

Thinking twice about having kids even if money isn't an issue?

There are many ways to consider whether becoming a parent is worth the effort. Here are four frames to look at.

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A recent article by psychologist Amy Lim suggests that if you're in pursuit of social status, then you are more inclined to put off having children. But is that really the case for you? And if it is, are there better reasons to not have children, or alternatively, to change your mind about not having them?

As academics who are also parents of two feisty young children, we have examined the coin toss of having children from every angle perceivable to us. There are at least four different frames through which to explore this question. We suggest that thinking through these can help anyone considering whether to have children to get a better grip on what might be at stake in their decision.

SHORT-TERM V LONG-TERM INTEREST

This is the social prism through which having children has traditionally been talked about. Initially, having children is burdensome. There's no energy vampire like a young child, needing constant loving care when all you'd like is an occasional sliver of solitude. Parents invest huge amounts of time and money in their children. Their lives become more stressful, with little opportunity for "me" time, and "couple" time. Regrettably, these burdens are especially felt by mothers, who tend to sacrifice more of themselves for their children.

Yet, in the long term, children can be a great boon. If things go well, they will eventually reciprocate your sacrifices and devotion and be a major pillar of your support network. They will respect you, admire you, and may even carry on your important life projects. As you age, having them in your life will, seemingly by osmosis, keep you young, connecting your life to future generations.

This framing encourages people to see children as an investment in their future. Some of the more time-honoured aspects of this framing make this a prominent lens that those of us from more



One of the best ways to broaden your life experience is to have children, say the writers. Raising children provides prolonged exposure to the vagaries of human life in a way that few other options can. ST FILE PHOTO

traditional societies have been socialised to use. However, as societies like ours mature, and people's options and choices expand, more people are seriously considering if there are other routes, not involving raising children, to experiencing some of these upsides.

FOR YOURSELF OR FOR SOCIETY?

Another framing is that having children is a personal project that adults pursue because it satisfies preferences. For example, to create life that is biologically connected to you, have a line of descendants, experience parenthood, deepen your relationship with your partner, or experience the special kind of love that exists between parent and child.

Pursuing such personal projects is generally fine. However, if you are socially conscientious, you need to ask yourself whether the social cost is too great. Some worry that having children is socially irresponsible, given the environmental footprint (especially in advanced economies) of each new child who enters the world. Other versions of this argument appeal to overpopulation, or the bleak future the next generation will face with threats such as catastrophic climate change, nuclear war, super pandemics, or, in our local setting, the stressful kiasu culture.

There is also a reverse framing that sees having children as a duty you owe to your country, faith or ancestors. In this framing, the more selfish choice is to enjoy

the freedom of a life unencumbered by children, and the conscientious choice is to take on the burden of child-rearing.

PLEASURE V MEANING

A third frame pits the pleasurable life against the meaningful life. Some research finds that after having children, your subjective well-being decreases. In their 2014 article, psychologists S. Katherine Nelson, Kostadin Kushlev and Sonja Lyubomirsky reveal the hazards of providing blanket answers regarding the association between parenthood and well-being at the broadest level, particularly when those answers involve comparing all types of parents with all types of non-parents. However, there is at least clear evidence that becoming a parent makes your life more stressful, hectic and fatigued. It may make your life less enjoyable overall. But this may be offset by your life becoming more meaningful. Bringing new life into the world, which you nurture into an autonomous adult and maintain a special lifelong relationship with, is arguably among the most meaningful human experiences you can have.

One thing often overlooked here is how much personal growth conscientious parenting requires. In lamenting what we sacrifice to have children, we rarely think about what we gain beyond the obvious. To show up for our children in the ways they need, we need to do a tremendous amount of work on

ourselves so that we can process our baggage and assuage our triggers. Parenting on autopilot is a cause for concern. Many who are hesitant to become parents worry they will inadvertently pass on their own trauma from being cared for by people who didn't understand or show compassion to themselves. Parenting can be a force for "doing the work" – working on one's personal growth. Conscientious parents live a more meaningful life by expanding their self-understanding, building their resilience and deepening their relationships.

Perhaps living a meaningful life is more important than living a pleasurable one. If so, having children is the better choice. However, if you struggle to find meaning through parenting, then the loss of pleasure might make you better off saying no to children.

SINGLE-MINDED OR WELL-ROUNDED?

The final frame pits a narrowly focused life of high achievement against a well-rounded life. In the previous frame, we suggested that parenting can enhance life's meaning. However, "workism" suggests the opposite. "Workism" is the growing trend for people to identify with their careers, and make their work the primary source of meaning in their lives. Having children is likely to interfere with optimising the meaning you create through work; it is a demanding life project replete with surprises that compete with, delay and

sometimes override your career goals. This single-mindedness often also coincides with a couple's peak reproductive years.

Some see workism as a socially destructive force that pushes people to abandon traditional sources of value and focus instead on building their CVs and climbing the corporate ladder. This relates to the pursuit of social status explored by Dr Lim in her article. We agree that it has this bad side. However, on the upside, if you are talented and do work that positively contributes to society, then a life devoted to work may give you an opportunity to have an impact on the world that you otherwise couldn't. Indeed, in a 2023 CNA-YouGov survey, impact to "career and current lifestyle" was the second-most cited reason (after costliness) for not wanting children.

There is, however, something often overlooked here. What if a good life is about more than just maximising your impact? A narrowly specialised, high-achieving life may have the greater impact. Yet, you lose something by giving up on many of the diverse experiences available to humans. A well-rounded life that includes many of these experiences may be a better life to live.

One of the best ways to broaden your life experience is to have children. Raising children provides prolonged exposure to the vagaries of human life in a way that few other options can. It has in-built mechanisms for developing nuance, perspective and resilience. This is enhanced when parents move beyond traditional gender expectations and give each other equal opportunities to create meaning through working, nurturing children and connecting with community.

Our point is not that the narrowly focused specialised life is always a mistake. The world would be impoverished if it lacked the great contributions that can be made only by those who live highly specialised lives. The point is rather that those attracted to such a life should carefully weigh up what they gain in achievement against what they lose in balance.

These four frames articulate related but differing considerations for those wondering if they should have children. It seems to us that the only wrong answer is an unconsidered one.

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