, the shoe laced. “Dad, untie my shoe,” he pleads. His father says Ben needs to say “please.” ...Ben says, “Please put my shoe on and tie it,” and his father obliges.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps because Americans live in family bubbles called “houses,” parents treat children as clay they alone can shape rather than as independent minds capable of finding their own learning opportunities and growing by solving their own problems. Modern child rearing is unnatural and totally different from how our ancestors – and “less civilized” tribes today – raised children:

[C]hildren have their most negative impact on parental well-being when they are adolescents or very young (i.e., infant or toddler stage; cf. Compton, 2004). In ancestral environments, adolescents would not have resided at home; instead, they would have lived independently after reaching puberty. Thus, the characteristically rebellious and independence-seeking behavior of teenagers today is constrained by laws that render parents responsible for children until they are 18 years old (Kanazawa, 2008). Moreover, raising children has historically been a collective responsibility, illustrated by the well-known adage, “it takes a village” (cf. Clinton, 1996). Our ancestors brought up very young children in the context of a larger village, clan, or tribe, which allowed childcare responsibilities to be shared across many individuals—both family members and neighbors. By contrast, the level of distress for modern-day parents is magnified when only one or two individuals are available to respond to a child’s cries and needs.<sup>17</sup>

Because we take parenting so seriously, it’s a huge source of spousal disagreement. A study of 748 conflicts reported by 100 husbands and 100 wives in families with one to six children found 36.4% of husbands’ problems and 38.9% of wives’ problems involved “the behavior of [their] children, differences in parenting styles, who should discipline your children and when, care of your children.”<sup>18</sup> Problems involved “family, in-laws, children from previous relationship, previous spouses” just 10.7% of the time for husbands and 11.9% of the time for wives. Though everyone says money’s the root of marriage problems, parenting issues arose twice as often: just 18.3% of husbands’ problems and 19.4% of wives’ problems involved “Spending, wages, salary, [or] bills.” That’s a lower percentage than household chores (25.1% / 24.1%), work (19.3% / 18.9%) and leisure/recreation (19.5% / 20.1%).

Since parents have frequent disagreements over chores, work and leisure – all of which are exacerbated by children – children are clearly a primary source of spousal disagreements. Because children are expensive, they’re also “responsible” for some parental financial stress. And, lastly, there’s the negative effect all these parenting-related stresses have on parents’ moods, which likely leaves parents less able to cope with the other issues that cause childless couples marital stress. (One piece of

good news for parents: parenting disagreements – though more frequent – are less intense, less hostile, less depressing, and more often resolved than money problems.<sup>19)</sup>

### ***Parenting doesn't bring happiness but does bring satisfaction***

Though kids don't, on average, raise mom's moment-by-moment happiness, life isn't all about happiness, as George Loewenstein movingly reminds us:

My wife and I spent last Thanksgiving vacation with her family, in Florida, with much of the family's time devoted to taking care of her ailing father. If the quality of our days during that vacation had been elicited using [satisfaction measures], our vacation would have come out very unfavorably. Much of the care-giving elicited strong negative emotions... [But] By caring for their aging parent, my wife and her siblings were displaying their humanity, sharing their love for their father and their sense of the family as an integral unit. None of these values would have been picked up by ratings of momentary happiness. In one of the empirical studies reported in Krueger et al., the single activity that comes out worst on the U-index, whether or not one controls for fixed effects, is adult care.<sup>20</sup>

Happiness studies find that caring for aging parents can be horribly unpleasant. Our parents – stricken by Alzheimer's perhaps – may not even remember who we are. Nevertheless, caring for them seems important and meaningful, even though it can make us deeply unhappy.

Parenting is similar. Despite the many trials and travails, few parents regret their decision to have children, and most swear their children are the joy of their life. The father of the positive psychology movement, Martin Seligman, says his earlier emphasis on happiness was excessively narrow because happiness can't explain why people have children when parents are less happy than childless couples, why the superrich pursue even greater wealth when they can't spend what they already have, and why some people play bridge obsessively despite seemingly having no fun and making no money from it. Some parenting studies suggest parents who feel less happy on a minute-by-minute basis because of their kids simultaneously feel more satisfied overall because they perceive their lives as more meaningful. Some studies “report relatively higher feelings of meaning, gratification, and reward (Russell, 1974; Umberson & Gove, 1989; White & Dolan, 2009).”<sup>21</sup>

It's also possible people are foolishly deciding to have children, seek wealth and engage in addictive activities that don't make them happy. Seligman disagrees, saying we just need a broader conception of satisfaction:

“Watching [people] play [bridge], seeing them cheat, it kept hitting me that accomplishment is a human desiderata in itself.”

This feeling of accomplishment contributes to what the ancient Greeks called *eudaimonia*, which roughly translates to “well-being” or “flourishing,” a concept that Dr. Seligman has borrowed for the title of his new book, *Flourish*. He has also created his own acronym, Perma, for what he defines as the five crucial elements of well-being, each pursued for its own sake: positive emotion, engagement (the feeling of being lost in a task), relationships, meaning and accomplishment.<sup>22</sup>

Professors Mathew White and Paul Dolan distinguish between pleasurable and rewarding activities. Their data suggest watching TV, eating, and relaxing are all pleasurable but unrewarding. Work is rewarding but unpleasurable. Commuting is neither rewarding nor pleasurable. Volunteering and prayer are both rewarding and pleasurable. So, what about parenting? Their data say parenting is highly rewarding but only barely pleasurable.<sup>23</sup>

Additional evidence of the rewards of parenting is that parents seldom regret having kids, whereas some childless people regret not having kids. Reinterviewed in their 70s, ten participants in Lewis Terman’s famous long-term study of promising young people – his “Termites” or “geniuses” – said “the first thing they would do differently if they had the opportunity” was “tr[y] harder to be married and/or have a family.”<sup>24</sup> Two listed their top regret as “Should have had more children.” And two said they “Should have spent more time with children/grandchildren when they were young.” No one reported having children as a regret, and this may reflect our tendency to regret inactions: “54% of the regrets appeared to be regrets of inaction, whereas only 12% appeared to be regrets of action.”<sup>25</sup>

It’s further possible we look back fondly on parenthood because our brains remember the good times and censor the bad (or reinterpret them as better than they were). As Billy Joel reminds us, “the good ole days weren’t always good.” Our brains regularly rewrite history in ways we’re completely unaware of:

Dr. Neisser’s work showed that memory is a reconstruction of the past, not an accurate snapshot of it. He found that however much people think they are remembering actual events, they are really remembering memories — and probably memories of memories. The mind, he said, conflates things. ...[A]fter the space shuttle Challenger exploded in 1986, Dr. Neisser asked students to write down their immediate experience upon hearing the news. Nearly three years later, he asked them to recount it. A quarter of the accounts were strikingly different, half were somewhat different, and less than a tenth had all the details correct. All were confident that their latter accounts were completely accurate...

Dr. Neisser came to the realization that his own memory was as fragile as those of his research subjects. For years, he had said that he was listening to a baseball game on the radio when he heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. Finally, he said, it dawned on him that he could not have been listening to a baseball game in December.<sup>26</sup>

I suspect many people chase illusory visions of happiness – especially the false belief that children or riches will bring joy – and then censor their memories to retroactively justify their decisions by remembering all the good consequences while forgetting the bad. But working hard to raise children certainly brings a sense of earned satisfaction and pride that can outweigh the loss of “happiness” a parent might have experienced had they instead spent those thousands of parenting hours on leisure. Besides, if we feel satisfaction and pride in our retirement years, does it matter whether the good times *really* outweighed the bad, as long as our brains *believe* they did?

### ***Don't have kids when young***

“young parents (ages 17-25) were less satisfied with their lives than their childless counterparts ( $b = -0.39, p < .001$ ); mid-range age parents (ages 26-62) were more satisfied than their childless peers ( $b = 0.42, p < .001$ ); and older parents (ages 63 and older) did not differ from older non-parents ( $b = 0.16, p = .29$ ).”<sup>27</sup>

The study above found that the happiest Americans are older, married parents. Says one of the researchers, “if you are older (and presumably more mature) and if you are married (and presumably have more social and financial support), then you’re likely to be happier if you have children than your childless peers. This is not true, however, for single parents or very young parents.”<sup>28</sup>

An 86-nation study of more than 200,000 people over 25 years found a similar pattern of unhappy young parents and happy older parents with a decrease in parental happiness as the number of kids increased, except among parents over age 50:

while for parents under 30 the level of happiness decreases with the first and each additional child, mothers and fathers aged 30 to 39 feel as happy as childless peers until they have four children or more. From age 40 onwards parents are even more content than childless couples are unless they have more than three children. Mothers and fathers over 50 are generally happier than their childless peers, no matter how numerous their offspring.<sup>29</sup>

Older, married parents tend to have many advantages over younger, unmarried parents: more financial resources, larger homes, more stable careers, more stable personal lives and relationships, greater life experience. Married parents also have two people to share responsibilities. So it’s little

wonder that older, married parents are happier. Delaying parenthood is a wise strategy.

### ***Don't have too many kids***

“The broad message is not that children make you less happy; it’s just that children don’t make you *more* happy.” That is, [Andrew Oswald] tells me, unless you have more than one. “Then the studies show a more negative impact.”<sup>30</sup>

There’s a modest negative relationship between happiness and the number of children one has.<sup>31</sup> Though having five or six children won’t ruin your life, it could hurt your children because children from larger families tend to do worse.

The more children in a family, the less academic achievement those children are likely to attain. In one study of low-income black families, children in 2-child families have 6th grade reading scores 3.5% lower than only children. In 3-child families, scores are nearly 6% lower. 4-child families: 7% lower. Et cetera. Middle children in 8-child families are most disadvantaged, scoring 11% below single children.<sup>32</sup> The same pattern holds – even more starkly – for 6th grade vocabulary. 2-family children are disadvantaged 4.5% relative to only children. 3-child family scores are 7% lower. 4-child families: 9% lower. Etc. Middle children in 8-child families score nearly 14% below single children.<sup>33</sup>

If you can afford nannies and tutors, this effect would likely be smaller. But less parental attention translates into less successful children. A study of a more socioeconomically diverse group of 503 4-year-olds using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test also found that “The presence of other siblings has a negative effect on the child’s PPVT scores,” consistent with other research into the effect of family size on children’s achievement, which finds “children from smaller families have higher achievement.”<sup>34</sup>

These studies explain an apparent contradiction that has always confused me: 1) Many successful people are first-born children; and, 2) substantial evidence suggests birth order doesn’t much matter. These studies imply first-borns, on average, achieve more simply because small families are advantageous learning environments and a far higher percentage of first-borns grow up in small families than, say, fourth-born children.

Parental time is a scarce resource that must be divided among children. The larger your family, the less time each child receives:

By her third child, she may no longer breast-feed [and] many other things may have changed as well. Maybe she is now using day care, exposing the baby to more illnesses. Surely she is not noticing that kid No. 2 has the baby's pacifier in his mouth, or that the cat is sleeping in the crib (trust me on this one). She is also not staring lovingly into the baby's eyes all day, singing songs, reading book after infant book, because she has to make sure that the other two kids are not drowning each other in the tub.<sup>35</sup>

### ***For young kids, quality parenting is somewhat better than daycare***

A meta-analysis of 69 studies of the impact of maternal employment during early childhood (first three years of life) concluded that “The small effect size and primarily nonsignificant results... should allay concerns about mothers working when children are young. However, negative findings associated with employment during the child's first year are compatible with calls for more generous maternal leave policies.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, the longer you can afford to stay home with your child during their first year, the better. But putting your child in daycare or leaving them with grandparents, especially after their first year, will not substantially hurt your child's future.

But digging into the data suggests educated stay-at-home parents benefit children more than this meta-study claims. Warning: I'm about to go into significant detail about “selection bias,” not just to show that stay-at-home moms are more beneficial than the aforementioned analysis suggests but also because “selection bias” is an extremely common problem plaguing statistical analyses and something everyone should understand.

The media constantly makes statements that dangerously oversimplify academic research, like “People who [drink coffee/beer/wine/soda, sit all day, eat hotdogs, own cellphones, take vitamin E] are X% [more/less] likely to [live longer, develop cancer/diabetes/Alzheimer's, have a car accident].” These studies are often totally misleading. It's *possible* fish oil supplements make you healthier, but the fact that people who take fish oil supplements are healthier doesn't *prove* anything. People who take fish oil supplements are more concerned about their health than people who don't, so they exercise more, eat healthier food, make sure they get enough sleep, etc. Of course they're healthier! Do fish oil supplements improve their health? We don't know. People who use Macs tend to be wealthier, better educated and more liberal than people who use Windows.<sup>37</sup> But ditching your PC for a Mac won't make you wealthier, better educated or more liberal. Mac owners are nearly twice as likely to be vegetarians, but buying a Mac won't make you stop eating meat.

There are two broad sources of statistics: correlations, and controlled experiments. Correlations – which say things like “people who do X are Y” – cannot prove causation because X could cause Y, Y could cause X, or some other factor Z could cause both X and Y. Buying a Mac doesn’t make you liberal, wealthy, or educated, but there’s a strong correlation between owning a Mac and being liberal, wealthy, and educated due to “selection bias.” Wealthy, educated, liberal people tend to choose/select Macs over PCs. The only way to totally control selection bias is to randomly force people to use only Macs or only PCs. That’s infeasible, so statisticians attempt to model the selection bias, which is very hard.

Only controlled experiments, which randomly assign study participants to two or more groups, can prove causation. Controlled experiments, done carefully with large, randomly assigned groups, can determine causation because they hold everything constant except the presumed cause. They then see how the different groups respond to the presence or absence of the thing under study (ideally without informing study participants which group they’re in, which is not always possible). To run a controlled experiment on the effect of diet on health, for example, researchers must literally lock people in a room for weeks or months and control exactly what each research subject eats. Such studies exist, but they’re difficult and expensive. Unsurprisingly, many statistics trumpeted in the media are based on correlational analysis, not controlled experiments. This is especially true of things that affect people over long time periods because it’s infeasible to lock people in a room for a decade to see how forcing them to use or not use a cell phone affects their cancer risk.

Determining the impact of a mother working outside the home suffers the same problem. As one analysis of the difficulty of testing the impact of maternal employment notes, “Women are not plots of land who can be randomly assigned different fertilizer treatments.”<sup>38</sup> We can’t run a true experiment because we can’t randomly force some mothers to work and others to stay home. Employed mothers tend to be more capable mothers: “Brooks-Gunn et al. (2010) found that U.S. White, non-Hispanic mothers employed part time during infancy had higher scores on observed sensitivity through first grade than mothers who were not employed during infancy.”<sup>39</sup> “In a study of New Zealand families of school-age children, Horwood and Fergusson (1999) found that mothers employed part time were rated as more responsive than those not employed.”<sup>40</sup> And “Muller (1995) found that mothers employed part time were more involved in school-related activities than nonemployed mothers.”<sup>41</sup>

One study found that the measured positive relationship between low-income mothers' work and child health and child behavioral outcomes vanished completely after trying to control for mother quality: "[A]lthough employed mothers who are no longer receiving welfare report better health and behavioral outcomes for their children, these advantages are explained by the unobserved characteristics of mothers who make a successful transition to employment, rather than to work per se."<sup>42</sup>

Another study that tried to control for mother quality found "Negative effects of maternal employment on children's cognitive outcomes... primarily for children whose mothers were employed full time in the first year postbirth as compared with children whose mothers postponed work until after their child's first year of life and also as compared with mothers who worked part time in the first year. Negative effects in terms of increased externalizing behavioral problems were evident in each of these comparisons involving mothers who worked full time in the first year."<sup>43</sup>

The data say children in low-income and single-parent families do better when their moms work outside the home, while children in wealthier two-parent families do better when moms stay home: "there was a positive association between early maternal employment and [cognitive] achievement for welfare samples; this effect was significant for overall achievement and IQ. For non-welfare samples, there was a significant negative association between [maternal] employment and formal achievement tests; the point estimates were of a comparable size but nonsignificant for overall achievement and IQ."<sup>44</sup> In non-welfare families, children do better with a stay-at-home parent:

children in middle- and upper-class families with two parents were slightly more likely to see decreases in [cognitive] achievement later on [if their mom returned to work before their third birthday]. In addition, slight increases in externalizing behaviors were evident later on if the mother went back to work full-time during the first year of the child's life. "This suggests that [for] families who are not struggling financially..." said Lucas-Thompson "...alternate care arrangements may not be as emotionally supportive as the child's mother."<sup>45</sup>

These results seem to imply different households should make different maternal work choices.

But *why* do children whose educated, high-income parents stayed home with them when they were young do better while children whose poorly educated, low-income parents stayed home with them when they were young do worse? Here are three plausible explanations:

- THEORY 1: High-income, high-education parents are better for young kids than daycare but low-income, low-education parents are worse because many are lousy parents whose children may find daycare more supportive, stimulating and enriching. IMPLICATION: Low-income, low-education parents should send children to daycare but high-income, high-education parents should try to stay home with young children.
- THEORY 2: Lower family income has more serious consequences (stress, hunger, few toys, etc.) for low-income families than high-income families. Low-income working moms are more capable/talented than low-income moms who stay home and could do better for their children than daycare but work because they need the money more than high-income parents. IMPLICATION: Children of moms who are capable of holding a job would be better off – ignoring the effect of family income – if their moms stayed with them when they’re young. If a low-income mom received the equivalent of a wage to stay home, children would benefit from her presence.
- THEORY 3: Whether mom stays home or works is irrelevant. What matters is how many months her infant drinks brain-boosting breastmilk. Wealthier, educated stay-at-home moms know the research saying breast milk is great for babies, so they breastfeed their kids for a full year, whereas low-income, low-education stay-at-home moms don’t bother giving their kids breastmilk. IMPLICATION: All moms should feel free to work, even when their children are very young, if they use a breast pump and give their infants plenty of breast milk.

We don’t know which theory is correct. Perhaps more than one.

In a perfect world, new moms would breastfeed each child for a year because breast milk has been proven to build healthier brains:

among the studies that properly controlled for confounding variables (variables that could explain the group differences), kids who were breast-fed had higher cognitive scores than kids who were formula-fed, and this effect was stronger for low-birth-weight infants. However the effects were very mild, in that breast-feeding resulted in an average of 3 additional IQ-equivalent points.<sup>46</sup>

In “The Case Against Breast-Feeding” – which stresses how challenging breastfeeding is in modern society – Hanna Rosin writes, “evidence on IQs is intriguing but not all that compelling, and at best suggests a small advantage, perhaps five points.”<sup>47</sup> Rosin argues that healthier, more disease-resistant

babies and 3 to 5 IQ points aren't worth the very significant aggravation of breastfeeding. But my wife felt the price of breastfeeding – waking up in the middle of the night, finding time and privacy to pump at work, storing and transporting the milk, etc. – to boost her children's lifelong brainpower 3% to 5% was a massive bargain compared with the billions of dollars parents pay for tutors, private schools, SAT prep courses and all sorts of activities providing much lower payoffs. My wife returned to work several months after giving birth but kept using a breast pump, and we fed our kids breast milk for a year. To us, it was a no-brainer. (It's even conceivable breast milk is of no benefit and what really helps infants is frequent quality interactions with mommy during feedings.<sup>48</sup> One attempt to separate these effects found a 5.3 IQ point benefit, of which “maternal bonding and the decision to breast-feed account for about 40 percent of that increase [and] 60 percent – 3.2 points – are related to the actual nutritional value of the breast milk.”<sup>49</sup>)

When researchers control for family income, parental education, etc., “The adjusted effects... indicated a small negative association [between maternal employment and children's cognitive achievement] that was significant only for formal achievement tests.”<sup>50</sup> This is also true of behavioral issues: “For overall behavior problems, adjusted effects were significantly negative; for externalizing behaviors [bullying, etc.], adjusted effects were also negative and of a comparable magnitude but were not significant.”<sup>51</sup> In other words, after controlling for socio-economic factors, children whose parents stayed home with them before their third birthdays were better behaved and more cognitively advanced later in childhood. A review of many studies that tried to control for selection bias reached a similar conclusion:

Controlling for observed and unobserved characteristics in a variety of ways leads to estimates of maternal employment effects that may be negative for employment in the first year of the child's life, but are generally negligible thereafter. Effects may be more negative for children of high socio-economic status mothers. For disadvantaged children, there is relatively strong evidence that maternal employment may even be beneficial, as long as it raises family income.<sup>52</sup>

The better a mom you believe you are, the lower the quality of alternative childcare you can find, and the higher your family income, the greater the benefit of staying home with your child: “Smaller negative effects of first-year maternal employment on cognitive outcomes for less-advantaged children have been found in prior studies, and this pattern has been interpreted as these children having less to lose by being in care with someone other than their mother than children who come from more advantaged families (see, for instance, Desai, Chase-Lansdale, & Michael, 1989).”<sup>53</sup>

Moms must balance their financial needs against the marginal benefit they believe they can provide their child relative to daycare. Moms who can afford to not work and believe they can be quality moms probably do their babies a favor staying with them for at least the first year. Low-income moms face a tough tradeoff because there's evidence children in low-income families benefit from both higher family income and time spent with mom.<sup>54</sup>

The negative impacts of working moms seem small, except “with very intensive, full-time employment early on [after birth].”<sup>55</sup> So moms should not feel guilty, whatever decision they make. You're not dooming your child's future sending them to daycare, even before age 1. My wife and I had the luxury of keeping our kids home till age 2-2½, and I interpret the research as saying staying home with kids till age 2 or 3 helps them a bit, if you can afford to and want to.

I've ignored the question of what's best for mom. Working outside the house may benefit mothers with children aged 6 months through 5th grade. Stay-at-home moms suffer more from depressive symptoms and poor health, relative to mothers employed full or part time.<sup>56</sup> (But it could be that mothers prone to depression and ill health are less likely to have jobs.) Compared with part-time moms, moms who work full-time are far more likely to have work interfere with family and family interfere with work<sup>57</sup> and much less involved in their children's schools.<sup>58</sup> Working full-time while parenting is stressful, esp. for moms because they bear more than half the parenting burden.

Moms who choose to work outside the home should avoid aiming for perfection at work and perfection at home because that's a recipe for depression: “working mothers who expressed a supermom attitude that work and home lives can be blended with relative ease showed more depression symptoms than working moms who expected that they would have to forego some aspects of their career or parenting to achieve a work-life balance... ‘You can happily combine child rearing and a career, if you're willing to let some things slide,’ Leupp said.”<sup>59</sup>

Regardless of what you choose, by 2 or 2½, your kids will either crave the company of other kids or need to be nudged out of their cosy nest to develop social skills. And non-working moms don't spend substantially more time with children than working moms. In 1997, children of non-working moms spent 47.38 hours/week with mom versus children of working moms who spent 39.24 hours/week with mom,<sup>60</sup> a difference of about an hour per day. And children of non-working moms spent 23.0

hours/week actively involved with mom versus children of working moms who spent 20.2 hours/week actively involved with mom, a difference of less than 30 minutes a day.<sup>61</sup> So moms should consider at least part-time work. Working full-time after your child's first birthday might have a slight negative impact, but working full-time after their third birthday will have no measurable impact.