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In Praise of Older Parents

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Having children often brings to mind an image of young, newly married couples. However, decisions about becoming parents have changed dramatically, and all over the country, couples are postponing parenthood. Birth rates for women in their thirties and forties have increased and for men over age forty-five, rates have increased by almost 20 percent since 1980 (Lamanna & Riedmann, 2006, p. 276). According to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report, the birthrate for women 45 and over more than doubled between 1990 and 2002. A Baby Boomer baby boom? Perhaps. The trend certainly has attracted attention. There is even a glossy magazine, *Plum*, from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, which targets pregnant women over 35. Why are parents waiting so long to have children and what are the rewards or trade-offs?

Rewards

There are definite benefits and rewards to being an older parent.

1. Both parents are more established in their careers, usually offering greater financial security. If career issues are ironed out, children are less of a threat. Parents feel like they have time for both their career and family. Mothers have more confidence to manage the changes in their life that children bring because of the organizational skills they have developed in their work. Older couples usually own property or a house, making that one less financial burden. More money also allows for support services or better quality day care.
2. According to a study conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Early Child Care Research Network, older fathers had less traditional child-rearing beliefs and were more sensitive during play with their children. Many middle-aged men choosing fatherhood today are well-established

baby boomers. Fatherhood in the 1950s usually meant a distant male who went to work, supported the family, but left the child rearing to the mother. Men of this era may not remember having much affection or physical contact from their dads. Today's fathers are part of the team and are more committed to fatherhood.

3. Older parents say they have more patience and understanding than they did when they were younger. They are better able to go with the flow. The farther away from childhood that you are, the easier it is to understand it. Many parents feel that if they had become parents in their twenties, they would still have been too much a child themselves to be a good parent. They have reached a new level of maturity. They don't worry so much about their child's position on the developmental scale. Children of older parents are also more likely to take center stage so they get a lot of attention from their parents. Older parents realize they don't need children to fulfill their ambitions and prove they are good people. The children are more free to grow up in a loving, supportive atmosphere.
4. Being an older parent forces many couples to look and plan ahead. They work hard to remain in good physical health and also stay financially healthy. With established careers, they find they have more time to spend with their children. They realize what a precious gift they have been given and want to make the most of it.

Trade-Offs

Being an older parent can also have its challenges or trade-offs. Many older parents encounter the experience of being mistaken for Grandpa or Grandma. Some laugh it off, but being older can make parents feel isolated among other parents who may be much younger than they are. Some older parents have even remarked that some parents of their child's friends are young enough to be their

children had they decided to have children at a younger age. Being an older parent shakes up the social order of expectations.

Older parents may not have the energy levels and stamina that younger parents have. Getting up in the middle of the night or staying up all night is hard. All parents get tired, but once you're older, you know you can't stay up all night and be raring to go the next day.

Late children often have problems that their friends may not face. Their parents may not play games and sports as much as younger parents for fear of physical injury. Late-born children may find themselves caring for aging parents or chronically ill parents at a young age. And some children complain they are deprived of grandparents at too early an age.

Many late-born children are like only children. Being around older parents may cause them to behave similarly, with responsible, mature attitudes. Older parents can put a lot of pressure on their children to succeed, to be a superachiever. This can be tough on a child.

Parents may worry about how their children will feel about having older parents and how old they will be when their child graduates from high school. The challenge is to be a parent, not an "old" parent.

Having a baby at any age is a big decision. Whether you're twenty or forty, most parents will tell you that becoming a parent is one of the most satisfying things they have ever done in their life.

Resources

- Crandell, S. (2005, September & October). Oh, baby. *AARP The Magazine* [On-line]. Available: http://aarpmagazine.org/lifestyle/oh_baby.html
- Lamanna, M. A., & Riedman, A. (2006). *Marriage and families: Making choices in a diverse society*. California: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Smilgis, M. (1988, October 10). Older parents: Good for kids? *Time* [On-line]. Available: <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,968651,00.html>

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