

SUMMARY

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SELFISH REASONS TO HAVE MORE KIDS

BY BRYAN CAPLAN



Summary of “Selfish Reasons to Have More Kids” by Bryan Caplan

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Learn why it's okay to have a big family.



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Introduction

My boyfriend comes from a big family. Now, when you hear that, a certain number of kids probably comes to your mind. Families with three kids are fairly common, so are you imagining that he's one of four? Maybe, if you're hazarding an especially outlandish guess, you might think that he's one of five kids. But would you be surprised to learn that he's actually one of twelve? That's right-- his parents literally had a dozen children. And as a result, they've heard it all. Every shocked response you can think of has been thrown at them. "Haven't you heard of birth control?" is a classic and so is, "Why did you have all those kids??" Many other people have guessed that their parents wanted lots of free help around the house or wanted kids to take care of them when they were older. (But of course, if you've ever had children yourself, you know that kids are never "free help around the house!" It would be a lot cheaper to hire a housekeeper!)

But, as surprising as it might be, none of those guesses is the answer. In fact, quite simply, his parents had a lot of kids because they love children and they wanted a big family. But that's pretty rare these days! Today, you mostly hear of people having two kids at the absolute maximum. Many others prefer to stop at one child or to avoid having kids altogether. But the author-- a father of three-- has devoted significant time and research to learning about the sociological and economical concerns that people have about starting a family. And his research has led him to the conclusion that having a big family isn't as scary as we think! It's also less expensive and less difficult on the environment than we might imagine as well. So, over the course of this summary, we'll explore the findings of his research. And we'll learn why it's okay to have a big family (and why it's not a selfish choice!)

Why Should You Have Children?

If you've opted not to have children, you've probably been hit with at least a dozen arguments designed to change your mind. (And don't worry-- that's not what this book is trying to do!) But you've probably noticed that every argument in favor of having kids has a few standard gems. For example, some people might insist that you'll be lonely if you don't have children. Others might argue that having kids means you'll have someone to take care of you when you're older. Likewise, other people may affirm that having kids will make you happier. So, when you put these three arguments together, they pack a triple punch: why wouldn't you want to be happier, have company, and have someone to take care of you in your old age?

These arguments sound pretty convincing and they often function as an effective guilt trip. But the author argues that they're actually not true. For starters, as we've already discussed, having kids is never a cost-effective endeavor. In fact, having a child is one of the biggest investments you'll ever make! And if you have more than one, the cost just keeps going up. So, unless you're already a millionaire, you should probably be aware that your kids will eat up your future retirement fund. And you can't exactly bank on them growing up to be successful enough to support you! You also can't guarantee that you'll have a great relationship with your kids or that you'll be close when you get old. Therefore, the author affirms that the previously mentioned arguments are not necessarily great reasons to have kids. So, if that's true, what should your reasons be? Caplan affirms that your reason for having kids should actually be the same as your reason for doing anything else: because you want to!

For the purposes of the author's logic, we're not going to think about having children in the same way that you would think about paying rent, buying a house, or getting a job. That's because these things are core needs for survival. You might love your apartment or be excited about owning a home and you might love your job. But even if you didn't like these things, survival in the modern world dictates that you would still have to go to

work and pay for a place to live, whether you wanted to do so or not. So instead, we're going to think of having kids in the same way that you would think about a fun purchase. For example, let's imagine that you're buying a condo at a tropical resort. Nobody is forced into buying a condo and nobody really needs one in the same way that you need food, shelter, or housing. You also don't buy a condo because you expect your vacation home to provide for you when you get older or because you expect it to keep you company. Neither do you buy it as a result of social pressure; you never hear people say, "But aren't you worried you won't be happy if you don't buy a vacation home?"

Instead, people buy condos on tropical beaches because they can afford to have a vacation home and they look forward to spending a lot of time at the beach. They do it because they want to, pure and simple. And having kids should be the same type of decision! So, don't make the decision to start a family because your mother-in-law pressured you to or because you feel the need to conform to social norms. Having kids isn't guaranteed to make you happy--as many people imply-- but if it's something you genuinely want, it will make you happy. The author observes that this is true in the same way that it's true of any other investment.

For example, if you buy a condo to keep up appearances or because you feel pressured to do so, you're probably not going to enjoy it very much. And that's especially true if you make a big purchase that you can't afford! But if you buy it because owning a condo on the beach has been a dream of yours for a while, then it's going to feel fulfilling. And if you put in the effort to take care of your condo and make it a clean and comfortable home, then it will be a great investment that will make you happy for a long time to come. The same is true of parenting when you genuinely want kids. And that's where the author's argument for having a big family comes in: if you can afford it and you want a big family, then go ahead and have more kids! Don't feel pressured to conform to the "ideal family dream" of 2.5 kids and a white picket fence. If having 12 kids is healthy and right for you, then go ahead and have 12 kids! It won't be as stressful or as weird as you've been led to think.

The Stress of the Modern Parent

Have you ever noticed that young, modern parents seem to be incredibly stressed? Have you noticed that many moms appear to confuse the words “mother” and “martyr?” Perhaps you’ve also noticed that the average third-grader has a list of extra curriculars that rivals your social calendar as an adult. These days, it seems that kids are being shuttled back and forth to an endless list of art classes, Girl Scouts, cheerleading practice, and violin lessons-- and parents are running themselves crazy by acting as constant chauffeurs! There’s no doubt about it: this approach to parenting is incredibly stressful! (And it’s not a cake walk for the kids either!) But Caplan argues that it doesn’t have to be this way.

In fact, if you think back to your own childhood, you can probably imagine a much simpler time. Rather than whizzing around to multitudinous activities, you probably spent time learning to play on your own or hanging out with friends. Your parents didn’t act as your personal maid, butler, chauffeur, and cook because they had lives and responsibilities of their own-- and you understood that their lives didn’t revolve around you. The author affirms that we need to revisit this parenting model because it would reduce a significant amount of stress for parents and kids alike. And it starts with deconstructing the mindset that drives this stressful modern style of parenting. Although contemporary parenting methods may have changed, giving rise to terms like “tiger mom” and “helicopter parent,” some things are universal. That includes the desire for our kids to have happy, healthy childhoods and become successful, well-adjusted adults. The difference lies in how we go about it.

For example, your parents likely came from a different generation with different values. Their focus might have been on providing for their family’s needs, not catering to their every want. They also might have been more concerned with building your character and helping you become a good person than they were about building your resume. Of course, that’s not to say that modern parents don’t want their kids to be good people! They

definitely do! But most modern parents are also under significant pressure to help their kids get into the best schools. In some cases, they're even worried about admission into competitive pre-school and elementary schools!

Although that might sound silly, it's actually because many early learning centers promise that their competitive programs will give your child the best start in life. And because everyone wants their kids to have a happy and successful future, parents run themselves crazy trying to bolster their children's resumes and make them attractive school applicants.

Unfortunately, however, this often results in children and parents who don't know how to relax and kids who are forced to take lessons they don't enjoy. For example, we've all met kids who hate football but they're always on the team because their parents are hoping for a future sports scholarship. Likewise, many other kids spend years on voice lessons because their parents want them to study the arts and be accomplished--even if their son can't carry a tune in a suitcase!

But as you can see from these examples, this is a lot of performative pressure for both the parents and the child. It's also completely unnecessary! However, the author acknowledges that this needless stress is often fueled by the pressure of performative perfectionism. And, let's be honest, we've all been there! Parenting guilt is a very real thing because no matter what you do, someone out there is judging for it. Maybe your kid has all the right grades and all the right activities, but your neighbor makes home-cooked, organic meals every night and meal-preps her daughter's school lunches every day. Another kid's mom makes elaborate hand-baked treats for every school bake sale and somebody else's mom made her son's Halloween costume herself. Everywhere you look, you face intense pressure from another parent who seems to have it all together or who seems to be doing things better than you.

And because parents are also fallible and human, they want to fit in and be accepted. No one likes to be seen as the outcast or the failure, so many parents encourage their family to act as if they have the perfect life. Picture-

perfect vacations, happy Christmas card photos, successful kids-- the pressure to display your Instagrammable happiness is intense, even though the happiness often isn't real. Fitting in might feel like the right thing to do, but the author affirms that it's ultimately toxic. So, if your family doesn't like going to Disney World, you don't have to go! And if your kids hate organic stuff, it's okay to order McDonald's (as long as they eat a vegetable once in a while!) Likewise, playing video games isn't as unhealthy as you might think. Many video games actually stimulate imagination and encourage creative thought.

So, it's okay if your kid will never be the next Michael Phelps or Taylor Swift; they don't have to take those swimming or voice lessons. And keeping up appearances isn't what makes you a good parent. That's why Caplan advocates for parents cutting out the stress and getting back to basics with a more relaxed approach. He also acknowledges that his research can set a parent's mind at ease with one simple fact: your small parenting screw-ups will not damage your children as much as you think. In fact, it really doesn't matter if they get into the right schools or have the right extra curriculars or if your family appears to be successful! In an answer to the age-old debate, Caplan's research has determined that ultimately, nature is more powerful than nurture when it comes to your child's happiness, well-being, and success. Now, at first, that might sound more worrisome than encouraging. But the key take-away is not "nothing I do matters!" In fact, your parenting has a powerful impact-- just not in the way you think.

Here's what it does mean: unfortunately, your parenting is not the core factor in "putting your child on the track." No matter what you can do, they can still develop behavior problems or make unwise choices like experimenting with unprotected sex or underage drinking. (In fact, that's actually to be expected). So, unless you're directly abusive or cruel, it's unlikely that you'll give your kids any sexual hang-ups or significant psychological dysfunctions. And you definitely won't screw them up because you ordered pizza instead of meal-prepping a vegan linguine. So, if you can't shape them into the next Mother Theresa or the next Ted Bundy,

what can you do? Well, the good news is that you still have a uniquely positive power. You might not be able to prevent them from making poor choices but you can give them a positive childhood. Because these happy memories and cherished family traditions are things your kids will hold onto forever.

It makes sense when you think about that famous quote by Maya Angelo. If you're not familiar with it, the saying goes, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." So, if you make your children feel good things, then they'll carry these positive memories with them throughout their lives. And with any luck, those positive feelings will influence who they become and how they treat people in return. At the very least, it will give them a warm and loving relationship with you! However, that doesn't mean giving them everything they want or always saying yes. Instead, it's about being there for them, showing love, and teaching them how to set healthy boundaries. That's the important stuff to focus on. So, don't feel guilty about buying them McDonald's or letting them play Call of Duty.

Final Summary

Having kids is one of the standard accomplishments on the checklist of successful, socially acceptable adulthood. We grow up understanding that a traditionally successful adult gets a good job, gets married, and has children. But we also tend to think of parenting as being one of the most stressful things you can do. As a result, parents tend to have smaller families and experience significant pressure to be a “perfect” parent. However, the author argues that we should deconstruct and destroy this stress by unpacking the truth about modern parenting. And the good news is that the truth is much less stressful than we think!

The myths that you “have” to have kids, that kids will make you happier, or that they’ll take care of you when you’re old are just that-- myths. So, Caplan argues that-- first and foremost-- you should have children because you want to. You should also release yourself from the pressure to be a perfect parent and remember that no one really has it altogether. In fact, your “perfect” parenting can’t even keep your kids from making bad choices or guarantee that they’ll be successful. So, instead, you should focus on building positive relationships and good memories with your kids because that’s what really counts.



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