

Chapter 5: Becoming a Parent: Approach and Attitude

My grandmother died before I turned ten. Life expectancy was shorter in the 1950s and 1960s, and one didn't get to share as many years with one's elders. Today things are different. Gen Z and the millennials share more years with their grandparents. Not long ago I met a girl whose family I have known for many years, and I have seen the little one grow up. She is now in her mid-twenties. 'Who do you like the most in your family?' I asked her.

'My grandmother,' she said.

'Why so?'

'Because of the way she was. She taught me so many things, and she shared many stories.'

'When are you getting married?' I asked her.

'Oh, I have a lot of time. I'm only twenty-six, Uncle.'

'All right, so when do you think you'll get married? Let's put it that way.'

'Maybe thirty-two or thirty-three.'

'Do you want your children also to have wonderful memories of their grandmother? Like you did?' I asked.

'Sure,' she said. 'I would love that. My mother can tell them stories and teach them so many things.'

'But the way you are planning,' I said, 'it may not work out that way.'

She calculated her approximate age when she would have children and her mother's age as the children grew up.

'If I do things my way, I don't think my mother will see much of her grandchildren,' she muttered while rechecking the math in her head.

‘Why are you robbing your mother of her grandmother-hood and robbing your children of their grandmother’s love?’ I could see that she started thinking, but I wasn’t sure where her thoughts took her.

Wage disparities, motherhood penalties, balancing the needs of career and family acutely affect women and the family they are helping to raise. For instance, during the pandemic, women faced an increase in their workload--had to work double shifts--and were compelled to quit work in droves. This mass exodus of women put gender parity at work back by at least thirty-six years by some measures. ⁱ

Men, even though in a better position, find it difficult to run a household on a single salary. Mainly for these reasons, I find young people delaying marriage and delaying having children. And among those who are married, many couples look for ways to deepen their relationship. So, whether you are newlywed or have a few miles under your belt, the topics covered here should be helpful.

[A] Tik Tok: Both Men and Women Have Biological Clocks

In the American movie *My Cousin Vinny*, Vinny Gambini, played by the wise guy Joe Pesci, hasn’t slept in five days. He’s scheduled to appear in court to defend his nephew in a death trial. On that morning, his girlfriend Mona Lisa Vito, played by the effervescent Marisa Tomei, spews fire over Vinny’s broken promises, their marriage, and her ticking biological clock. As she stomps her stiletto heels on the pine floorboards, shouting out ‘tik tok, tik tok,’ Vinny breaks out into a rant about how *everything* is going wrong in his life, and on top of it, the added pressure of a ticking biological clock. ⁱⁱ

Although popular, the stereotype of portraying women as having limited shelf-life fertility is wrong. Both men *and* women have fertility clocks that are ticking away.

Let's start with the men first. In 2018, Dr. Michael Eisenberg, Director of Male Reproductive Medicine at Stanford University, led a population study. He and his team analyzed more than 40 million births in the United States between 2007 and 2016.ⁱⁱⁱ The study found that advanced paternal age (forty-five years and older) affects the children *and* the mother. They noticed that advanced paternal age was associated with an increased risk of premature birth, low birth weight, and low Apgar score, the five-point assessment of a baby's health in the minutes after birth. The study also found that the odds of gestational diabetes in mothers were 34 per cent higher with the oldest partners (fifty-five years and older).^{iv}

The study also showed that advanced paternal age put the children at an increased risk of conditions such as dwarfism, psychiatric disorders and autism. So, it's no surprise that the American Society for Reproductive Medicine recommends the following for sperm donors: 'The donor should be of legal age but younger than forty years of age so that *potential hazards related to aging* are diminished.'^v The data on advanced paternal age risk has been around for a while. Yet, awareness of the male biological clock and its impact on the mother and the child's health is minimal even in developed countries.

Switching gears, women hit peak fertility in their early twenties. Once women reach thirty-five years, they are considered a high-risk pregnancy in many countries, including the United States. Osteoporosis, gestational diabetes, and reduced skin elasticity are some risks associated with pregnancy in advanced maternal age. There are many screenings prescribed for a high-risk pregnancy, including tests like Amniocentesis. Most of these tests are inconvenient, and some are even painful. Not to mention the stress that comes with getting the tests done. For women, giving birth in their twenties is in tune with the fertility rhythm of their bodies. Another

benefit of giving birth to the first child in her twenties is that it makes planning for a second one easier.

Over the years, I have met some couples who tried to conceive when they were younger in their peak fertility years. But things didn't work out for some reason, and they ended up having children later who are all in good health. I also know of couples who delayed having children. They had children later in life who are also doing well. So, planning a child is not about beating the statistical odds. It's about avoiding taking chances with something so important. There is merit in cooperating with the natural rhythms of the body. As a couple, you should sit down and talk through your plans for raising a family. One key consideration in your discussion should be your biological clock and making sure that you use the window wisely. I pray that your circumstances support you and your partner in making these decisions.

Offering reproductive advice is a charged topic. It touches on women's reproductive rights, social policy for childcare, and religious beliefs, and no matter which line one treads, someone will be unhappy. What I have written here is what I told my children and loved ones. If my words caused you any hurt, I hope you can take it as advice from a well-wisher.

[A] Energy, Fun, and Finances

Besides biological rhythms, the other reason to have children sooner is the energy it takes to raise them. Children like to run around, play ball, ride bikes, paint pictures, have pillow fights, and wage snowball wars. When parents are younger, their energy levels are higher. They can keep up with children's demands and manage their careers, social life, and everything else that needs attention. When physical energy is waning, the body struggles to keep up.

The energy advantage becomes clearer later in life when children become teenagers. For example, a mother who gives birth in the late thirties will have to deal with her own

physiological and psychological changes related to menopause while supporting a teenager whose body is also changing. Both are on the edge, and it's a recipe for emotional showdowns. The same goes for the father who may be dealing with his midlife crisis and now has to support a young person dealing with uncertainties that come with youth. It can be challenging.

Having children while parents are younger has some auxiliary benefits too. When you are younger, it's easier to find jobs. So, if you decide to move closer to family or take a break from work, it's easier to get back in.

When parents are younger, it's likely that grandparents too are younger. That makes it easier for grandparents to offer both practical help and monetary help if needed. Most couples understand these benefits, but there are situations that throttle your plans. One such situation is balancing career and family, and it's most accentuated for mothers.

[A] Career and Family: Supporting Mothers

Couples, in the present times, try to achieve some financial goals before having children. Women play a key role in achieving these goals. Considering how difficult it can be to raise a family on a single income, working women, when faced with an option to choose between a career and starting a family, prefer to choose a career.^{vi} Also, if the partner dies or is unable to work, it's more difficult for a woman to re-enter the workforce after a break. Not to mention the disparity women face at the workplace. In the US, for example, women earn 49 percent of what men do, mothers earn less than fathers, and mothers earn less than women with no children.^{vii}

Over the years, I have met many working mothers, and not one of them has told me that they were happy to go back to work immediately after having a child. A mother feels tormented stepping away from her new-born. Her guilt for missing out on her time with the child and being

unable to give full attention to them runs deep. Unfortunately, most women don't have a choice, and for single mothers, there's no other option.

Having a day care at work could be great. But in most places, good quality day care is expensive. I once heard of a day care at a tech company that had a two-year waiting list. And the cost? Fifty thousand dollars a year! Most mothers take a break when they get tired of 'working-to-pay-for-day care'. But the transition from a career to a full-time homemaker is not easy. Imagine having worked hard towards a professional career and then setting what you've accomplished aside, even if temporarily, for childcare, which can be exhausting and less immediately rewarding.

In days when society was agrarian, women were married-off while they were very young, and as a result, they lost their childhood. From there, we seem to have swung to the other end of the spectrum, where we are delaying marriage and having babies for as long as we can. Somewhere in between is the place where a family's financial security and the desire to have children are not at odds with each other.

Having said that, there are no simple answers, and each family situation is different. If a couple can enlist the support of their parents or some close family members while planning a family, that would be helpful. It will give them an understanding of how others managed to raise a family. The family's support, be it advice, helping when the baby comes or having someone to speak with, takes away some pressure from parenting. Also, when couples involve the elders in their life plans, it brings the families closer.

So far in our discussion I shared my thoughts about the importance of having children in line with your biological clock and its benefits. I also touched upon the real challenges that make

some of these decisions difficult. Now I shift gears to touch upon some relationship anchors that help a couple grow in their relationship.

[A] Relationship Anchors: Acceptance, Friendship and Teamwork

All parents would like to be the best in raising children. So how do they do that? Research shows that one of the best predictors of *parenting quality* is *marital quality*.^{viii, ix} In simple terms, happy couples make good parents. That said, couples can't be madly in love or blissfully happy in their relationship all the time. They're not going to agree on every single thing. That's why it's so important to manage expectations.

Relationships hit rough water because of mismatched expectations. Especially expecting the *other* person to change doesn't work. I am not saying people don't change. What I am saying is accepting the other person as they are is the first step towards change.

I tell my young friends, 'When you are in a relationship, focus on yourself. Everything you are expecting from the other person, ask yourself if you could offer that to your partner. The way you are today, do you love that version of yourself? My suggestion is you first build your own empire of moral qualities. Strengthen your moral muscles before you expect the same from the other.'

An attitude of self-improvement gives strength to a relationship. It shows that your ego is not rigid. Most of the time, there's friction in relationships because of the clashing egos. When the couple focuses on self-improvement, they give each other the space they need to adjust. In the process, they start developing a friendship.

[\[B\] Discover Friendship in Your Marriage](#)

Couples that have a strong base of friendship in their relationship enjoy life transitions, including welcoming a new member into the family. Think of your best friend and how you

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spent time together. With your best friend, life did not feel serious. Days just passed by, and any minor squabble ended with both of you trying to out-appease the other. When a couple becomes friendly, accepting the other becomes easy. When there is acceptance, love grows in the relationship.

Becoming friends also helps the couple appreciate the small joys of life. Science also backs this idea. John Gottman of the prestigious Gottman Institute found that the real difference between couples who stuck together and those who didn't wasn't their ability to tackle big problems well, handle conflicts and manage communication. Instead, it were the small things that made a big difference. Drinking coffee together, sharing a sandwich, going out for a walk, doing a crossword, sharing house chores and so on. The dull and mundane stuff turned out to be the glue in the relationship. Couples that stayed together cherished the small moments. They took interest in each other. They were friends first, husband and wife second. Rediscover friendship in your relationship. If you are already friends, continue to deepen the friendship. Raising a family is an ongoing adjustment of lifestyles. Early on in the relationship if the couple develops mutual respect and appreciation for what each one does, it keeps the relationship harmonious.

Do This:

The partner's support is vital for the mother. Simple things like helping out with the dishes, making a cup of tea, and helping with the laundry gives the mother meaningful support. For the men who are reading this, try to do everything your wife does at home for a week. Getting the children ready, the chores, and everything else. It will give you an appreciation of how much effort it takes to run the house.

And for the wives, who may not be paying attention to financial planning, investments and other tasks often handled by men, start taking interest. Taking interest and supporting each other will help strengthen the relationship.

[B] Relationships are Teamwork

One evening, during my walk, I saw an elderly couple sitting on a bench near the river. They shared a sandwich and had some water while watching the river. Then they got up and started walking on the trail along the river. They didn't talk. They just held each other's hand and continued walking for a long way. The harmony in their evening ritual was heartfelt.

Often people think that they have to talk and impress the other with their intellect and smart conversation. In an authentic relationship, one doesn't need to impress the other person with words. Instead, the words are replaced with a reassuring silence. The desire to impress is overridden by the desire to care for the other. The care is expressed in one's actions. In a heartfelt relationship, silence is the best expression of love. Through mere eye contact, this elderly couple conveyed volumes to one another. Their picnic lunch ritual was a masterclass in togetherness.

Relationships are teamwork. Think of your family and close friends as one team running the relay race. Father, mother, children, grandparents, close friends—all are part of the team. Each member runs their race and passes the baton. We cheer for each other and boost each other. Sometimes, the baton slips. But because a teammate fumbled, we don't stop running. We don't walk away from the race. Instead, we run harder to make up for the lost time. Couples who are friends work as a team. They look beyond their individual identities. They see their strength in unity, and they complement each other.

As a couple's compatibility increases, they resonate with each other at a deeper level. Their relationship benefits not only them but those around them as well. We have all experienced this. Think of the awkward evening dinner with a couple that sparred over everything from parking to restaurant décor to which dessert to order. Spending time with such couples can drain one's energy. Contrast this with an evening spent with a friendly couple. Their banter, body language and ability to finish each other's sentences inspire couples' goals. The field of energy created in the two scenarios is of an opposing nature. One gives out an all-consuming and tiring vibration while the other gives joyful and uplifting vibration.

Happy couples resonate better with each other, and their heart-mind fields create a welcoming space for a new soul to enter their lives.

Daily Dilemma:

My husband and I often have arguments. Sometimes things get loud. Should I be worried about the psychological impact this will have on my child?

I suggest you and your husband try 'postponing anger'. In general, most of us are experts at postponing. We postpone exercise, meditation, financial planning and many other things in life. Try postponing anger. You will be delighted with the results.

In the Talmud, the holy book of the Jews, there is a line 'the talk of the child is the talk of the elders at home'. So, it's wise to avoid arguments and fights in front of children.

ⁱ Global Gender Gap Report 2021, Insight Report March 2021 published by the World Economic Forum.

ⁱⁱ My Cousin Vinny (3/5) Movie CLIP—Her Biological Clock (1992) HD, August 4, 2015, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dh0210A-VZo>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Yash S. Khandwala, et al., ‘Association of paternal age with perinatal outcomes between 2007 and 2016 in the United States: population based cohort study,’ *The BMJ* 208, no. 363 (31 October 2018), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.k4372>.

^{iv} Association of paternal age,’ *The BMJ*.

^v ‘Guidelines for sperm donation,’ *Fertility and Sterility* 77, no. 5, 2–5 (June 01, 2002), [https://www.fertstert.org/article/S0015-0282\(02\)03181-3/fulltext](https://www.fertstert.org/article/S0015-0282(02)03181-3/fulltext).

^{vi} Sarah Berger, ‘Building a career is more of a priority than having kids, say single American Women,’ *Make It* (June 22, 2018), <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/06/25/study-single-american-women-say-career-is-priority-over-having-kids.html>.

^{vii} Payscale Research, 2021 State of the Race and Gender Pay Gap Report, <https://www.payscale.com/research-and-insights/gender-pay-gap>.

^{viii} ‘What You Need to Consider Before Having Kids, PsychCentral, Med Review 2016, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://psychcentral.com/lib/what-you-need-to-consider-before-having-kids#7>.

^{ix} Korrel Kanoy, ‘Marital relationship and individual psychological characteristics that predict physical punishment of children,’ *Journal of Family Psychology* 17, no.1 (March 17, 2003); 20–28, <https://doi.org.10.1037//0893-3200.17.1.20>.