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Judith A. Myers-Walls

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PLANNING FOR PARENTHOOD

by Judith A. Myers-Walls, Human Development Specialist and Karen R. Hinkley, Graduate Assistant
Department of Child Development and Family Studies

Cooperative Extension Service, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907
Introduction

Although our culture has traditionally viewed parenthood as an expected part of marriage, almost five percent of the population is now voluntarily childless. Although small, the number of people choosing not to have children is growing steadily. However, the vast majority of individuals do have children at some point in their lives. Now that couples have the tools to make conscious decisions about parenthood, how can they be sure they are making the decisions that are best for them?

Planning for Parenthood was written to help you and your partner explore your thoughts and feelings about becoming parents. The discussion of planning for parenthood will focus on several important questions: Do you want to have children? When do you want to have children? How many children will you have? If you and your partner make the decision to have children, either now or in the near future, a list of additional resources is provided in the appendix. These resources will help you understand what to expect during pregnancy and the transition into parenthood so that you and your partner may be better able to enjoy your new adventure as parents. If you decide to postpone parenthood or that you do not wish to become parents at all, some of the resources will help you decide what the best method of contraception would be for you.
Considering Parenthood
You must deal with many issues in your relationship, both before and after your wedding day. One of the most important issues you will face as a couple is planning for or preventing parenthood. However, until quite recently the decision of whether or not to have children often was not even considered to be a decision. Parenthood was viewed as a natural and expected consequence of marriage. A minimum of decision-making was involved, and any decisions that were made to postpone parenthood were difficult to carry out because convenient and reliable birth control methods were not available.

Times have changed, however. With the increased availability of effective birth control techniques, you are in a better position to think of parenthood as an option rather than an unavoidable consequence. You can exercise greater control over the number of children and even choose the most desirable time for parenthood.

The “Whys” and “Why Nots” of Parenthood
At some point, you must consider the question of whether or not to become parents. You might deal with this issue by avoiding conscious planning and letting nature make all the decisions for you. You might feel sure enough about parenthood to respond with a definite “yes” or “no.” Or you might respond with a “maybe.” Trying to turn a “maybe” into a “yes” or “no” can take months or years of imagining what it would be like to be parents and weighing the costs and benefits.

The reasons given for deciding to have children are numerous and varied. Some of these reasons include:

- the belief that parenthood is a divinely ordained role;
- positive memories of a person’s own childhood;
- positive image of parenthood;
- an interest in the experience of pregnancy, childbirth, and parenthood;
- a great love for children;
- a feeling that something would be missing from a person’s life or marital relationship without the experience of parenthood;
- the desire to leave a legacy, something that will live on after a person is gone;
- a wish to provide hope for the world or to “add a link to the chain of life”;
- a biological urge; and
- social and/or family pressure.

Similarly, if you answer “no” to the question of parenthood, either temporarily or permanently, you will have specific reasons for deciding not to have children that are just as personal and varied as the reasons for wanting children. The two of you may choose not to have children in order to concentrate more fully on your respective careers; you may be financially unable to provide for children; you might feel that your
relationship would be negatively affected by children; you may not want to bring a child into such a troubled world; you may know you are carriers of a hereditary disease; or you just may not like the idea of raising children.

Understanding why you want to become parents is important because later these reasons may play a role in the adjustment to parenthood. Some recent research has shown that the more varied the reasons people give for wanting children, the easier their adjustment to parenthood. It also seems likely that people who have children for reasons that are based on other people's desires instead of their own (for example, because of family pressure) or for reasons that are based on inaccurate expectations (like assuming that the birth of the child will keep a troubled marriage together) would have a more difficult time adjusting to and accepting the responsibilities of parenthood.

Exploring Your Thoughts and Feelings about Parenthood

When considering parenthood, you will find it useful to explore your thoughts and feelings about parenthood and your reasons for wanting to become parents. This allows each of you to understand the other better and may help in arriving at a mutually satisfying decision. The following discussion questions are offered as a guide.

- What was my childhood like? In general, do I have positive or negative feelings about my experience?
- What were my parents like? Did their behavior give me a good or bad impression of parenthood?
- What images come to my mind when I think of myself as a parent?
- What values or experiences may have influenced that image?
Some Practical Considerations

The process of deciding whether or not to have children would be incomplete without taking a good look at what the experience is really like. You should ask yourselves how a child will affect your relationship and lifestyle. Although specific experiences will be very different for different couples, it is guaranteed that your lifestyle will change. Adding a child will influence how each of you relates to the other, how schedules are arranged, and the amount of time and energy available for home and outside interests.

Another thing you should consider when deciding to become parents is how children will affect your career or other life goals. This issue is particularly important and difficult for mothers who want to pursue a career outside the home. Since the daily responsibilities of child care have traditionally fallen to the mother, she must attempt to balance several roles at once—wife, mother, cook, housekeeper, and employee. Even couples who share household tasks equally tend to assume more traditional husband/wife roles after the birth of a child. Thus, women face the task of preparing for the child’s impact on a career even more so than men.

If you are both employed, it may be helpful for you to discuss ahead of time who will take responsibility for particular household and child care tasks. Being aware of the traditional separation of roles that occurs after becoming parents and making some decisions before a child is born may help prevent disagreements, resentments, and hurt feelings after the child arrives.

Another area of consideration is the financial responsibility involved with the addition of a new family member. Not only are there added expenses when raising a child, but often this is accompanied by the loss of the wife’s income, at least temporarily. Because of today’s unstable economic conditions, you may want to wait until you feel financially secure before giving serious thought to having children.

A final factor to discuss is whether a supportive network of friends and/or relatives will be there if help is needed. In the process of deciding about parenthood, it is helpful to discuss issues such as how to find babysitters, pediatricians, and playmates for a child. You might benefit from identifying those friends and relatives who would be willing to take over when you want some time away from your children.

After you have considered these additional points, take some time as a couple to answer these questions: Do you want to become a parent someday? Why or why not? Do both of you agree to have children, postpone parenthood, or remain childless? It is not unusual for one partner to want children and the other to feel differently, or for one person to be ready now and the other to want to wait a while longer. Although these differences may cause hurt feelings or resentment in the relationship, it is probably not wise to have a baby before both parents-to-be are ready. Each of you should try to respect the other’s feelings so that one is not overly pressured by the other. Deciding when one is ready for parenthood is discussed in more detail in a later section.
The Joys of Parenting
Along with the work and responsibility of parenthood come many joys and rewards, some expected and some unexpected. Parenthood can be a time of personal growth and learning for both mothers and fathers. Seeing children grow up, being able to help with their first step, or hearing their first word are very exciting and rewarding experiences. Through children, we can be transported back to a time of fantasy and wonder. One mother put it this way:

If you didn’t have kids, how would you ever know that teakettles shout or that the sky cries rain or that boats don’t sink because they used to be fish?

Fathers and mothers find the intense physical and emotional closeness to their baby a source of great joy. Further, the sense of accomplishment at bringing a child into the world and the shared experience of raising a child may serve to bring a couple closer together. A whole new facet of your partner’s personality is opened up to you as you watch him or her care for your child.

You may find that after having children you are able to appreciate your own parents more and strengthen your relationship with them. Often there is a renewed interest in family traditions and religious beliefs. Thus, the joys of parenthood and the feeling of fulfillment it gives can make the whole parenthood experience a worthwhile and rewarding time of life.

Saying “No” to Parenthood
After careful consideration of all the issues, you might decide against parenthood altogether. Even though the acceptance of voluntary childlessness appears to be increasing, those who choose this option may still experience considerable negative social pressure. Traditional views do not change easily. Voluntarily childless couples may encounter continual disbelief that they have “really” chosen this lifestyle and disapproval if it is suspected that they have.

If you choose to remain childless, you should try to support each other when opposition to your decision arises and try not to let the expectations of others make you feel guilty about your decision. You should be prepared for some of the responses you will encounter. Some people may think voluntarily childless couples are abnormal, selfish, irresponsible, not ready to settle down, or that they dislike children.

1 From Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, Ourselves and Our Children, p. 53.
Also, as a couple who has chosen to remain childless, you should not feel that you have to justify your position to everyone who asks. It is more important for you to feel good about your decision and comfortable with your chosen lifestyle.

The most difficult people to deal with may well be your parents. They may consider your decision not to have children to be a personal insult. The decision also may deny the parents the opportunity to have grandchildren. It is helpful to be honest about your reasons for making the decision and to recognize and accept your parents' feelings.

A Time for Everything

If you answer “yes” to the parenthood question, then you face another and possibly more difficult question: When? Deciding the perfect time for having a child would be easy, were there such a thing as a perfect time.

Many of the considerations described earlier also can be applied to the question of timing. Studies of readiness for parenthood have indicated that there are three major issues to consider.

1. Stability in the couple relationship. Many couples need about two years to establish effective communication patterns, decide how to divide roles, learn how to solve problems together, etc. However, the important issue is not the amount of time spent but that the tasks are completed.

2. Financial security. Again, there is no specific guideline to tell you if you are financially secure. It is most important that you think you are financially prepared for the child as a couple.

3. Being finished with the childless portion of your life. Many people have goals for their lives that do not involve children. In fact, children may interfere with those goals. This may include going to school; taking a special, once-in-a-lifetime vacation; getting established in a job; or any number of other goals. Once you have accomplished your particular goals for the childless portion of your life, you may be ready to commit yourself to parenthood.

However, rarely does anyone ever feel absolutely ready for parenthood. Doubts and fears may creep into the mind of even the most confident person. You should keep in mind that these feelings are normal and, for most people, the doubts will become less and less important as the pregnancy progresses.

If you and your partner have decided to become parents some day, you should start asking yourselves questions regarding the timing of parenthood. Some of these questions could include:

- How stable are we as a couple?
- How will we know when we are financially secure enough to have children?
- What goals do we have for this period of our lives when we do not have children?
- What age limitations do we have? That is, do we want to have children before we reach a certain age?
You may choose to postpone parenthood indefinitely. However, what appears to be postponing parenthood may actually be *postponing the decision* about having children. Continually postponing the decision may leave you in a difficult situation—in your late 30s with time quickly running out. At this point, parenthood becomes a now-or-never decision. You may look back and think of several points in time when it would have been better or easier to have children. If you find yourself in that situation, try not to punish yourself for putting off the decision. Instead, make a decision and then accept that decision. However, in order to avoid the last minute panic, you should deal as early as possible with the important decisions regarding parenthood and be sure you are being honest with yourself and each other.

Suppose, however, that even with careful planning Mother Nature has made the timing decision for you, and you find yourselves with an unplanned pregnancy. First, you should identify and deal with the feelings you are experiencing. You may feel shocked, surprised, helpless, excited, frightened, or overwhelmed. It is also possible that you feel relieved that the decision was made for you. If you need help dealing with negative feelings, you may turn to parents, friends, pastors, or professional counselors. After the initial shock has worn off, you need to make some important decisions. If you decide to have and raise the child, you must come to grips with the idea that you will be parents and take control of the situation. Even though the decisions about whether and when to become parents have been made, there are still many other important decisions to make. For example, you must decide about prenatal care, childbirth preparation, child care arrangements, birth control following the child's birth, and future children.

**The More the Merrier?**

Unlike couples two and even one generation ago, many couples today are choosing to limit the size of their families because of economic reasons and concerns about overpopulation and limited world resources. In fact, more families are deciding to have just one child. Research shows that "only children" are not always selfish, spoiled, or deprived.

As in trying to determine the perfect timing for parenthood, there is no perfect number of children for all families. You must make your own decision. The following questions may help you and your partner discuss this issue:

- What kind of lifestyle do we want to offer our children financially?
- How many children can we afford, considering the type of lifestyle we want to make available?
- How do we feel about "only children"? Why?
- Do we want a child of a particular sex? If we do not get a child of the desired sex (or one of each), would we keep trying until we do?
- How long would we keep trying?
- Are we concerned about overpopulation?
- Have we ever considered adoption or foster care to increase the size of our family? Why or why not?
Too Close for Comfort

An issue related to the number of children is the spacing of children. If you are planning to have two or more children, you need to consider how far apart to have them. You may prefer to have closely spaced children in order to get through the most demanding time of parenthood quickly or to provide your children with playmates close to their own age. Or you may want to space your children further apart in order to recharge after each birth or to prolong the period of intensive parenting, especially if you plan to keep the family quite small. Child developmentalists tend to disagree on the best time interval between children. Recommendations range from 1½ to 3 years. However, children outside of this range do not have any special problems. Siblings who are more than 5 years apart can develop close relationships. Likewise, siblings very near in age need not be extremely competitive. However, most experts agree that a woman's body needs time to recover between pregnancies.

When you and your partner discuss the number of children you would like, you should consider spacing as well.

- What are the advantages to having our children close together financially, careerwise, relationshipwise, etc.?
- Considering the same issues, what are the advantages to spacing the children farther apart?
- Which advantages are more important to us?
A Word about Birth Control

If you and your partner have decided to postpone parenthood or remain childless, then you must choose an effective method of birth control. Several sources of reliable birth control information and methods are available to you—your physician, books, or family planning agencies. It is very important to choose a method of birth control that best fits your circumstances and preferences and then use it consistently. Do not be afraid to try different alternatives until the best method or combination of methods is found.

Planning for Parenthood

Deciding about parenthood is not easy. After all, caring for another human being is a very important responsibility as well as a tremendous job. Seriously discussing the issues involved and making your own decisions are important parts of personal and relationship growth. Honest communication of your thoughts and feelings will help you make the best possible decision when planning for parenthood.
References


*This source would make good additional reading.

A related publication is NCR-165, *Beginning Parenthood: A Guide to a New Parent’s Development,* also available in many county Extension offices.
(This publication is based on an earlier version by Mardel Crandall).
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