

Families First

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Published in the [TheDCPost](#)

Twenty-two years ago my husband and I were married in Portofino, Italy. Neither of us is Italian nor had previously been to Portofino, and we weren't disappointed. It was a lovely place for a civil ceremony despite the fact we didn't understand a word that was spoken. Thankfully they provided us with a charming wedding certificate which we had translated and every five years or so when I read it I am reminded that my choices were right.

No, I am not speaking about the choice of choosing my husband. That turned out okay, even with some rocky terrain along the way, but the Italians didn't care much about that. What they cared about was family, specifically our future children and their happiness, education and ambitions which mattered more than our individual marital happiness. They specified that the choices we make throughout our marriage were to be determined by the responsibility to our children's ongoing stability and future goals. The direction of our family is to continuously be determined by the needs of the child.

While this may seem excessive and disproportionate to many Americans, including me twenty-two years ago, I adhered to their doctrine and I am now glad. Our 18-year-old daughter is proof of that. There were times I wanted my needs to come first, but somehow I always knew that by putting her first, I was putting myself first. After all, her happiness is a large part of what makes me happy. This was not how I was raised. It was very clear in my growing up that children's needs were a distant second and parent's needs always came first.

I couldn't help but be reminded of this when I read the State of the World's Mothers annual report released by Save The Children Organization. It surveyed 176 countries based on maternal health, children's well-being, educational status, economic status, and political status ranking the best countries for raising children.

While Italy was not top on the list (that distinction went to the Nordic model countries Finland, Sweden and Norway) it did top the US which ranked pretty low at 30, with Italy coming in at 17.

These top countries understand that by making the family structure a priority we are strengthening the backbone of our country. We need to have a family friendly, well-functioning country that puts social economics and education before greed and power. When children's needs come first we all benefit. Not only are they the future of the country, for parents they are always our present. When our lives work easier by having jobs, health care and policies that are family friendly the country, and all citizens, flourish.

So next time you are unsure about policies that protect and support families, including the overall security, think about the countries that put these issues high on their priority list. These countries all have a higher happiness index than we do in the United States, and happiness is essential to a productive life.

Yes, we make our own happiness but if you live in a country where many are dissatisfied and frustrated by policies that don't allow for growth, then happiness will be one commodity hard to achieve for the majority of the population. If you want to grow a bountiful orchard then maybe it is time to use the same policy fertilizer the flourishing gardens across the oceans use.