

# When You're **NOT** ..... Bringing Up Baby

It's a different world when you choose not to have kids

by Dena Braun



**F**irst comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Susie pushing a baby carriage. This popular nursery school rhyme illustrates how, from a young age, society tells us what being a grown-up entails. Decide that part of this formula isn't for you, especially the baby part, and at best you'll draw a lot of questions, and at worst, you'll face outright scorn.

During the last few years, while our culture has reveled in celebrity moms and the commercialization of all things baby,

the childfree movement has flown under the radar. According to the Census Bureau's 2000 Population Survey, there are more than 17.2 million childfree women between the ages of 20 and 44. That's 33.6 percent of the population and includes 6.8 million married women. As a group, the childfree tend to be highly educated, well-compensated professionals who live in urban areas.

We're so indoctrinated in one version of adulthood and family that most people don't ever take time to consider that there are options, and in the 21st century, having a child

is a conscience choice we can make or not.

"This is really the first generation where this (childfree) is even an option," says Jennifer Shawne, author of "Baby Not on Board." "Even though the baby boomers came of age during the rise of feminism, it was still expected that they have kids. Today, women are realizing that they don't have to."

The pill, the increased importance women place on their careers and the realization that maybe you can't have it all have made childfree a legitimate choice.

But despite their growing ranks, the

childfree are still a misunderstood and often maligned group. Friends, family and complete strangers tell them that they're selfish, uncaring, child-haters that should grow up and take responsibility. Society tells them that they aren't a whole person without a child, and that a couple doesn't constitute a family.

"The childfree are made to feel that their life choice is something to be ashamed of. Their lifestyle is undervalued," says Leslie Lafayette, author of "Why Don't You Have Kids" and founder of the ChildFree Network.

But the childfree don't believe that their life is missing anything, and in fact, scientific and antidotal evidence backs them up.

A recent study in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* concluded that parents have more symptoms of depression than non-parents. Studying more than 13,000 people, researchers found that the childfree were the happiest group. In contrast to past studies, the research also showed the childfree to be happier than empty nesters. "Everything we did showed that parents did not fare better," says study co-author Ranae J. Evenson.

John Gottman, a marriage expert at the University of Washington, conducted a study that showed couples with children have eight times more fights. And while

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many people believe that their children will bring them happiness and contentment in their later years, a study by Tanya Koropecj-Cox, sociology professor at the University of Florida, debunks that myth. Her survey of nearly 4,000 50- to 80-year-old men and women showed no statistically significant differences in loneliness between parents and the childfree.

In a famous 1975 column, advice guru Ann Landers asked her readers, "If they knew going into parenthood what it would really be like, would they choose to parent again?" Seventy percent said, "no."

This didn't surprise Dr. Susan Jeffers, parent and author of "I'm Okay, You're a Brat," who says, "There is not one aspect of your life that doesn't change—nothing." In researching her book, she says parents were evenly split when asked if they would do it again.

"Many parents are too ashamed of how they feel to complain. They don't want to hurt their kids," says Jeffers. "But we've been fed a myth that all parents will love the process of parenting. But that doesn't make sense, why would all people love this one thing? It's like saying everyone would love being a doctor or a lawyer."

Ron Lisowski, of Tampa, Fla., was a diehard devotee of the childfree lifestyle until his wife, who was told she couldn't have children, got pregnant.

"I love my child, but if I could go back to that day, I would have zigged rather than zagged," he says. "And a lot of my friends with kids say the same thing."

A common misnomer is that the childfree hate children, and while *some* do, *most* don't. Most childfree people have children in their lives and enjoy them, they simply do not want to parent.

The childfree list a host of reasons for not procreating. Currently, it costs \$270,000 to raise an upper-middle class child and that

## Cries not Heard Around the World

America isn't the only country needing less and less babysitters. In Germany, the birth rate has plummeted so far that the issue figures to be a major factor in this year's election. Researchers claim the country needs to have a birth rate of 2.1 children per woman to maintain the population, but the country is only at 1.3. In Italy, the birth rate has gotten so low that the government started offering a 1,000 euros bribe for each woman

who had a second child in 2003. In Japan, 2006 brought the first rise in birth rate in more than six years, but it is still at a dismal 1.25 and many economists in Japan are worried they will soon not have enough people to fill the infrastructure.

In fact, according to the World Bank, the birth rate has declined in almost every country across the globe since 1980, meaning more and more couples are having fewer children or none at all.

Simple numbers say every person needs to have a baby to replace them when they die: for the world's population to stay constant, meaning every couple should have two kids. But since 1800, the world's population has nearly quadrupled because of large families and a soaring life expectancy. One theory for the declining birth and fertility rates is that it is simply nature's way of compensating for the overpopulation of the human race.





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figure does not cover college or account for studies that show being a stay-at-home mom costs a woman \$1 million in lost wages over the course of her life. Other common reasons are the desire to maintain freedom, a strong focus on career and a lifestyle not compatible with children.

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“Ultimately, all those reasons really boil down to just one reason—a lack of desire,” says Shawne. “I could talk about the financial aspects or the loss of freedom, but if I really wanted kids, I could find a work around.”

Because the childfree aren’t tied up with the responsibility of parenting, they’re able to focus their time and efforts on a variety of other endeavors. They rank high in donating both time and money to charitable groups.

“People tell you kids are so important to being fulfilled, but it’s the opposite,” says Shawne. “With kids, your whole life is about fulfilling them. A childfree person has the time and resources to make themselves and the world a better place by investing in the life they’ve been given. That isn’t selfish.”

Jeffers believes it is about what makes you happy. “More people are realizing that a child is one way to go, but there are a zillion other ways.”