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Survey 28.0

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"The wellbeing of Australians - the wellbeing of parents"

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http://www.deakin.edu.au/research/acqol/auwbi/survey-reports/index.php

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The Wellbeing of Parents – An Introduction

Subjective wellbeing (SWB) refers to cognitive and affective evaluations that individuals make about the quality of their own life (Diener, 2006), and is reflected in terms of their satisfaction with different domains of life that contribute to their overall life satisfaction (Cummins, Eckerskley, Pallant, Van Vugt, & Misajon, 2003). These domains represent universal predictors of life satisfaction (IWBG, 2013). By its nature, SWB is relatively stable over time, though it can change in response to significant life events (Suh, Diener, & Fujita, 1996). One life event that has been explored in the SWB literature is the experience of becoming a parent. Research has captured both the highs and lows of parenthood, with some studies indicating that parenting is associated with higher wellbeing (e.g., Aassve, Goisis, & Sironi, 2012), and others suggesting a negative effect of parenting on SWB (e.g., Evenson & Simon, 2005).

For example, a meta-analytic review of parenthood and marital satisfaction found that parents report lower marital satisfaction compared to people without children (Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003). The same review also revealed a significant negative correlation between marital satisfaction and number of children, highlighting the possible strains children can place on relationship satisfaction – one of the seven SWB domains.

Despite these negative effects, research has continued to find support for the notion that parents are happier than people without children (Nelson, Kushlev, English, Dunn, & Lyubomirsky, 2013), even after controlling for individual characteristics, such as number of children and household income. This effect appears to be more pronounced for fathers, who reported higher satisfaction and happiness than non-fathers. The same effect was not apparent for mothers (Nelson et al., 2013).

A more recent study modelled the SWB trajectory of parents from four years prior to four years post the birth of their first child, and demonstrated that some parents were happier (4.3%), some were less happy (7.2%), and most remained stable (84.2%) (Galatzer-Levy, Mazursky, Mancini & Bonanno, 2011). These findings are consistent with the idea that we may experience temporary fluctuations in SWB in response to a life event, but that over time SWB returns to a set-point (Suh, Diener, & Fujita, 1996; Cummins, 2010).

We consider the wellbeing of Australian parents using data collected as part of the Australian Unity Wellbeing project in 2012. More information about this project and the survey can be found at http://www.deakin.edu.au/research/acqol/reports/auwbi.php.

Sample and Methodology

The sample for this study was derived from the 28th survey of the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index. The sample comprised a geographically representative national subsection of the Australian population, aged 18 years or over and fluent in English, who were surveyed by telephone over the period 19th September to 4th October, 2012. Interviewers asked to speak to the person in the house who had the most recent birthday and was at least 18 years old. Of the total sample of 1964 participants, 1492 (76.0%) were parents. The average age of the sample was 53.36 (SD = 16.64), and participants had on average 2.59 children (SD = 1.15). The majority of participants (57.6%) were married, and either engaged in full time work (38.8%) or retired (26.3%).

1. Is the wellbeing of parents different from the wellbeing of people without children?

These findings come from Table 1, and the yellow bar represents the normal range for Australians generated from all the data accumulated to this point.
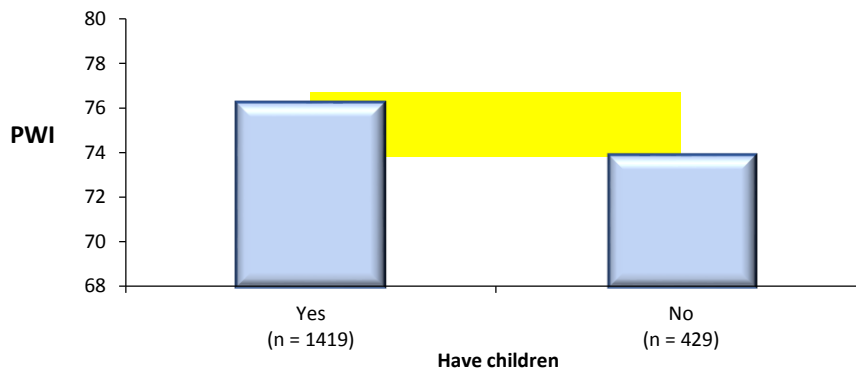
Figure 1: Children and wellbeing

Yes. On average, the wellbeing of people with children sits towards the top of the normal range for Australians. They report statistically higher wellbeing (M = 76.2) than those with no children (*M* = 73.9), though the effect size is small.

To further understand how the wellbeing of parents compares to the wellbeing of people without children, we explored their satisfaction with the different domains of life.

These findings come from Table 2.
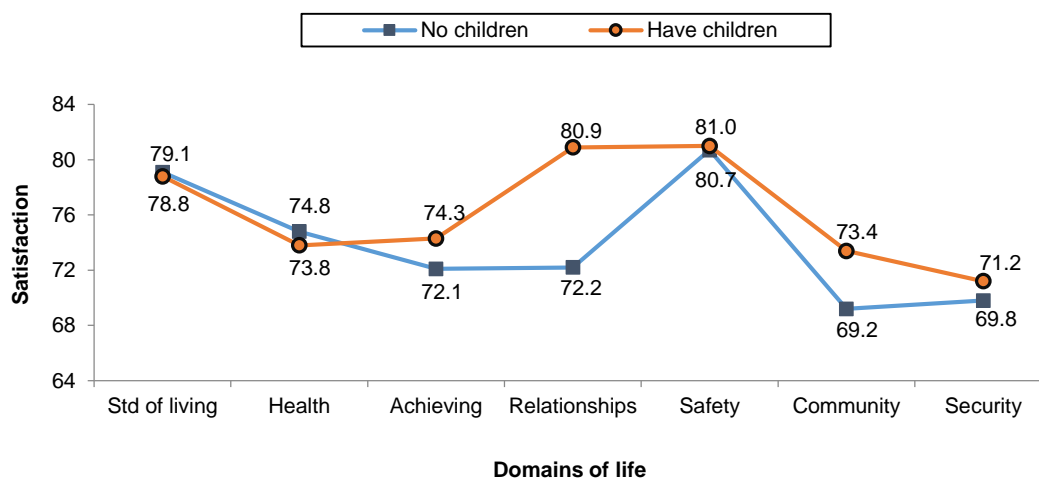
Figure 2: Children and wellbeing (domains)

Figure 2 reveals that the differences observed in Figure 1 emerge due to differences in three key domains of life: Satisfaction with achievements, relationships, and community. The largest difference emerged for satisfaction with relationships, with those who have children

reporting satisfaction scores almost 9 points higher than those without. This is likely due to the greater likelihood that people with children are married (*see Table 3*).

The findings also suggest that people with children have higher scores on satisfaction with community connectedness. This might be due to the tendency for parents to engage with others in their area through neighbourhood playgroups, local schools or other geographically-bound organisations that foster a sense of connection.

2. Is the higher wellbeing for parents the same for mothers and fathers?

These findings come from Table 4.
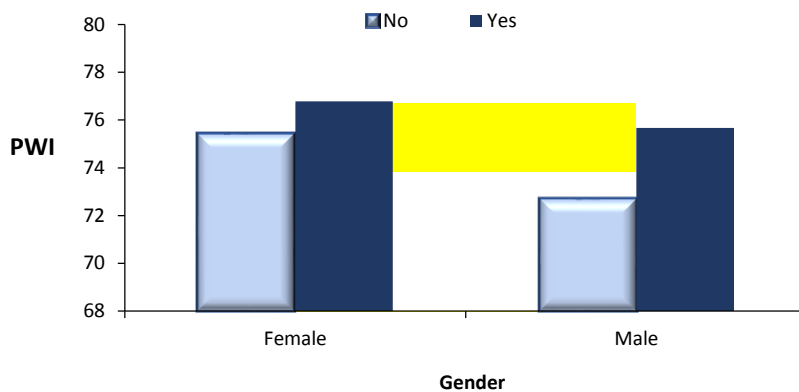
Figure 3: Parenthood and wellbeing x gender

No. There was **no** statistically significant difference in the wellbeing scores for women with children compared to women without children. Women's wellbeing is within (or just above) the normal range for Australians whether or not they have children. However, there was a statistically significant difference in the wellbeing of males. The wellbeing of men with children (*M* = 75.67) was almost 3 points higher than for men without children (*M* = 72.71).

3. How does the wellbeing of fathers compare to men without children on the different life domains?

These findings come from Table 5.
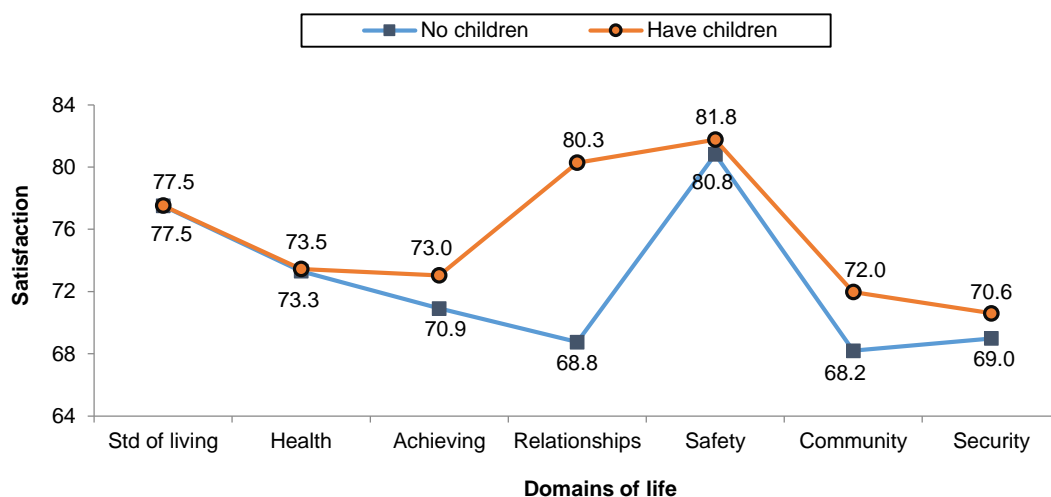
Figure 4: Children and wellbeing domains (men only)

The lower wellbeing for men without children is largely driven by one key domain difference: Satisfaction with personal relationships. For men without children, their satisfaction with relationships was almost 12 points lower than for men with children.

4. Is the wellbeing of fathers different from men without children across all age groups?

These findings come from Table 7.
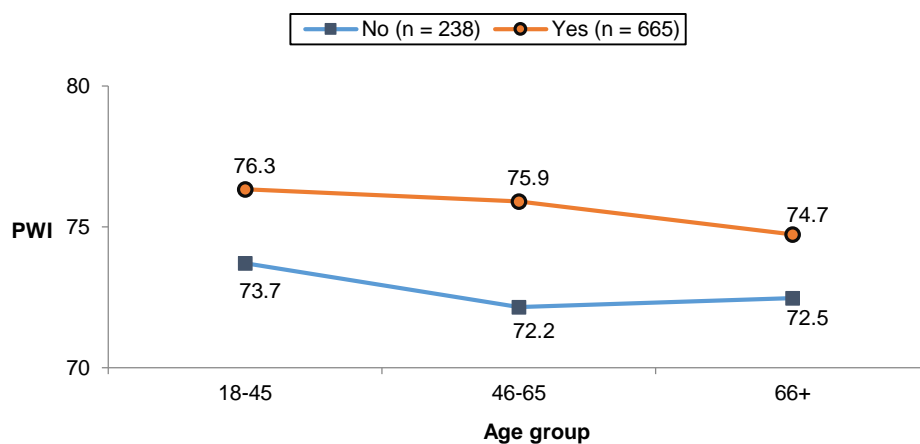
Figure 5: Have children x age group (PWI) (men)

Yes. On average, fathers demonstrate higher wellbeing than men without children, and this does not vary as a function of age.

5. Does the wellbeing of fathers and men without children differ as a function of their income level?

These findings come from Table 8.
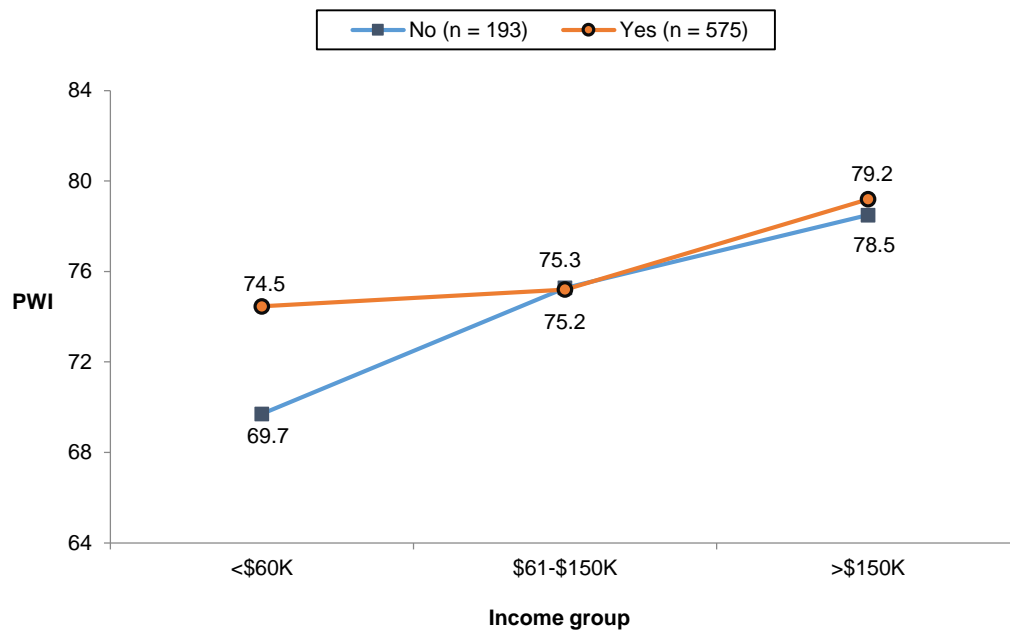
Figure 6: Have children x income group (PWI) (men)

No. Overall, there was a significant difference in the wellbeing of men as a function of their income, but there were no differences in the wellbeing of men with and without children at different levels of income. Figure 6 shows a fairly consistent drop in wellbeing in men without children as income declines. However, the drop in the wellbeing of fathers in the lowest income group appeared to be somewhat less substantial. Although this finding just failed to reach statistical significance, fatherhood may be a protective factor for the impact of stressors such as low income.

6. Does the wellbeing of fathers compared to men without children differ depending on their marital status?

These findings come from Table 9.
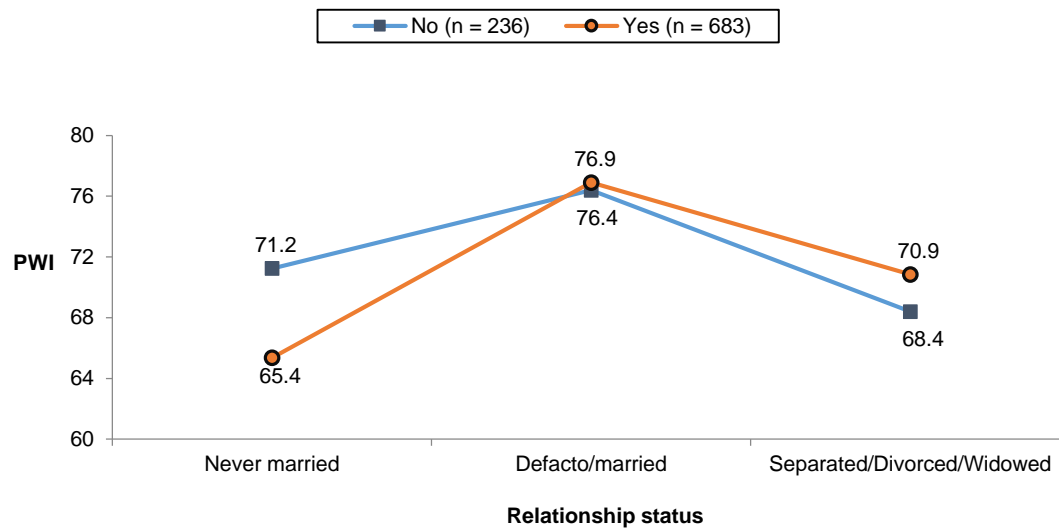
Figure 7: Relationship status x children (PWI) (men)

No. For men with and without children, wellbeing is higher for those who are married or in a defacto relationship compared to those who have never married. For fathers, wellbeing is also significantly higher for those who are married or in a defacto relationship compared to those who are separated, divorced or widowed. These findings highlight the importance of being in a committed relationship to men's wellbeing.

7. Is the wellbeing of men different depending on how many children they have?

These findings come from Table 10.
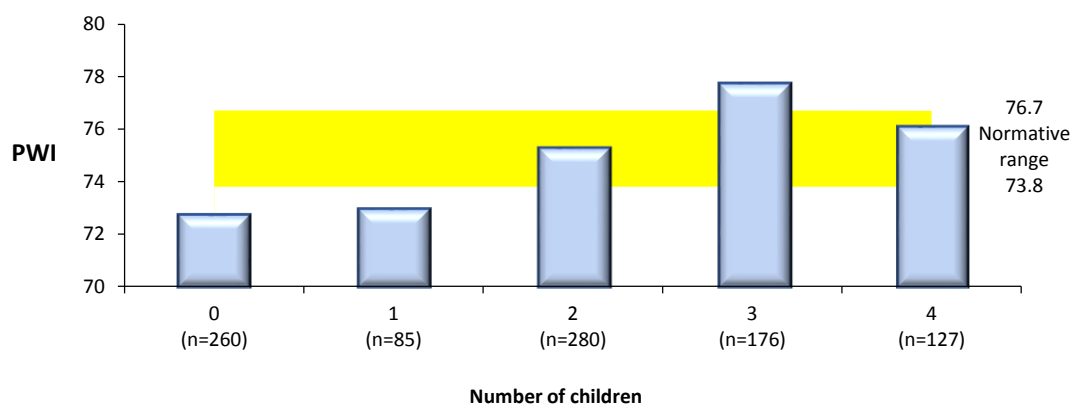
Figure 8: Number of children and wellbeing (men only)

Yes. The wellbeing of fathers appears to peak with three children. These dads have significantly higher wellbeing (*M* = 77.73) than for men without children (*M* = 72.77) and fathers of only one child (*M* = 72.99). The wellbeing of men enters the normal range for Australians when they have two children.

8. Are there differences in the wellbeing of fathers who have sons compared to fathers who have daughters?

These findings come from Table 11.
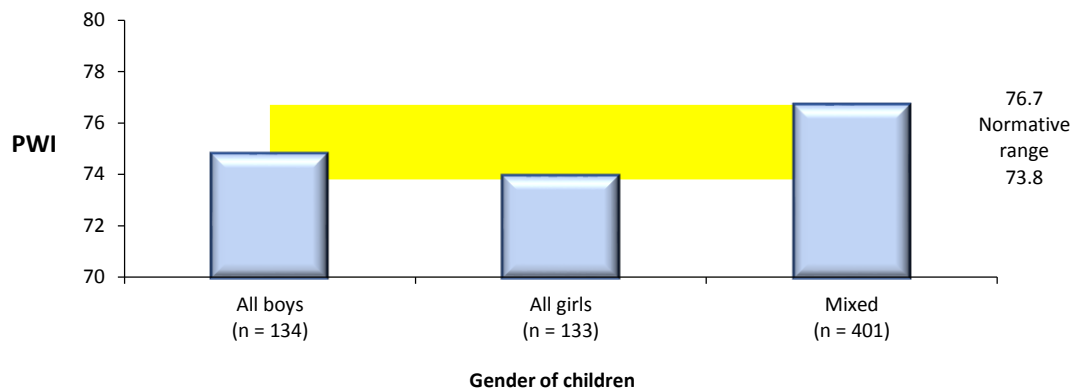
Figure 9: Father's wellbeing and gender of children

No, there were no significant differences in average wellbeing between fathers of all boys (*M* = 74.82), fathers of all girls (*M* = 73.97), and fathers who had both boys and girls (*M* = 76.72).

9. Is there an interaction between the gender of children and the number of children on wellbeing?

These findings come from Table 12.
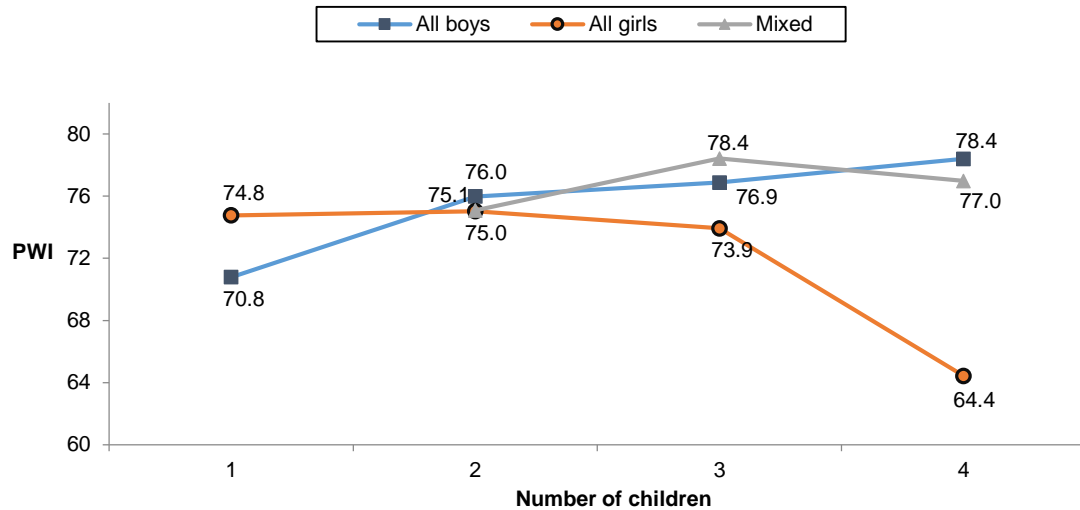
Figure 10: Number of children and gender of children x PWI (Fathers)

Yes, there is an interaction between the number of children and the gender of children in terms of their effect on the wellbeing of fathers. For fathers of 1, 2, or 3 children, there is no statistically significant difference in their levels of wellbeing. However, for fathers of 4 children, their wellbeing is significantly lower if they have 4 daughters compared to 4 sons or a combination of sons and daughters.

Due to the small sample sizes for the analysis above, the groups were collapsed into two groups of fathers: Those with 1 or 2 children, and those with 3 or more children.

The previous analysis was repeated, and revealed that for fathers of one or two children, there was no difference in their average wellbeing score based on the gender of their children. However, for those with 3 or more children, the wellbeing of fathers who had only daughters (M = 70.76) was significantly lower than for those who had a combination of sons and daughters (M = 77.79).

These findings come from Table 13.
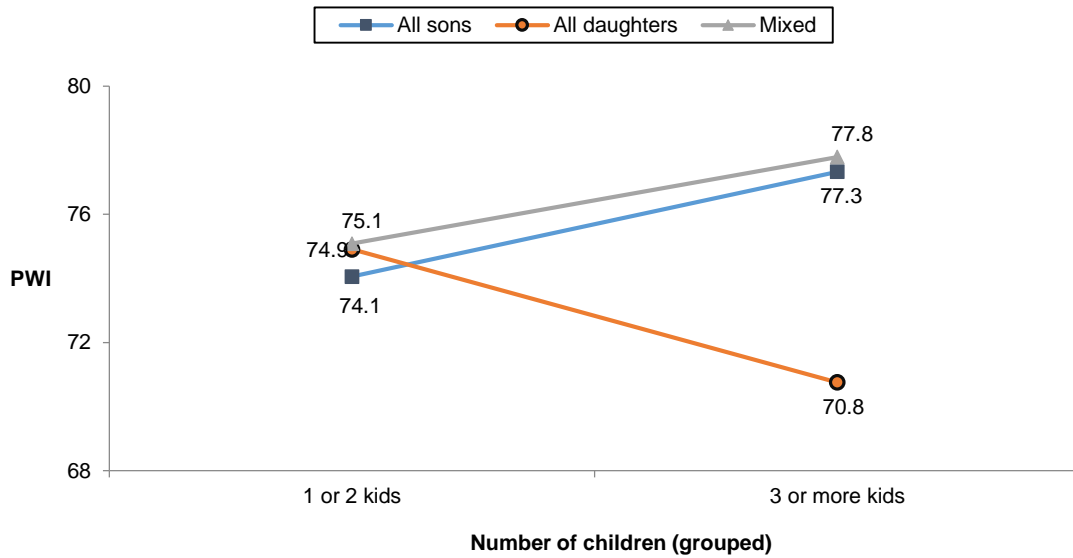
Figure 11: Number of children (grouped) and Gender of children x PWI (fathers only)

To provide insight into the lower wellbeing for fathers of 3 or more children who have all girls, they were compared against other fathers of at least 3 children on all the domains of life.

These findings come from Table 14.
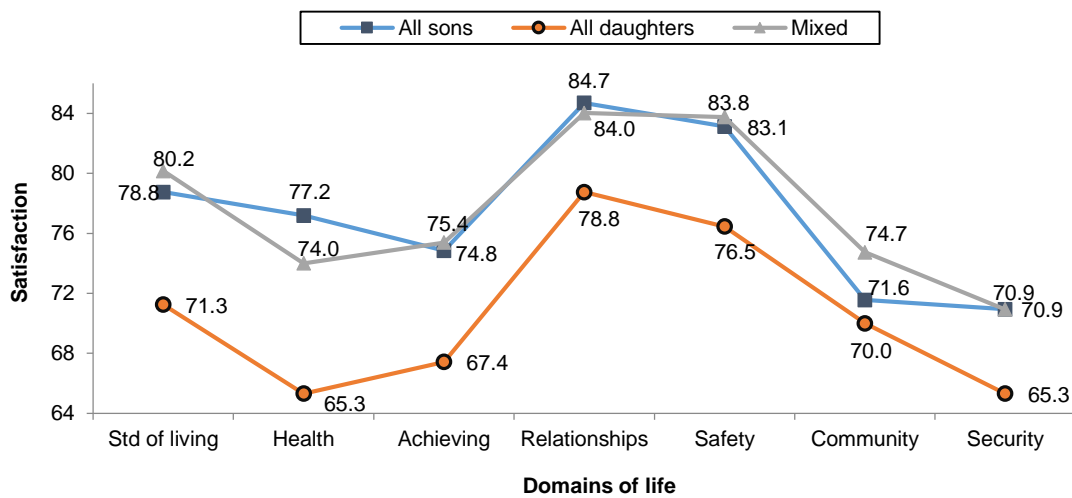
Figure 12: Fathers of at least 3 children on all domains

It appears that fathers of only daughters score lower than fathers of only sons or those with both sons and daughters on all domains. These differences achieve statistical significance for three domains: Standard of living, health, and safety.

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Conclusions

1. There is a significant difference in the wellbeing of men who have children and men who do not. There is no significant difference in the wellbeing of women based on whether or not they have children.
2. This difference in men's wellbeing emerges due largely to differences in the domain of personal relationships. Fathers report significantly higher satisfaction with their personal relationships than men without children. This occurs because most fathers are married or in defacto relationships, whereas men without children are more likely to be unmarried.
3. For fathers, wellbeing appears to peak for those who have 3 children. Their wellbeing is significantly higher than those who have no children or just one child.
4. For fathers who have 1 or 2 children, there are no differences in wellbeing if they have sons or daughters. However, for fathers of at least 3 children, those who have all daughters and no sons report lower wellbeing than those who have a combination of daughters and sons, and this is driven particularly by lower satisfaction with standard of living, health, and safety.

Summary

These findings support the general idea that SWB is higher for parents compared to people without children, though further analyses revealed that this difference was driven by fathers, whose wellbeing was significantly higher than for men without children. This finding is consistent with the previous research that supports the positive effects of parenthood on SWB (Aassve, Goisis, & Sironi, 2012; Nelson et al., 2013). The present findings emerged due to the large difference in satisfaction with the domain of personal relationships between fathers and men without children. Most fathers in our study were married or in a defacto relationship, and so they have the benefit of a close partner to provide social support, which is essential for higher wellbeing (Cummins, 2010).

Amongst fathers, the highest wellbeing was reported by those with 3 children, whose SWB was significantly higher than those with no children or just one child. However, for fathers with at least 3 children, wellbeing was significantly lower if they had only daughters compared to those who had at least one son. These findings were driven by differences in three key life domains: Standard of living, health, and safety. One explanation for these findings from the economic literature is that sons may consume fewer financial resources than daughters (Lundberg, 1995). Alternatively, fathers may be more involved and active in the lives of their sons compared to their daughters, thereby deriving the wellbeing benefits in return for their greater investment. In support of this explanation, research on time allocation in the USA has revealed that men spend more time with their children if they have at least one son (Barnett & Baruch, 1987, Harris & Morgan, 1991).

Overall, the wellbeing of fathers is within the normal range for Australians, and is higher than for men without children. This difference in parental wellbeing appears to be exclusive to fathers, with no significant difference in wellbeing emerging for women. Structural differences like the number of children and gender of children account for differences in wellbeing amongst fathers, but the importance of being in a committed relationship with a partner was a key factor contributing to the higher wellbeing of fathers in general.

Appendix of Tables

Table 1. Children vs No Children (PWI)

Do you have any children?	PWI		
	N	Mean	SD
No	429	73.91	13.48
Yes	1419	76.24	12.89

$t(1846) = -3.247$, p=.001, Cohen's d=.18

Table 2. Children vs No Children (GLS and domains)

Domain	No children			Children			t-test	Effect
	N	Mean	SD	N	M	SD	p	d
GLS	461	74.86	17.43	1490	78.68	17.01	.000	.22
Standard of living	460	79.09	16.62	1491	78.84	16.53	.779	
Health	461	74.79	19.81	1489	73.82	19.09	.344	
Achieving in life	453	72.10	19.10	1474	74.31	18.58	.027	.12
Relationships	456	72.24	25.52	1470	80.88	20.65	.000	.37
Safety	458	80.74	18.43	1485	80.96	16.69	.824	
Community	453	69.16	20.61	1482	73.41	18.54	.000	.22
Future security	446	69.75	20.21	1466	71.21	19.81	.177	

Table 3. Children vs No Children x marital status

Do you have any children?		Married	Defacto	Never married	Separated	Divorced	Widowed
No	Observed	96	58	256	6	23	15
	Expected	264.9	33.8	66.6	13.8	41.3	33.6
Yes	Observed	1033	86	28	53	153	128
	Expected	864.1	110.2	217.4	45.2	134.7	109.4

X^2 (5) = 896.299, p=.000

Table 4. Children vs No Children x Gender (PWI)

Do you have any children?	Female			Male			t-test	effect
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	p	d
No	190	75.42	12.71	239	72.71	13.97	.039	.21
Yes	736	76.78	13.00	683	75.67	12.76	.105	-
p	.198			.003				
d	-			.22				

ANOVA
Kids: F(1, 1844) = 8.947, p = .003
Gender: F(1, 1844) = 7.013, p=.008
Kids x Gender: F(1, 1844) = 1.229, p=.268

Table 5. Children vs No Children (GLS and domains) (men only)

Domain	No children			Children			t-test	Effect
	N	Mean	SD	N	M	SD	p	d
GLS	257	73.42	18.62	716	78.25	17.35	.000	.29
Standard of living	247	77.51	17.34	717	77.53	17.08	.986	.
Health	257	73.31	20.38	716	73.45	19.15	.920	.
Achieving in life	253	70.91	19.91	707	73.04	19.07	.132	.
Relationships	256	68.75	27.84	708	80.28	21.24	.000	.47
Safety	255	80.82	18.11	714	81.76	15.67	.430	.
Community	250	68.20	20.11	714	71.97	18.54	.007	.19
Future security	248	68.99	20.62	704	70.60	19.75	.277	.

Table 6. Children vs No Children x age group (PWI) (men only)

Age group	No			Yes			t-test	Effect
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	p	D
18-25	16	71.79	12.87	50	76.14	13.17	.251	
26-35	19	73.61	17.04	56	75.56	11.28	.572	
36-45	34	74.66	12.36	118	76.78	11.64	.358	
46-55	57	72.43	12.05	130	76.14	12.80	.065	
56-65	56	71.86	13.73	139	75.67	12.43	.062	
66-75	38	71.17	14.88	119	73.27	13.56	.418	
76+	18	75.24	19.54	53	78.01	11.76	.474	
Total	238	72.68	13.98	665	75.74	12.51	.002	0.23
p	.914			.284				

ANOVA
Kids: F(1, 889) = 7.397, p = **.007**
Agegroup: F(6, 889) = 1.052, p=.390
Kids x Agegroup: F(6, 889) = .128, p=.993

Table 7. Have children vs age group (condensed) x PWI (men only)

Age group	No			Yes			t-test	Effect
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	p	D
18-45	69	73.71	13.74	224	76.33	11.87	.123	
46-65	113	72.15	12.85	269	75.90	12.59	.009	0.29
66-75	56	72.47	16.45	172	74.73	13.18	.299	
Total	238	72.68	13.98	665	75.74	12.51	.002	0.23
p	.914			.284				

ANOVA
Kids: F(1, 897) = 8.077, p = **.005**
Agegroup2: F(2, 897) = .634, p=.531
Kids x Agegroup2: F(2, 897) = .226, p=.798

Table 8. Have children vs income (grouped) x PWI (men only)

Income group	No			Yes			t-test	Effect
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	p	D
Less than $60K	87	69.70	15.27	226	74.46	13.89	.009	0.33
$61-$150K	71	75.27	11.88	247	75.20	11.22	.962	
More than $150K	35	78.49	8.61	102	79.19	9.71	.707	
Total	193	73.35	13.46	575	75.61	12.21	.030	0.18
p	.001			.004				
μ^2	.07			.02				

ANOVA
Kids: F(1, 762) = 2.616, p = .106
Income grp: F(2, 762) = 11.636, p=**.000**
Kids x Income grp: F(2, 762) = 2.465, p=.086

Table 9. Have children vs relation (grouped) x PWI (men only)

Relation group	No			Yes			t-test	Effect
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	p	D
Never married	137	71.24	14.65	16	65.36	14.20	.130	0.33
Defacto or married	82	76.39	11.08	558	76.90	11.75	.711	
Separated/divorced/widowed	17	68.40	16.91	109	70.85	15.54	.552	
Total	236	72.83	13.90	683	75.67	12.76	.004	0.21
p	.011			.000				
μ^2	.04			.05				
Post hocs	*Defacto/married>never married, p=.021*			*Defacto/married>never married, p=.001* *Defacto/married>sep/div/widowed, p=.000*				

ANOVA
Kids: F(1, 913) = .344, p = .558
Relation grp: F(2, 913) = 14.998, p=**.000**
Kids x Relation grp: F(2, 913) = 1.834, p=.160

Table 10. Number of children x gender (PWI)

Number of children	Female			Male			Total			
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	M	SD	p
0	215	74.94	13.57	260	72.77	14.06	475	73.75	13.87	.090
1	96	75.21	10.81	85	72.99	12.99	181	74.17	11.90	.212
2	301	77.09	11.90	280	75.29	13.12	581	76.22	12.52	.083
3	205	76.88	14.44	176	77.73	11.97	381	77.27	13.34	.536
4+	113	77.88	13.32	127	76.10	11.98	240	76.93	12.64	.277
Total	930	76.45	12.98	928	74.94	13.12	1858	75.70	13.07	.013
p	.191			.001			.000			
				Post-hocs			*Post-hocs*			
				3>0, p=.001			*2>0, p=.019*			
				3>1, p=.047			*3>0, p=.001*			
							4>0, p=.017			

ANOVA
Parent gender: $F(1, 1848) = 4.624$, **p=.032, μ^2 = .002**
No of children: $F(4, 1848) = 5.292$, **p=.000, μ^2 = .011**
Parent gender x no of children: $F(4, 1848) = .904$, p=.461

Table 11. Father's wellbeing x gender of children

Gender of children	PWI		
	N	Mean	SD
All boys	134	74.82	13.33
All girls	133	73.97	12.95
Mixed	401	76.72	12.25
Total	668	75.79	12.65
p	.058		

Table 12. Father's wellbeing x gender of children and number of children

Number of children	All boys			All girls			Mixed			p
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	
1	38	70.79	13.68	47	74.77	12.25	.	.	.	.
2	65	75.98	11.92	56	75.03	14.31	159	75.09	13.22	.889
3	22	76.88	15.57	20	73.93	11.22	134	78.43	11.37	.275
4+	9	78.41	14.15	10	64.43	8.01	108	76.98	11.61	.005
Total	134	74.82	13.33	133	73.97	12.95	401	76.72	12.25	.058
p	.161			.111			.065			

ANOVA
No of children: $F_{(3, 657)} = 1.002$, p=.391
Childgender: $F_{(2, 657)} = 3.604$, **p=.028**
No of children x childgender: $F_{(5, 657)} = 2.533$, **p=.028**

Table 13. Father's wellbeing x gender of children and number of children (grouped)

Number of children	All boys			All girls			Mixed				Post-hocs
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	M	SD	p	
1 or 2	103	74.06	12.78	103	74.91	13.35	159	75.09	13.22	.816	
3 or more	31	77.33	14.95	30	70.76	11.10	242	77.79	11.48	.010	*Mixed > only girls, p=.007*
Total	134	74.82	13.33	133	73.97	12.95	401	76.72	12.25	.058	
p	.233			.123			.031				
d							0.21				

ANOVA
No of children (grpd): $F_{(1, 662)} = .217$, p=.642
Childgender: $F_{(2, 662)} = 3.080$, **p=.047**
No of children (grpd) x childgender: $F_{(2, 662)} = 3.001$, **p=.050**

Table 14. Gender of children x GLS and domains (fathers of at least 3 children)

Domain	All boys			All girls			Mixed			p
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	
GLS	32	77.19	21.59	32	73.75	16.61	256	80.23	16.76	.105
Standard of living	32	78.75	22.11	32	71.25	17.92	256	80.16	15.79	.018
							> All girls, p = .013			
Health	32	77.19	22.03	32	65.31	23.42	255	74.00	18.56	.032
	> All girls, p = .040						*> All girls, p=.047*			
Achieving in life	31	74.84	22.49	31	67.42	13.41	254	75.39	18.34	.075
Relationships	32	84.69	16.85	32	78.75	15.19	251	84.02	19.46	.309
Safety	32	83.13	12.30	31	76.45	16.44	255	83.76	14.95	.036
							> All girls, p=.027			
Community	32	71.56	15.68	32	70.00	14.37	253	74.74	18.03	.254
Future security	32	70.94	25.45	32	65.31	17.04	251	70.92	20.19	.342

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All our data and previous reports can be accessed online at
http://www.deakin.edu.au/research/acqol/reports/auwbi-long.php