

Dads Just Want to Help

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My late father was a generous and kind man, but often morose. He was troubled about matters large and small, be they the fate of the world or the water in the basement.

I remember two times when he seemed genuinely happy. The first was when, unable to meet our family's needs with his modest teaching salary, he took on a second job driving a bus. The other was a few years later, when he decided to advance his career—once again for the good of our family—by pursuing his Ph.D. During both periods, he was exhausted and overworked. But he smiled and laughed more than usual, and seemed untroubled by the small annoyances and big quandaries that normally brought him down. He looked back on those periods with real fondness.

This always seemed paradoxical to me: He was unhappiest when under the least pressure for money and time; he was happiest when under the most strain. But this paradox has an explanation—and in it, a happiness secret for fathers, potential fathers, and everyone else.

A good deal of [research](#) shows that in many areas of the industrialized world, men are fathering fewer children, and doing so [later](#) in life—even more so than women are. This is especially [true](#) for highly educated men. No doubt these decisions reflect both an economy that demands more schooling and skyrocketing education costs, for (potential) parents and for their (potential) offspring. But they also probably have to do with the fact that delaying or forgoing parenthood is more socially acceptable than it once was. When I was a boy, my dad once casually said (in a comment that made me slightly nervous), “It never occurred to me in the 1960s that one could choose *not* to have kids.” Today, nothing is especially odd about a man (or any adult) making such a choice.

Fatherhood, like motherhood, requires obvious economic and social sacrifices. But on the happiness balance sheet, [the evidence](#) supporting it is very strong: Fatherhood, for the average man, is a huge source of net well-being. In one study published in the journal *Psychological Science* in 2012, researchers [found](#) that parents enjoyed higher levels of happiness, positive emotion, and meaning in life than nonparents—and this was especially true for fathers. Similarly, researchers in 2001 [found](#) that men who lived with their young children (or who had grown children) had significantly higher life satisfaction and were less likely to suffer from depression than men who were childless or who were living apart from their young children.

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