

The benefits of smaller families

Dominant cultural norms often influence couples in their choice of family size. Depending on the context, this decision can be traced to religious, cultural or socio-economic reasons, such as the need for support in old age. However, it is proven that a family size of two or fewer children provides many benefits both to the parents and the children.

Fewer children means better quality of life:

1. For children

The benefits of having a smaller family are experienced by children. Children of smaller families receive more attention of higher quality from their parents, resulting in higher achievements. Studies have shown that children with one or no siblings perform better in education, for instance.¹ The cause for this can be found in the theory of *resource dilution*. Because parents hold a limited amount of economic and emotional resources, these become 'diluted', meaning their quality decreases as the number of children increases.

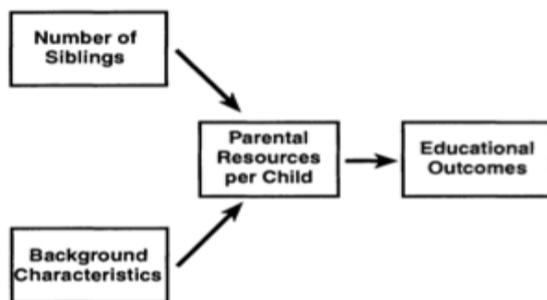


Figure 1. Illustration of Resource Dilution Model

Source: Downey (1995)

¹ Downey, D. B. (1995). When bigger is not better: Family size, parental resources, and children's educational performance. *American Sociological Review*, 746-761.

Children with a smaller number of siblings were also found to attain increased economic success and social positions; moreover, these results were felt across four generations. The decision to limit family size can then be understood as a strategic choice to improve the socioeconomic success of children and grandchildren in modern societies.²

2. For Parents

Smaller families also have several benefits for parents. The cost of supporting a child from cradle to university was calculated to be of £221,251.³ Broken down, this means households spend, on average, £10,917 a year, or £910 a month on each child. The highest costs of raising a child were associated with education (including school uniforms, books, trips, food, university fees) and childcare during the early years. Indeed, more children puts pressure on household budgets, causing parents to work longer to make ends meet, or to cut back on essential shopping by buying low-cost products. Fewer children create a more manageable impact on family finances, consequently relieving stress and psychological pressure levels.

Why two is better than three

A survey recently confirmed that mothers find the 'most stressful number of children' to be three.⁴ One mother expressed the pressure she felt in dealing with three children:

"Going from one to two was an easy, breezy transition. Two to three, everything was turned upside down. I do not feel like I have it together. You only have two hands! Just

² https://www.lshtm.ac.uk/newsevents/news/2012/small_family_size_increases_the_wealth_of_descendants_but_reduces_evolutionary_success.html

³ <http://www.lv.com/assets/life/pdfs/life-insurance/coac-report-final.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.today.com/parents/mom-survey-says-three-most-stressful-number-kids-6C9774150>

crossing the street and not being able to physically hold all their hands I find tremendously stressful.” Today (2013)

Furthermore, recent research has found that happiness levels are maximised when the number of children is limited to two per family. Those who become a parent at a young age, which is often associated with having a larger family, reported downward happiness trajectories, while happiness levels were maximised when parents were older and had already acquired educational and financial resources.⁵

Finally, it seems the ‘breaking point’ between benefit and detriment for additional siblings is at two children per couple. To contrast the words of Australian Treasurer Peter Costello: “You should have one for the father, one for the mother, and one for the country” the implications of a recent study are that “lying back to have one more for the country goes to the detriment of existing children”.⁶

A small family as an environmentally sustainable choice

Although little mentioned in environmental debates, population and family size have a big role to play in preventing and attenuating climate change. It may, indeed, be the “only [campaign] for environmentally friendly lifestyles that really counts”.⁷

If we consider that every human is a new consumer with a significant carbon footprint, there is no more effective decision to reduce our environmental impact than having one

fewer child. One study has found that an American who has one less child would save 9,441 tonnes of carbon – almost six times the amounts of CO₂ they would emit in their own lifetime. The amount one could save by driving a fuel-efficient car, reducing one’s driving, installing energy-efficient windows, using energy-efficient light bulbs, replacing a household refrigerator and recycling all household waste, would only equate to about 500 tonnes.⁸

John Sauven, director of Greenpeace UK, stated that “it’s a no brainer that a smaller population would place a smaller burden on the planet”⁷

Taking into account the further impacts of climate change, such as the disappearance of certain species,⁹ having a smaller family makes even more environmental sense.

Smaller families for gender equality

Smaller families tend to have positive effects on the lives of women too, who are generally responsible for many, if not most, child-rearing activities. A smaller number of children would allow women more time to develop personally and professionally. Coupled with men taking more responsibility, smaller families could boost women’s empowerment. Moreover, it has been shown that women who bear their first child at age 30 or older and hence tend to have fewer children are better off economically and professionally as well as in terms of well-being.¹⁰

⁵ Myrskylä, M., & Margolis, R. (2014). Happiness: Before and after the kids. *Demography*, 51(5), 1843-1866.

⁶ https://www.melbourneinstitute.com/downloads/hilda/Bibliography/Conference_Papers/Parr_2004-PA_APA.pdf

⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2010/feb/13/climate-change-family-size-babies>

⁸ http://blog.oregonlive.com/environment_impact/2009/07/carbon%20legacy.pdf

⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/05/science/new-estimates-for-extinctions-global-warming-could-cause.html?smprod=nytcore-iphone&smid=nytcore-iphone-share&r=1>

¹⁰ Hofferth, S. L. (1984). Long-term economic consequences for women of delayed childbearing and reduced family size. *Demography*, 21(2), 141-155.

Small family size and development

Research has shown that, by increasing family planning facilities and women's education, a decrease in population size through smaller families can have great benefits. The World Bank has shown that the benefits of couples with smaller families include: reduced expenditure on food, more time to devote to work or leisure, increased maternal attention per child and reduced health risk.¹¹

An example of these positive gains from smaller families is that of Vietnam, where it has been shown that young people are more likely to achieve higher levels of education if their family is limited to one or two children. While socioeconomic factors are relevant, family size has a significant impact on the attention and encouragement children receive at home.¹² In the case of Peru, the number of siblings has also been a significant factor in the involvement of children in the labour market due to a lack of resources to support them.¹³ Many highlight that large families can be a strategy to maximise old-age income, but the truth is that when all pursue this strategy, living standards of both children and parents are reduced below expectations. It has been shown that community incomes would increase if everybody was to have smaller families.¹¹

¹¹ http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2000/01/06/000178830_98101911474513/Rendered/PDF/multi_page.pdf

¹² Hollander, D. (1998). In Vietnam small family size means better education among the young but socioeconomic factors are key. *International Family Planning Perspectives*, 24(3), 149-50.

¹³ Patrinos, H. A., & Psacharopoulos, G. (1997). Family size, schooling and child labor in Peru—An empirical analysis. *Journal of population economics*, 10(4), 387-405.

Challenging cultural norms

Several organisations have started to express the benefits of smaller families. The Childless By Choice project¹⁴ conducted a survey amongst childless couples and individuals and uncovered the top six motives for going child-free:

- A loving relationship which will not be enhanced by a child;
- Valuing freedom and independence;
- Avoiding raising a child means less responsibility hence less pressure;
- No instinctive desire for a child;
- The need to accomplish or experience things in life that would be difficult or impossible if they were a parent;
- A need to focus time and energy on own interests, needs or goals.

Moreover, organisations such as Gateway Women¹⁵ are promoting alternative narratives whereby the lives of individuals and couples without children are not stigmatised, but rather celebrated.

Others are striving to expose the negative stereotypes of only children as false and instead presenting the positive experiences of only children. Just one example of the advantages of experiencing life as an only child, for instance, is formation of attachments to other children that are deeper, more lasting and complex than most children's friendships with one another.¹⁶

With the growing exposure given to positive experiences of children with one sibling or none, the socio-economic and environmental benefits of smaller families may well come to the fore too.

¹⁴ http://www.childlessbychoiceproject.com/Childless_by_Choice_Survey.html

¹⁵ <http://gateway-women.com/>

¹⁶ <http://www.onlychild.com/youve-got-to-have-friends/>