Having children adds almost two years to life, say scientists

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When Friedrich Nietzsche declared ‘that which does not kill us makes, us stronger’ he probably did not have parenthood in mind.

Yet [a new study suggests](http://jech.bmj.com/lookup/doi/10.1136/jech-2016-207857) that despite the sleepless nights, incessant worry and financial headaches which children bring, youngsters also increase longevity.

In fact, fathers can expect to live nearly two years longer than childless men, while mothers gain an extra 18 months.

Scientists do not believe the effect is biological, but rather the result a loving support network which is crucial in later life, when, something as simple as a fall can be deadly.

People with a close knit family are also generally encouraged to visit the doctor, stay active and take care of themselves by their loved ones.

Previous studies have found that [loneliness](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/science/science-news/12012663/Loneliness-triggers-biological-changes-which-cause-illness-and-early-death.html), or losing a partner in later life can hasten death, but it is the first large study to show that children have a protective effect.

Dr Karin Modig, Unit of Epidemiology, Institute of Environmental Medicine, [Karolinska Institute](http://ki.se/en/startpage), Stockholm, Sweden, which carried out the study said: “Having children is associated with increased longevity, particularly in an absolute sense in old age.

“Support from adult children to ageing parents may be of importance for parental health and longevity.

“At old age, the stress of parenthood is likely to be lower and instead, parents can benefit from social support from their children.

“In addition, parents have on average more healthful behaviours than childless individuals.”

To find out if parenthood might help stave off death in older age, the researchers, studied the records of nearly 1.5 million people who were born as early as 1911, looking at when they died and whether they had children.

The risk of death rose with increasing age, irrespective of whether the individuals were parents or not.

But after taking account of influential factors, such as educational achievement and deprivation, life expectancy was higher among those who had children.

The findings contradict previous studies which suggest, for women at least, children shorten lifespan by diverting resources from physical maintenance to reproduction. In poor communities, having four or more children has been shown to shorten lifespan by 3.5 years.

But the [new study](http://jech.bmj.com/lookup/doi/10.1136/jech-2016-207857)found that mothers lived on average to 84.6 compared with women without children whose life expectancy was 83.1.

The difference was even more striking for fathers, whose life expectancy was 80.2 compared 78.4 compared with childless men.

The gap in death risks between the two groups also rose with increasing age, and was larger for men than it was for women.

At age 60 the difference in the one year risk of death was 0.06 per cent among men and 0.16 per cent among women. By the age of 90 these differences had risen to 1.47 per cent among men and to 1.10 per cent among women.

The associations were even greater among unmarried men, where the chance of dying doubled for those who did not have children.

The researchers suggest that unmarried men might rely more heavily on their children in the absence of a partner. They are also likely to be less well educated, whereas unmarried women tend to be more educated.

Dr Modig added: “Our finding that the association grew stronger when parents became older is further in agreement with research suggesting that childless people face support deficits only towards the end of life.

“In Sweden and the other Nordic countries, there is an overall trend of increasing levels of childlessness across birth cohorts.

“It may therefore be valuable to improve our understanding of how childlessness is linked to health and survival chances in old age.”