

Home Matters: First-time Parenthood

By Michelle Post, MFT

Adrenaline junkies have nothing on first-time parents. As a Marriage and Family Therapist in Los Angeles, I sometimes see married couples wrestling about having their first child with more anxiety than a first-time bungee jumper displays before launching himself out into thin air.

Their questions are many: Are we ready? Do we have enough money or time? Will we lose our place in the home? Our freedom? Sleep? (Most certainly.) What's effective discipline? How can we be "good" parents? It sometimes seems the only thing couples do know about child rearing is what not to do (what their parents did). These concerns are normal, but need exploration.

□ When not to have children

Do not have children to "save" your struggling relationship. This is the worst time. Studies show marital satisfaction takes a nosedive after the first child is born, drops further as children become teens, and doesn't start to rise until the last child leaves the nest. To survive these pitfalls, develop a strong foundation and a high level of relationship satisfaction before having children.

Do not assume you know your roles or partner's expectations. In today's two-income, two-career homes, men and women are confused about familial responsibilities. Forty some years ago, seeing a father-to-be in the delivery room was a rare sight. Now many men need time off from work for Lamaze classes, OBGYN visits, or carpool duties. And let's not forget, the my-child-is-sick-today-and-my-wife-can't-stay-home excuse. But not everyone has this flexibility. Partners resent this. Discuss these long-term, child-care responsibilities.

□ Child bearing age increasing

Do not assume you can wait forever to have a child. Financially and emotionally, older mothers may be better equipped for child bearing, but the body's physical maturity is still a risk factor. Dr. Susan Cohen, an OB-GYN in Beverly Hills, says the average age for child bearing is increasing amongst her clients. She offers compassionate reassurance about the physical risks of childbirth at later ages and notes that when a woman is due after age 35, her doctor should perform an amniocentesis to check the fetus. Most doctors recommend starting a family before 35. Do not assume you'll live forever. Many of my clients seek grief counseling because a 50-year-old (or under) spouse or parent died suddenly from a heart attack, accident, or an aggressive form of cancer. Statistically, most people live into their 80s, but one should plan for the unknown and the inevitable.

Before having children, more couples today seek therapy and education to learn child-raising skills and avoid the mistakes of their parents. This consideration provides a healthy, secure, and loving reception for their new child as well as powerful insights for themselves.

About the Author

Michelle Post is licensed Marriage and Family Therapist with a private practice in West Los Angeles. She specializes in children, adolescents, and families who are dealing with grief and loss, pain management, stress management, and life transitions. Ms. Post also is the Director of Child & Adolescent Programs for Our House. She can be reached at michpost@comcast.net or at (310) 927-5611. Learn more about Michelle Post at <http://www.camft.org/Therapists/MichellePost>