

MYTHS ABOUT LATER MOTHERHOOD

A Fact Sheet Prepared for the Council on Contemporary Families

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Myths about Later Motherhood: Fact Sheet

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Today, almost 40 percent of all babies in the United States are born to women over 30, and almost 15 percent – 1 in 7 – are born to women 35 and over. As the chart below of historical trends in women's fertility rates by age demonstrates, birth rates to women aged 15-24 have fallen significantly since 1970, while birth rates for women aged 30-39 have risen significantly.

The recession has accelerated the trend toward older births. While the overall US birth rate fell more than 7 percent between December 2007 and December 2010, the birth rate for women ages 40-44 rose by 8 percent in the same period, continuing a trend that has been mounting since 1983. The sharp decline in births to younger moms -- teen birth rates fell by 17 percent, and births to women aged 20-24 by 16 percent -- presages an added rise in the number of later mothers in the future.

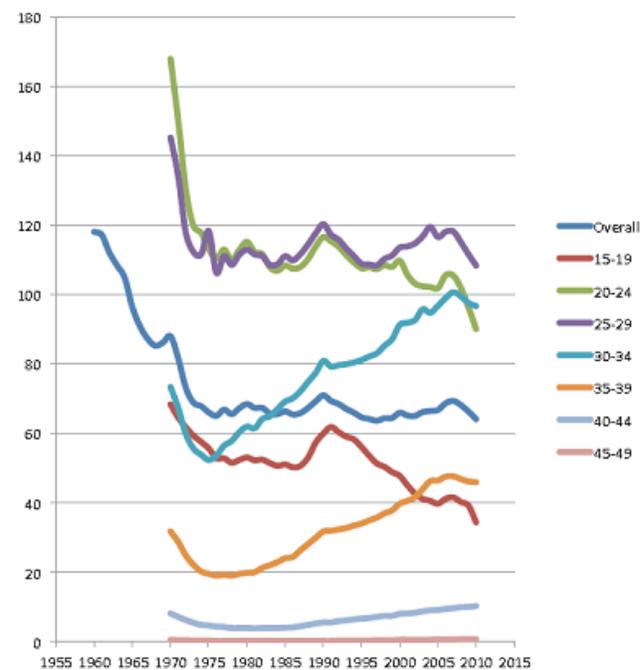
Having children later in life is nothing new. When women routinely had 4 or 5 children, many bore their last child in their 30s or even 40s. What is new is the increasing trend toward postponing *first* births into that later age range. In 1970, 1 in 100 first births was to a mother 35 and over. Today the figure is 1 in every 12. And 1 in every 4 first births is to a woman over 30.

But is it risky for women to delay first births, as the mass media incessantly warns? This fact sheet explores three myths that impede women's ability to make informed decisions about when to embark on motherhood.

Myth One: Women who delay motherhood past age 35 are unlikely to ever get pregnant

According to one 2010 news story, a 30-year-old woman has only 12 percent of her eggs left. The author conveniently left out the fact that this is in comparison to the number of eggs in a 20-week old fetus. In fact, a 15-year-old woman has only half the egg cells of a

Fertility Rates by Age of Mother, 1970-2010
 with overall data 1960-2010
 (annual births per 1000 women, within each age group)
 including CDC June 2012 revised data



Source: CDC National Vital Statistics Reports 60:1, 60:2, and 60:7.

female fetus and a healthy woman of 25 has only 22 percent. Since there is no major fertility decline at 30, apparently 12 percent is all you need.

It is true that fertility declines after 35, and it often takes longer for a couple to conceive. But studies suggest that about 90 percent of 35-year-old women can get pregnant without aid, roughly two-thirds can do so through age 39, and about half at 41. Rates plummet thereafter, and few women have children after age 44 with their own eggs.

Myth Two: Women who do get pregnant after age 35 are putting their children at risk

Though the risk of autism does increase with maternal age, the rate of increase is often blown out of proportion. The increased risk attributable to mothers' age appears to be *one half of one percent*. Older fathers, often partnered with older mothers, have been linked to a somewhat higher risk. But while reported cases of autism increased by 600 percent in the 1990s, less than 1 percent of the total rise was due to maternal age.

Not only has the risk of older motherhood to children been exaggerated, but the benefits have been ignored: For example, children's test scores improve with each year of motherhood delay.

Myth Three: Older parents will not have the health or energy to really enjoy parenting

Although all mothers have a spike in happiness around the birth of a child, this spike is particularly strong for moms who start their families after 35 and is not followed by the steep and sustained decline in happiness and satisfaction that occurs among younger mothers.

Mothers who choose to delay childbirth actually live longer than other mothers, on average (due to a combination of physical vitality, better access to health care, and perhaps a will to stick around to see their children through).

Establishing oneself in a career before having a child makes sense to many women, and in the absence of the family-friendly work policies adopted by every other major industrial democracy (see: [Heymann & Earle, 2007 for CCF](#)), delay is also a shadow-benefits system, minimizing the motherhood penalty that women accrue when they interrupt their careers early. For example, female college graduates earn substantially more—roughly 12 percent more in long-term salary -- for each year they delay having children. Thus a college graduate who had her first child at 30 would make twice as much in annual salary over her life time as she would have if she'd had her first child upon graduation at 22.

This fact sheet is based upon the forthcoming new edition of *Ready: Why Women Are Embracing the New Later Motherhood*, to be released August 7, 2012 by Basic Books).

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Founded in 1996 and now based in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Miami, the Council's mission is to enhance the national understanding of how and why contemporary families are changing, what needs and challenges they face, and how these needs can best be met. To fulfill that mission, the Council holds annual conferences, open to the public, and issues periodic briefing papers and fact sheets.

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