

Assignment: Persuade us to accept a claim about which you have considerable conviction.

### **Considering Children? Start Earlier, Finish Earlier!**

by Mary Jo Mayerck

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The following scenes are based on actual conversations I have had with high school friends.

Flashback, ten years ago. The scene is a local bar:

*"Hey, you guys made it! Found a babysitter this time, huh?"*

*"Yeah, and none of the kids got sick at the last minute either – what a miracle!"*

Present day. Girl's night out:

*"I wish my kids were old enough to drive themselves back and forth to school and activities and friends' houses; I'm ready to put the meter in my car and start charging for rides."*

*"It really does free up a lot of time. I have time now to do stuff for myself, like taking classes at Harper, and even simple things like actually reading a whole magazine at one sitting."*

The future, ten years from now. Telephone conversation:

*"You two just got back from a weekend away! Where are you going this time? We'd join you but you know how it is to have teenagers; for them to go anywhere with their parents would be the ultimate in boredom, and we certainly can't leave them home alone for a weekend!"*

*"I remember those days. Hang in there, they'll be over soon!"*

As this fictional dialogue suggests, the events of my life have followed quite a different course than that of my peers. While a young adult, I made one major decision that determined that alternate course: I decided to begin having children while I was still in my twenties. Over the years, there were many times when I questioned and even regretted that choice. But now, when I weigh the pros and cons, I believe my decision was a good one. And I suggest that all young couples consider the now-radical idea of starting a family when they are in their twenties rather than postponing this part of their lives until later.

Ten years ago, unlike most of my peers, I was changing diapers, chasing preschoolers, and going to T-ball games. My husband and I, in our twenties, were young and energetic enough to deal with the challenges of having young children around the house without exhausting ourselves or our fun-loving attitude. Many of my friends, who waited until their mid-to-late thirties to begin a family, now have toddlers and children in elementary school. They feel the physical demands of parenting young children much more than we did.

When kids reach the older child/preteen years, their worlds expand, and so, too, the physical demands on parents expand. These are some of the busiest years of a child's life; I have survived endless baseball practices and games, music lessons, trips to the mall, homework assignments and school functions, all of which required one or both parents to be involved. Many of my peers are just now beginning to be swept up in the whirlwind of activities of this age group. They have little time or energy to indulge any interests of their own and can only rarely break away for a dinner out with friends.

In my household, the children have advanced to their teenage years; they are constantly planning outings with their friends; they are newly licensed or soon-to-be licensed drivers; they are beginning to think of post-high school options. They need to be as closely monitored as young children. But since the energy expended by parents is less physical and time consuming and more mental at this stage in a child's life, the parents are able to pursue other interests and continue their education at a stage in their own lives when they can truly appreciate that opportunity. Many in my age group did not take seriously the chance to attend college after high school; we either dropped out or used the college years as a chance to further our social skills. Some who did earn a bachelor's or master's degree worked for a few years, and are now home raising young children. I was one of the few who had children while still in my twenties and now finally have another opportunity to continue my education. I bring to my studies life experience, appreciation, and

attentiveness that were absent twenty years ago. Other advantages of this delayed educational fulfillment directly involve my kids: we help each other with homework; we cheer each other for good grades; we motivate each other to continue learning at any age.

Another beneficial consequence for couples who have children earlier is that the children will be more likely to have a longer and closer relationship with their grandparents. And if we look further into the future, these couples will more likely have the same relationship with their own grandchildren. In my own family, my parents (who had all five of their children before age 35) have been able to join us on family vacations and keep up with the kids in activities such as mountain climbing, biking, and canoeing. My three children have wonderful memories of those experiences with their grandparents. I hope to be able to do the same with my grandchildren; even if my oldest waits until age 30 to have children, I'll only be 51!

A more serious issue in favor of having children before age 35 involves the risk factors of pregnancy and childbirth, all clearly pointed out by The Johns Hopkins University in an electronic posting titled, "Pregnancy After 35." Women waiting until after 35 to become pregnant may have a difficult time conceiving since there is a general decrease in fertility beginning in the early thirties, and there is a higher risk of miscarriage than for women aged 20 to 35 years. During pregnancy, women over 35 have an increased risk of developing high blood pressure, diabetes, placental and bleeding problems, and cardiovascular problems. When the time comes to deliver the baby, first-time mothers over age 30 typically have harder labor with more fetal distress and are twice as likely as younger women to deliver by cesarean section. And finally, pregnancies of older women have a much higher risk of producing babies with genetic disorders, most commonly Down Syndrome. The chance of having a child with Down Syndrome increases steadily from one in 1,250 at age 25 to one in 106 at age 40. One-fourth of the cases of Down Syndrome are attributed to the advanced age of the baby's father, making this a consideration for dads-to-be also. Obviously, these should be serious considerations for couples planning their families.

The most compelling argument against couples beginning their families before age thirty is financial. My husband and I sometimes struggle to and sometimes simply cannot provide our children with non-essential items they want. It may have been much more practical for both of us, after completing college, to devote our time and energy to earning as much money as we could to prepare financially for raising a family. I have to agree that it is much easier to save for a house and contribute to long-range saving plans when there are no expenses involving children to account for. But in my observations, some parents carry this thinking too far. Does a newborn baby really need a home with four bedrooms, two-and-a-half baths, and a three-car garage? Does a toddler really need designer duds and a pint-size electric-powered SUV? And do elementary school age children really need all the latest state-of-the-art video games and birthday parties at the arcade with fifty of their closest friends? I think it might be good for kids these days to experience a world with financial limits; it would temper their exposure to the negative influences of advanced technology, encourage more imaginative and physically active play, and force them to take a look at the most natural things in the world around them.

I have experienced one other negative effect from my choice to have children earlier than have my high school friends. Because our lives were progressing on such different paths, there were times over the years, especially when we were in our twenties, when I felt we could not relate to each other; my peers and I were essentially living on two separate planets. But we remained friends, and now they understand what I was doing and I understand what they are going through. The mutual recognition of parental pitfalls makes for some interesting and amusing discussion on our occasional, much-needed, kid-free outings.

The decision to commit to a relationship and have children is, of course, one that requires much thought and planning. To marry and begin a family too soon could be disastrous for a young adult; for committed couples, delaying this stage of life could also produce unfavorable consequences. I believe that for parents and children alike, the personal, developmental, familial, and physical benefits of having children before age 35 outweigh the economic challenges and minor social frustrations. I recommend that young people give this idea serious consideration when planning their future.

### **Works Cited**

“Pregnancy After 35.” February 1997. The Johns Hopkins University. 11 May 1999  
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