- Child rearing / Parenting

Having children keeps you young

Researchers from the US have analysed the brains of more than 37,000 people, finding a surprising benefit for both mothers and fathers.

HUMANS There seems a gap in Australian data as to whether parenting contributes to feeling youthful or happy. Studies in Finland, Sweden and Norway have previously shown that older adults there are happier when they have children. But then studies in Denmark and the Netherlands have indicated the complete opposite.

This may be because parenthood can bring good times and a sense of meaning in life, but at the same time add levels of worry and stress that make their way into everyday life.

Now researchers from Rutgers University in the US have discovered that children can leave a mark on their parents' brains – for both mothers and fathers – perhaps giving them an advantage later in life. The brains of parents appear to gain extra protection against ageing.

As we grow older, certain functions of the brain weaken. For instance, researchers can see a connection between ageing and weaker links in the brain areas responsible for movement, sensation and social connection.

As part of the study, the researchers analysed images of 37,571 brains (primarily British) in search of differences between individuals with and without children.

The analyses showed that the brain's networks for movement, sensation and social connection appear to be stronger in people who have children. According to the researchers, this indicates that parenthood may help protect against certain indicators of ageing in the brain.

The researchers also found that each additional child seemed to add extra protection. And the results were the same for both men and women, suggesting the benefits come from the experience of parenting rather than biological changes from pregnancy.

The parents in the study also showed higher levels of social connection, with more frequent family visits and larger social networks.

The researchers are now planning to investigate the mechanisms behind the link, which may include increased physical activity, richer social networks and greater cognitive stimulation.



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