What stops parents from having a second child?

Francesca Luppi | October 24, 2016



Parents of one child are commonly confronted by the first child's persistent pleas for a little brother or sister. However, they might be skeptical about satisfying their child's request because they know from experience how easily childbearing can turn their well-balanced daily life upside-down. Childbearing can be far less joyful than one might imagine before experiencing it, as witnessed by the decline in parents' – and especially mothers' – happiness and life satisfaction shortly after the birth of the first child (Kohler and Mencarini, 2016). The first child is the proving ground of parenthood: prospective parents' expectations about how life will change with the arrival of a child do not often match the reality of experience after the birth (Craig and Siminski, 2010). Tiredness due to sleepless nights and to the infant's relentless needs are among the causes. Additionally, childbearing reduces time for intimacy, increases the level of conflict within the couple and dissatisfaction with the partner, in particular about how partners should share the household tasks (Twenge *et al.* 2003; Doss, 2009). Traditionally, the mother is the parent with more responsibilities for childcare, especially during the first years of the child's life. This means that she often takes on the double burden of family and work, sometimes sacrificing her career prospects in order to reconcile her multiple responsibilities.

Understanding whether and how first parental experience affects the probability and the timing of a second child is important for theoretical and practical reasons. The theoretical reason is that low fertility is in large part due to couples stopping at the first child. Do these couples forego the second child because they are dissatisfied with their life after the first birth? The practical reason concerns the possibility of policy intervention to support fertility within specific social groups which might experience more difficulties related to childbearing.

Transition from first to second child

In a recent paper (Luppi, 2016)[1], I explore the probability of experiencing a second birth over time in a sample of 436 Australian couples with one child (data: Household Income and Labor Dynamics in Australia panel survey, 2001-2012). The women in the sample are 45 years old or

younger. Information on parents is collected from the year of the birth of their first child onwards, until they become pregnant with the second child or exit the survey. Results show that prospective parents tend to be overoptimistic about the difficulties of parenthood. More than a half of the mothers and one third of the fathers report that the experience with the first child was much harder than expected, and this reduces the likelihood of having a second child in the short term. Unexpected difficulties can arise for several reasons, because the child has health or behavioural problems, for instance, or simply because it is difficult to fully anticipate the consequences of childbearing. For women, these difficulties are at least partially associated with work-family reconciliation. Fear of losing career opportunities because of parenthood and dissatisfaction with employment prospects after childbirth are widespread among mothers, and they apparently represent the two main sources of uncertainty that lead couples to postpone or forego the decision to have a second child. In fact, Australia, is one of the OECD countries with the highest proportion of mothers abandoning the labour market or working part-time after the birth of their first child (OECD database, 2014). This happens because, independently of employment conditions, mothers are culturally and practically responsible for their children. The cultural importance of the mother's caregiver role is so pervasive that – on average – fertility decisions are conditional on the adoption of this role. Results show that the probability of having a second child is higher in couples where the woman does most of the childcare, while it decreases drastically when the partners share this workload "fifty-fifty" or where the father is responsible for most of the care. But it is not just a matter of sharing equally. Couples where the man *perceives* he is doing his equal share of childcare – independently of whether this is true – are only half as likely to transition to the second child. The opportunity to outsource childcare is of great help for parents: they can adjust to the new situation and proceed quickly to the second child. Nevertheless, formal and informal help with childcare is not always accessible or affordable, and for a non-negligible number of couples this means that the birth of the first child leads to the adoption—at least temporarily—of the traditional specialization of gender roles. However, when fathers of newborns do contribute to housework tasks this usually involves activities such as cleaning, cooking, shopping for food and household errands, and the more fathers do and perceive themselves to do these activities, the more likely couples are to have a second child.

At the same time, emotional and practical support from the partner becomes crucial for mothers' evaluation of their couple relationship after the transition to parenthood. This might explain why it is women's – and not men's – satisfaction with the partner that is so important in the planning of a second child.

At the end of the day, the mother's, more than father's, experience with the first birth can really shift the balance towards the decision to have a second child. Because women take on most of the childbearing burden, ensuring quick and satisfying reconciliation in their work and family life is crucial to sustaining higher fertility. Mothers are no longer willing to forego their career prospects and opportunities because of childbearing, even though fathers do not seem be ready to assume their "fair" share of childcare tasks. This means that – alongside the need to implement adequate family policies to help parents in balancing family and work – much more should be done to promote the adoption of egalitarian gender roles.

References

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Footnote

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