

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Parenthood has been and remains a central aspiration among Americans. In surveys, most young Americans still say they would like to have two or more children. At the same time, a growing share of young women and men believe that a good marriage is personally unattainable, and more are raising children outside of marriage. As a culture, we remain certain about parenthood, but not so sure about marriage.

When Baby Makes Three marshals nationally representative data from three surveys—including a new survey of young married couples in America—to respond to three questions: Is it emotionally easier to parent alone in a world in which a good marriage seems increasingly out of reach? Is parenthood itself an obstacle to a good marriage? What are the social, cultural, and relational sources of marital success among today's parents?

In this report, we find that married parents are more likely than their childless peers to feel their lives have a sense of meaning and purpose. We also find that parents who are married generally experience more happiness and less depression than parents who are unmarried.

At the same time, we find, as have previous studies, that parenthood is typically associated with lower levels of *marital* happiness. But we delve deeper, looking at the substantial minority of husbands and wives who do not experience parenthood as an obstacle to marital happiness. These women and men navigate the shoals of parenthood without succumbing to comparatively low levels of marital happiness or high levels of marital instability.

What is their secret? We were able to identify ten aspects of contemporary social life and relationships—from marital generosity to shared housework to religious faith to sexual satisfaction—that appear to boost women and men's odds of successfully combining marriage and parenthood.

We also provide a fuller portrait of contemporary marriage and parenthood by examining factors such as family size and parents' beliefs. For example, in a striking finding, we discovered that the happiest wives and husbands today are those with no children *and* those with four or more children (see the [“Family Size, Faith, and the Meaning of Parenthood”](#) sidebar to learn why).

Most Americans still want to have children and eventually do have children. Successfully rearing the next generation is crucial not only to these families, but to our nation. For everyone's sake, we must prepare young people for the critical transition to parenthood and provide them with solid research and insights from successful couples so that they—and their children—can thrive.

W. BRADFORD WILCOX
National Marriage Project, University of Virginia

ELIZABETH MARQUARDT
Center for Marriage and Families, Institute for American Values

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