

Plan Your Parenthood

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Despite what everyone tells you, being a parent isn't just about children. Nor is it about having the money to do it. We can have every possible resource, but fail to ask and answer the difficult questions about parenthood. The following concerns are not always easy to consider, but we profit by pursuing them.

Parenthood is different than being a Mom or Dad. Parenthood is about you today; sometimes being the best parent means taking time and resources for yourself. It is all too easy to forget about ourselves and devote every available resource to our children. We forget that children don't need things as much as they need quality experiences and relationships, guidance and freedom, success and failure. But in giving too much we forget about ourselves, our needs, and the lifetime of difficulty that we must confront. Let those things fester and build up, and they will inevitably spill over into your family life, your child's life, and poison the perfect world that you sought to create.

Much of parenting has to do with our relationship with our significant other and ourselves. If you have a partner, you need to have a series of conversations: about parenting style, about belief, about culture, and about worst-case scenarios. If you can't get on the same page about some of these issues, then you should know where the disagreements will be and how to disagree.

Parenting Style

While painful, our lives and our children's lives will meet failure, disappointment, depression, sadness, anger, and the full spectrum of human feeling. If you are unprepared for the "bad" and uncomfortable feelings we will all feel, how can you guide your child through them? Most difficult will be forming an intimate, emotional relationship with a person: a person who is bound to change and struggle as they grow.

How do you handle your child's failure? How will you punish your child when they do wrong? Often, one parent shoulders the burden of being the disciplinarian; this is an exhausting and alienating exercise. Consider how to share this burden as parents. Discuss how your family will change through the different periods of childhood: school, adolescence, puberty, first love, college, and the ever-growing period of pre-adult dependence. What are the important milestones for your family, and how will you reach them together?

Legal

It is easy to avoid lawyers. The word kindles anxiety, even among lawyers. Slogging through the legal morass causes a pain in the put of our stomachs. But according to John Lennon, "life is what happens when you make other plans." A child is for life and a lot can happen in that time. Does a particular disease run in your family? Then you should plan for it today instead of avoiding it until it might be a reality.

But one thing can be planned on and you must draft a will for that. A will is the only way that

you can help your child after your death, and you *cannot* leave it to the judgment of others. Family court is the last place you want your legacy determined.

This last is even more critical for gay and lesbian couples who do not still enjoy the full protection of the law. Single parents are also in a legally vulnerable position.

Religion

The practice of religion goes beyond what happens in the church, mosque, or temple. It isn't simply just the ideas we have about life, death, devotion, justice, behavior, but often forms the systems we use to cope with life's disasters; the coping mechanisms we use to grieve, the actions we can take at a funeral, and how we can expect people in our community to treat us. Most importantly, religion can be a fountain of strength.

Even couples that share the same religion can have radically differing views about the proper adherence. What will you celebrate, and how often? Will your child be raised in a particular faith, or will he or she sleep in on the weekends? Your partner may agree completely with your views, but experience pressure from the extended family.

Culture

We live in a connected age, in one of the most multicultural places on the planet. You may live with someone that has a very different culture than your own. Like with religious issues, Cultural differences need to be discussed. While your partner may be willing to let some things slide with you, he or she may be adamant about raising your child in a particular way. Should the child be sent to a special school that teaches a particular culture? Will your house be multilingual? Will boys be circumcised (not an argument you want to have at the hospital!)?

Finance

Kids are expensive, period. Your child might be priceless, but he or she will certainly have a cost. In a town like New York, they cost even more than the estimates you see in the newspaper. First, you have to handle the day to day costs — food, the resulting diapers, extra doctor's visits, babysitters, toys, and so on. Then there are the costs of the things you will want your child to do — how much was Harvard? That summer camp costs *what* for two weeks? You should also think about the unforeseeable: critical illness and divorce. Where would those leave your family?

Here is thumbnail sketch of the next twenty (financial) years: The US Department of Agriculture (don't ask why) estimates that it takes, on average, \$17,000 per year to raise a child, totaling nearly \$300,000 by the time your child is 17. Remember, average is Wal-Mart clothes, going out to Denny's twice a month, and is a small town in Ohio. Business Week recently placed the lifetime cost of raising a child in comfort at one million dollars. Coincidentally this is the same amount gained over your lifetime from having a 4-year degree as opposed to just a high-school degree. Speaking of which, the College Board estimates the cost of a 4-year degree at public school is \$25,000 and just over \$100,000 at a private school. All these costs rise about 6% a year, more than doubling in 20 years. There are always student loans, but their interest can now run as high as 15%, similar to a credit card.

In the next twenty years, our parent's generation will leave the workforce, and begin to draw social security, welfare, and Medicaid payments. At the same time, our children will begin to go to college and, after graduation, will often go through a lengthy period of "pre-adulthood" characterized by dependence on parents. They will not contribute to the tax base until they are 30. We can all look forward to being squeezed more than our parents were.

CONCERNS SPECIFIC TO FAMILY TYPES

Gay and Lesbian

Let's talk about you. There are three questions that you must be able to answer before you become a parent. First: Am I comfortable with being homosexual and coming out? It isn't as simple as it might sound. Coming out is a continuous process; as you progress through life you will continually approach situations from a unique, minority perspective. In some sense, you will always be an outsider. Are comfortable with that? Second, if you are in a committed relationship, is it a stable one? Constantly blazing new trails is difficult work, and can lead to vast differences quickly amassing between any two people.

Third, do you live in an area that support gay parents? Simply because *you* are left alone does not mean that your children will be supported. They will have to take your relationship and the choices you make to school with them one day.

There is a vast network of friends, grandparents, community, and family that traditionally supports couples with babies. Depending on your family situation and social circle, you may not be a part of it. If not, how will you make your own network?

Will you raise a child of a different gender? How and when do you explain a homosexual relationship to your child? They will certainly notice the difference in you family earlier than you plan for. This difference has to be acknowledged honestly.

If you adopt, will you child be of the same gender and race as you? How might those differences be handled? You may find that people who were previously tolerant become vocal when you have a child. Family may not support a surrogate, or find that it is a painful reminder of your orientation.

Adoption

When adopting, remember that you are bringing a child into your world that is not of you. You may experience doubts greater than a biological parent would: "What if this child develops a disease that doesn't run in my family?" "Am I ready to raise a child that isn't of my own flesh and blood?" You may be surprised when friends and family react badly to the proposition, especially if the child is of another race – a University of Minnesota study finds that nearly 45% of parents of international adoptees faced some sort of negative or intrusive comments about their child.

Are you willing to compromise on the child you want? There are times when the child that you want will simply not be available – you may need to settle for an older child. If you are adopting

abroad, you need to carefully research the pitfalls that are associated with adopting from each country. For instance, 14% of Chinese babies have elevated lead levels in their blood stream. Older children from abroad will come with a different culture, and you must adapt to that.

It might be your only option, but it is an expensive one. It can add anywhere from \$10,000 to \$60,000 dollars to the expense of having a child. Moreover, it can take over a year to work through the complicated process that can involve interviews, credit checks, drug test, references, and more. And ultimately, it is another way to be different in our society.

Single

Like the adoptive parent, you will have doubts: “Is it selfish to deny a child the resources of two parents?” “Can I meet all of the emotional needs of a growing child?” “Can I do it all, all alone?” If you don’t ask them of yourself, someone in your life is likely to. As with gay and lesbian couples, you need to consider where you live – is it the sort of place that welcomes, or at least accepts, single parents and their children? You might be tough enough weather the storm of a negative public opinion, but your child will certainly be affected. Our lives can be challenging enough without the heartbreak of watching your child tackle persistent narrow-mindedness and aggression.

As a single parent, some of these issues become easy; you can decide how your child will be raised and how much exposure he or she will have to religion and cultures. But being alone means that some things are much more difficult — there is only one set of finances to rely on, one set of friends and family to step in and help. Will your job provide for you and a child? Will it be there for the next 20 years? And can you create a support network deep and broad enough to offer real help when you need it?

Remarrying

As a divorcee, you will need to look inward more so than others. Without introspection, issues that caused one divorce can lead to another. While it is tempting to blame the other person for the divorce, ask yourself, why did it happen? Even if your former partner was a total dud, why did you form a relationship with them in the first place? The purpose of this is not to assign blame to any person, but to prevent the repetition of problems that can scar a child for their entire adult life.