



## Families ... generations of strength

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# Delayed Parenting

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A growing number of women across America are having their first babies at age 40 or even older. Overall, first births among women over 30 rose to a record 22% of all births in 1995, as opposed to 5% of births in 1975. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the birth rate for women aged 40–45 years rose 20% between 1990 and 1995, and increased 74% during 1981–95. The rising birth rate along with the increasing number of women in this age group means that there were more babies born in 1995 to mothers in their 40s than in any year since 1966.

### Why Wait?

What explains this pattern of delayed childbearing? According to a study by Susan Coady, Human Development and Family Science faculty member at The Ohio State University, there are several reasons for waiting to start a family. Women who wait usually have more financial security, more emotional maturity, and more time to commit to their marriages and to their careers before focusing their energy on children.

It isn't so much that people aren't interested in having children, but they are just busy with their lives. Many couples have waited until they've established careers, bought a house and fixed it up, and then realized that it's getting late and they're running out of time.

Deferred marriage also plays a role, and many more females aren't married until a sizeable chunk of their reproductive lives has gone by. The high divorce rate

among Americans also plays a part. Many couples delay childbearing until their marriages are stable.

Other factors that account for delayed childbearing include economic problems in the baby boom generation, the availability of legal abortion, and effective contraceptives that make postponement easier.

### When Is It Too Late?

The media has generally publicized the virtues of older motherhood and suggested that women can easily conceive in mid-life, maybe even up to menopause. Women who put off trying to have children until their mid to late 30s may worsen their chances of becoming pregnant and lose the chance altogether to become a parent. Over the past 10 or 15 years, millions of couples have had reproductive problems stemming at least in part from the woman's age.

"Women aren't told enough about the decline of fertility with age," David Meldrum, a reproductive endocrinologist who heads the Center for Advanced Reproductive Care in Redondo Beach, Calif., says, "Many don't realize that if they wait, motherhood may pass them by." Female reproductive organs become less effective with age. When couples do decide to start a family, many find that they cannot.

Pregnancies can also be harder to maintain for older women. Studies show that women in their 40s have a rate of one and a half more miscarriages than women in their 20s. Premature and low-birth-weight babies can also be a

problem for mature women. The good news is that doctors keep a very close watch on the mother, and many of these problems can be avoided. The wealth of sophisticated new genetic screening methods now available to pregnant women has enabled them to establish the health of their fetuses early in pregnancy.

## Rewards

Although these facts can seem depressing or scary, don't panic. It's best to know the facts and see how they fit into the rest of your life. If you are thinking about having a child, talk it over with your partner. If you're not ready, determine why you're not. Many people are just scared to make that commitment — to be responsible for another life.

There are no guarantees in life, and many of the factors affecting older parents can also affect parents at any age. The ability to love and take care of a child is certainly a good prerequisite for becoming a parent.

Midlife parenthood has so many rewards that people feel the benefits outweigh the risks. It's easier to relax and have fun with your children when you know you have the resources to care for them. Age also brings self-knowledge and control, and you are less likely to project your own longings onto your children to fulfill your needs. Older parents can still maintain their careers if they choose

because they have the resources to afford good child care — something they might not have been able to do in their 20s.

And of course, the maturity level of older parents is a definite asset. They are past feeling like kids who still need to be parented and can move right into a positive parenting role. Older parents are more calm, confident, and able to go with the flow. Babies can sense this.

Too old to be a parent? Think again. Delayed parenthood can be the best thing for both the parent and the child. People seem surprised at older parents having children, but compared with teenagers having babies — is it such a risk?

## References

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