

The **BOISI CENTER** *for*

RELIGION *and* AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

Symposium on Religion and Politics

**THE FUTURE OF MARRIAGE AND THE
FAMILY**

“Children”

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BOISI CENTER
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Symposium on Religion and Politics THE FUTURE OF MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY “Children”

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The New York Times

December 1, 2012

More Babies, Please

By ROSS DOUTHAT

IN the eternally recurring debates about whether some rival great power will knock the United States off its global perch, there has always been one excellent reason to bet on a second American century: We have more babies than the competition.

It's a near-universal law that modernity reduces fertility. But compared with the swiftly aging nations of East Asia and Western Europe, the American birthrate has proved consistently resilient, hovering around the level required to keep a population stable or growing over the long run.

America's demographic edge has a variety of sources: our famous religiosity, our vast interior and wide-open spaces (and the four-bedroom detached houses they make possible), our willingness to welcome immigrants (who tend to have higher birthrates than the native-born).

And it clearly is an edge. Today's babies are tomorrow's taxpayers and workers and entrepreneurs, and relatively youthful populations speed economic growth and keep spending commitments affordable. Thanks to our relative demographic dynamism, the America of 50 years hence may not only have [more workers per retiree](#) than countries like Japan and Germany, but also have more than emerging powers like China and Brazil.

If, that is, our dynamism persists. But that's no longer a sure thing. American fertility plunged with the stock market in 2008, and it hasn't recovered. Last week, the Pew Research Center reported that [U.S. birthrates hit the lowest rate](#) ever recorded in 2011, with just 63 births per 1,000 women of childbearing age. (The rate was 71 per 1,000 in 1990.) For the first time in recent memory, Americans are having [fewer babies than the French or British](#).

The plunge might be temporary. American fertility plummeted during the Great Depression, and more recent downturns have produced modest dips as well. This time, the birthrate has fallen fastest among foreign-born Americans, and particularly among Hispanics, who saw [huge amounts of wealth evaporate](#) with the housing bust. Many people may simply be postponing childbearing until better times return, and a few years of swift growth could produce a miniature baby boom.

But deeper forces than the financial crisis may keep American fertility rates depressed. Foreign-

born birthrates will probably gradually recover from their current nadir, but with fertility in [decline across Mexico](#) and Latin America, it isn't clear that the United States can continue to rely heavily on immigrant birthrates to help drive population growth.

Among the native-born working class, meanwhile, there was a retreat from child rearing even before the Great Recession hit. For Americans without college degrees, economic instability and a shortage of marriageable men seem to be furthering two trends in tandem: more women are having children out of wedlock, and fewer are raising families at all.

Finally, there's been a broader cultural shift away from a child-centric understanding of romance and marriage. In 1990, 65 percent of Americans told Pew that [children were "very important"](#) to a successful marriage; in 2007, just before the current baby bust, only 41 percent agreed. (That trend goes a long way toward explaining why gay marriage, which formally severs wedlock from sex differences and procreation, has gone from a nonstarter to a no-brainer for so many people.)

Government's power over fertility rates is limited, but not nonexistent. America has [no real family policy](#) to speak of at the moment, and the evidence from countries like Sweden and France suggests that reducing the ever-rising cost of having kids can help fertility rates rebound. Whether this means a more family-friendly tax code, a push for more flexible work hours, or an effort to reduce the cost of college, there's clearly room for creative policy to make some difference.

More broadly, a more secure economic foundation beneath working-class Americans would presumably help promote childbearing as well. Stable families are crucial to prosperity and mobility, but the reverse is also true, and policies that made it easier to climb the economic ladder would make it easier to raise a family as well.

Beneath these policy debates, though, lie cultural forces that no legislator can really hope to change. The retreat from child rearing is, at some level, a symptom of late-modern exhaustion — a decadence that first arose in the West but now haunts rich societies around the globe. It's a spirit that privileges the present over the future, chooses stagnation over innovation, prefers what already exists over what might be. It embraces the comforts and pleasures of modernity, while shrugging off the basic sacrifices that built our civilization in the first place.

Such decadence need not be permanent, but neither can it be undone by political willpower alone. It can only be reversed by the slow accumulation of individual choices, which is how all social and cultural recoveries are ultimately made.

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Eric Cohen

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Why Have Children?

OVER THE PAST few years, a new “demographic crisis” has emerged as a subject of intense debate: the most affluent, most advanced, freest societies of the world are not having enough children to sustain themselves. Recent books—including Phillip Longman’s *The Empty Cradle* and Ben J. Wattenberg’s *Fewer*—have described the potentially tragic consequences of this fertility decline.¹ Lamenting the collapse of modern birthrates, world leaders as diverse as Vladimir Putin and Pope Benedict XVI have advocated pro-natalist state policies.² Popular magazines and newspapers that once worried about the horrors of a “population explosion”—mass starvation in developing countries, environmental catastrophe, the subjugation of women trapped by the excessive burdens of serial motherhood—today ask whether free societies mean to perpetuate themselves at all.

Right now, the answer, with a few exceptions, is no. The numbers are indeed staggering. Since the 1950s, the total fertility rate (TFR) in Europe has fallen from 2.7 to 1.38³—an astounding 34 percent below the replacement rate of 2.1, which is the average number of children per couple needed for a society to sustain itself. Japan’s fertility rate is 1.23, and its average age is already 43.5 years and climbing.⁴ (The

world average, by comparison, is in the mid-20s.)⁵ A large number of nations, including Russia, Spain, Italy, South Korea, and the Czech Republic, have TFRs between 1.0 and 1.3⁶; some of these nations (most notably Russia) are already experiencing rapid population decline.⁷ Generations of children are growing up without brothers or sisters, and a sizeable percentage of men and women in the most advanced nations will never have any children at all.

Compared to most of its democratic peers, the United States is still in decent demographic shape, with a fertility rate hovering near replacement, albeit with sizeable differences from region to region (higher fertility in most “red states,” lower fertility in most “blue states”) and between child-rearing immigrants and child-avoiding natives. But like every other advanced nation, the U.S. is also heading toward a mass geriatric society, with more elderly dependents and fewer grown children to care for them or grandchildren to replace them.

The consequences of the birth dearth now worry people of every imaginable political, religious, and ideological stripe, though for a range of different reasons. One major set of worries, widely shared, is economic. In a 2004 study commissioned by the European Union, the RAND Corporation warned that as the percentage of the population in the workforce shrinks, countries experience reduced productivity, overburdened pension and social insurance systems, and a decreased ability to care for a needy and growing elderly population.⁸ In other words: fewer workers, more retirees, and a fiscal crisis for the European welfare state. The economic problems do not stop there. Older populations are less likely to be innovative and entrepreneurial, and less likely to produce the consumer power necessary to drive national economies. Moreover, those states that raise taxes on the young to support programs for the old will only make it more difficult for the rising generation to afford children of their own. The result is a vicious cycle of economic stagnation, a graying of society on the way to decline or extinction.

But the deeper demographic worries are cultural. To Longman, the

central looming problem is what he calls “the return of patriarchy.” Since religious fundamentalists are still having children while liberal secularists are not, Longman fears a “new Dark Ages,” a demographic reversal of the Enlightenment in which zealous Christians at home and radical Muslims abroad will eventually inherit the earth. He therefore wants liberals to become pro-natalist, and urges democratic societies to enact child-friendly social and economic policies. If children are more affordable, he hopes, happiness-seeking adults will have more of them.⁹

George Weigel, relying heavily on Longman’s data, flips his argument on its head. In *The Cube and the Cathedral*, he argues that the deepest cause and most tragic consequence of population decline is the abolition of Christian Europe, the birthplace of human rights and human progress. He believes that Christian renewal is the best hope for saving the West from the twin dangers of secular nihilism’s soul-destroying barrenness and radical Islam’s nation-destroying fecundity.¹⁰ A similar argument has been advanced by the columnist Mark Steyn, who attributes the modern West’s low fertility to its “lack of civilizational confidence.” The “design flaw of the secular social-democratic state,” Steyn writes, “is that it requires a religious-society birthrate to sustain it.”^{11,12}

Other cultural dangers loom as well. Once the welfare states of Europe, Japan, and the United States are in crisis, euthanasia may seem like the most rational, or perhaps the only plausible, solution. Once the childless generations grow old, they will face their mortality without children to care for them, comfort them, and mourn them. The childless freedom of the past will often end in isolation. The old will die with no one there to say “Kaddish” (the Jewish prayer of remembrance), and with little assurance that the faith of their fathers will persist *l’dor v’dor*, from generation to generation, once they return to the pleasureless dust from which they came. Perhaps the fact that having a child to say Kaddish seems to matter so little, or only matters too late, lies at the heart of our cultural and demographic problems.

Of course, one must always tread lightly in judging the choices of free people in free societies—choices often made for understandable human reasons. To appreciate our predicament in all its complexity, we need to probe more deeply than the demographers and economists typically do; we need to explore the human motivations and longings that lie beneath the statistics. Why are free people not having children, and will the fertility bust usher in the decline of the West that many people now fear? What is new about our contemporary patterns of birth and death, and what lessons can we learn from the cultures of the past? Only by asking these questions can we attempt to answer the most important question of all—Why have children?—in a way that might resonate with modern people who do not necessarily believe that the God who created the heavens and the earth also commanded them to “be fruitful and multiply.”¹³

PATRIMONY, PLEASURE, AND PERPETUATION

Fertility control is hardly a new phenomenon in human history, and the current age is not the first in which the fear of depopulation aroused grave economic and cultural concern. “In our own time,” wrote Polybius in roughly 150 B.C., “the whole of Greece has been subject to a low birthrate and a general decrease of the population, owing to which cities have become deserted and the land has ceased to yield fruit.” The reason for this demographic crisis, he believed, was the cultural decadence of the age. “For as men had fallen into such a state of pretentiousness, avarice, and indolence that they did not wish to marry, or if they married to rear the children born to them, or at most as a rule one or two of them, so as to leave these in affluence and bring them up to waste their substance, the evil rapidly and insensibly grew.”¹⁴

In both ancient Greece and Rome, limiting fertility was seen as the prudent course for established families—a way to preserve wealth from generation to generation, undivided by multiple heirs, and a way to preserve each man’s share of immortality by preserving the family name. Ancient forms of birth control were almost surely a fertility-

lowering factor, and the desire to control the number and quality of one’s offspring was defended by poets, philosophers, and aristocrats alike. As Hesiod described, one would “hope for an only son to nourish his father’s house, for this is how wealth waxes in the hall.”¹⁵ Aristotle suggested that “the proper thing to do is to limit the size of each family, and if children are then conceived in excess of the limit so fixed, to have miscarriage induced before sense and life have begun in the embryo.”¹⁶

In general, Greek and Roman children were not seen as sacred gifts but as products of nature—sometimes wanted and sometimes not, sometimes with the potential for human flourishing and sometimes sub-human, sometimes useful to their progenitors and sometimes liabilities. “Monstrous offspring we suppress,” wrote Seneca, “and we drown infants that are weakly or abnormal.”¹⁷ The natural affections of mothers and fathers for their children, surely not absent, were usually governed (at least among elites) by the patrilineal ideal or the pursuit of pleasure, sexual and otherwise. As Angus McLaren explains in his superb study, *A History of Contraception*, “the Roman elite did not relish the prospect of their urbanized, civilized style of life being jeopardized by a horde of infants.”¹⁸

But the good of the family and the happiness of the individual did not always serve the public good. At some point, the Roman combination of patrimony and pleasure broke down, prompting fears of depopulation and giving rise to laws that punished the unmarried and the childless and publicly rewarded those with three or more children. In support of such “marriage legislation,” the emperor Augustus supposedly read from the famous speech of the censor Quintus Caecilius Metellus Macedonicus, delivered in 131 B.C.:

If we could survive without a wife, citizens of Rome, all of us would do without that nuisance; but since nature has so decreed that we cannot manage comfortably with them, nor live in any way without them, we must plan for our lasting preservation rather than for our temporary pleasure.¹⁹

But natality for the state did not win universal favor or assent. "I shall beget no sons to swell Rome's glory; not of my son shall historians tell," wrote one Roman poet to his mistress. "Let me be your one joy; you at my side, I have no need of sons to feed my pride."²⁰

Making the leap from Athens and Rome to ancient Jerusalem, one encounters another male speech about childlessness—the speech of Elkanah to Hannah, his beloved but barren wife. "Hannah, why weep-est thou? And why eatest thou not? And why is thy heart grieved? Am I not better to thee than ten sons?" Of course, we know that Elkanah already has sons and daughters of his own by another wife, which may account for his rather sanguine attitude. And perhaps his failure to understand Hannah's misery—"forgotten" by God and cruelly mocked by her fecund rival—reflects a distinctly male blindness to her distinctly female longing for a child. But whatever the cause, Hannah herself, unlike the Roman poet, could never say "I have no need of sons," and her ultimate reason for wanting them was the very opposite of "feeding her pride." Indeed, she sees the child she wants as a child wanted for God. She relies upon God to open her womb, and God Himself relies upon the fruit of her womb to sustain His holy way in the world against the "wicked [who] perish in darkness."²¹

The biblical idea of procreation is captured succinctly in the famous passage from Genesis: "Be fruitful and multiply." When God addresses Noah after the flood, His speech begins and ends with these words—first as a divine *blessing*, then as a divine *commandment*. God seeks to replenish the world destroyed by the flood, and to introduce a new chapter in the history of the world, ruled by men who are themselves ruled by God's moral law. Yet man, unlike the other animals, must be *commanded* to have offspring. Even as his God-like possibilities depend upon his animal-like capacity to reproduce, man alone among the animals has the power to reject and control his procreative drive. Man alone is tempted by illusions of self-sufficiency, or is prone to allow either present goods or present despair to curb his desire to raise up the next generation. One might even say that the Bible here offers a

preemptive critique of sociobiology—that is, the idea that the passing on of our genes is the controlling impulse of human existence—before this new science was fashionable (and before it was clear that sociobiology cannot explain the current age of fertility decline). The sex drive is primordial, an ineradicable part of human nature; the procreative drive requires a commandment, bidding men to remember the future rather than lose themselves in the ecstasies or miseries of the present.

The idea of procreation as an act of devotion took a rather different form in ancient Sparta, where children were seen, from the beginning, as servants of the state's glory—and especially as future warriors or future mothers of warriors. "As a woman was burying her son," recalls Plutarch, "a worthless old crone came up to her and said: 'You poor woman, what a misfortune!' 'No, by the two gods, a piece of good fortune,' she replied, 'because I bore him so that he might die for Sparta, and that is what has happened, as I wished.'" The son, in the Spartan mother's eyes, was only her child if he lived a life worthy of the state's glory, and of course some children failed. "Away to the darkness, cowardly offspring, where out of hatred/ Eurotas does not flow even for timorous deer./ Useless pup, worthless portion, away to Hell./ Away! This son unworthy of Sparta was not mine at all."²²

Our ancient forbears thus set before us three different ideas of procreation, each of them corresponding to permanent human desires that often come into tragic tension. The first is *patrilineal pride*—the desire to preserve one's name immortally in the flesh of one's children, but to limit their number for the economic benefit of parent and child alike. The second, going beyond the notion of limiting the number of one's offspring, is *freedom from children*, to pursue instead the pleasure that needy infants make impossible, especially when their incessant cries are seen as disruptions of sexual bliss rather than its fruits, or as impediments to ambition rather than the reason for working. The third is *perpetuation as an act of devotion*—whether to the city, to God, or to the young themselves, who will inhabit a future one hopes to sustain but will never see. In its most elevated form, procreation as

fidelity sustains the good life from one generation to the next; in its most perverted form, it treats the young simply as servants of the state's glory, forever ready to be sacrificed. These three desires—for patrimony, for pleasure, for perpetuation—still rival one another for our deepest devotion, today as yesterday. They are the permanent possibilities, the eternal reasons to have or avoid children, that persist in the human soul despite the many economic and technological revolutions that drive history forward.

WHY NOT HAVE CHILDREN?

When it comes to human procreation, the permanent possibilities are today shaped by certain historically unprecedented conditions. First, there is no stigma attached to being childless; a woman's worth, in this life or the next, is not demeaned by the dominant culture if she chooses a life without children. And unlike ages past, when the hardest physical labor required male strength and the most elite professions were restricted to men, the professional ambitions of modern women meet virtually no external restraints. Second, children are no longer economic assets for their parents, as they generally were in rural and early industrial societies; rather, they are economic burdens, voracious consumers who produce virtually nothing until their late teens or early twenties. The middle-class child, as Longman argues, is a million-dollar expense. Third, fertility control is now both uncomplicated and virtually absolute. Those who want to avoid having children can easily do so—without restraining their natural sex drive, without putting themselves at physical risk, and without resorting to infanticide or abortion.

Children are thus culturally optional, economically burdensome, and technologically avoidable. But having the *option* to avoid children is not a *reason* to avoid them; and for those with reasons to have children, the economic burdens seem bearable enough. So the question remains: Why do so many men and women in the most affluent societies in history seem to want so few offspring?

A small literature has been devoted to this question by now. In a 2005 essay called "What Do Women Really Want?," social scientist Neil Gilbert develops an attitudinal typology running from so-called "traditionalists"—that is, women with three or more children who "derive most of their sense of personal identity and achievement from the traditional childrearing responsibilities and from practicing the domestic arts"—to, at the other end of the spectrum, "postmodern" women who are childless "by choice" and focused on themselves and their careers. In the middle are "modern" women with one child and "neo-traditional" women with two children—ways of life that vary in degree, not in kind, from the big-family traditionalists and no-family postmodernists. Over the past few decades, Gilbert finds, the trend toward the "modern" and "postmodern" end of the spectrum has been significant, with predictable demographic results. In the United States, the number of women over the age of 40 who have three or more children dropped from 59 percent in 1976 to 29 percent today. During the same period, the number of women with no children has nearly doubled to 18 percent, and the number with one child (now 17 percent) is climbing faster than the number with two children (now 35 percent). In Europe and Japan, the figures are skewed even more heavily toward childless and one-child families.²³

To be sure, for some men and women, childlessness is an un-chosen misery. But most childlessness in our age is clearly self-chosen sterility. Many childless individuals, especially women, eventually regret never having children. But most see their choice, at least in the long decades when having children is still an option, as the positive pursuit of an individualist, feminist, or environmentalist ideal, or even as an act of charity toward the unborn, since the current age is so miserable that giving life is seen as an act of cruelty.

The early stirrings of today's "childfree movement" have been traced by Elaine Tyler May, in her book *Barren in the Promised Land*, all the way back to the time when the great postwar baby boom in the United States was coming to a gradual end.²⁴ She cites a playful 1957 article titled "Pity the Childless Couple":

There's nothing sadder than the childless couple. It breaks you up to see them stretched out relaxing around the swimming pools ... all suntanned and miserable ... or going off to Europe like lonesome fools. It's an empty life. There's nothing but more money to spend, more time to enjoy, and a whole lot less to worry about.²⁵

By the late 1960s and 1970s, these "musings of a good mother—on a bad day" would become an entire philosophy of life—a radical turn against motherhood, a defense of sex and romance unencumbered by children, an embrace of feminine ambition and worldly power. "For many women," wrote Ellen Peck in her 1971 book *The Baby Trap*, "the birth of children marks the end of adventure, of growth, of sexuality, of life itself."²⁶ The modern feminist eschews Hannah's longing, instead pursuing the Roman poet's freedom; she has "no need for sons to feed her pride." In her view, motherhood extinguishes femininity; giving birth to new life is a kind of premature death.

This redefinition of the meaning of life has now survived three decades in which feminism itself has been redefined over and over again. Today, for example, "choice feminism"—the idea that every woman should decide for herself the best mix of motherhood and career—is widely acknowledged to have failed, amid much bitterness on the part of women who complain they were deceived into thinking they could "have it all." In a widely-discussed essay in *The American Prospect*, the feminist Linda Hirshman contends that women who have tried to balance work and family end up sacrificing the former to the latter, living lives tyrannized by diapers and dependent on men for their sustenance. Instead of such false "choices," she advocates a return to feminism's radical roots—ruthlessly ambitious, focused on self and money, uninterested in children. If a woman must have a baby, Hirshman writes, she should stop at one. (Somewhat flippantly, she concedes that "if you follow this rule, your society will not reproduce itself.")²⁷

In their case against children, feminists of this stripe find a pas-

sionate ally in the environmentalist movement. Like feminism, environmentalism is a cause with many faces, but a majority of its adherents subscribe to the basic maxim that the fewer people there are, the healthier the planet will be. In this self-negating view, man is not the measure of all things, and self-control—including reproductive self-denial—is sometimes necessary for the good of the natural world. The classic statement of this view is Paul Ehrlich's 1968 tract *The Population Bomb*, which declared: "We must have population control at home, hopefully through a system of incentives and penalties, but by compulsion if voluntary methods fail. . . . Population control is the only answer."²⁸ Ehrlich's most dire predictions—such as mass starvation around the world—obviously did not come true, but he has become only more certain in recent decades that drastic fertility reduction alone can avert a looming ecological catastrophe, for which America and the West will deserve the greatest part of the blame.²⁹

In *Maybe One: A Personal and Environmental Argument for Single-Child Families*, Bill McKibben articulates this environmentalist sensibility with far greater moderation. He describes the human longing for children and the joys of being a father himself, and yet defends the moral obligation of modern families to limit their number of offspring in order to prevent an ecological meltdown. He describes his own painful decision to have a vasectomy after the birth of his only daughter, and argues that single-child families are not only environmentally virtuous but often best for the child, who gains a monopoly on her parent's love.³⁰

As McKibben's formulation suggests, however, environmentalist zeal in itself is rarely the reason that people decide not to have children or to limit their progeny to one. It is, instead, a way to add a patina of self-sacrifice to decisions made on other grounds—mostly self-regarding or family-regarding ones. Not that such grounds are necessarily trivial or unworthy in themselves. Raising children is a labor, requiring a constant outlay of time and energy, imposing a constant burden of new and growing expenses, and limiting one's personal freedom for two decades or more. To many, the economic or psychic

costs may well seem too high, and there is no shortage of experts supplying data to confirm that impression. As one *New Yorker* writer put it, "Married couples with children are twice as likely as childless couples to file for bankruptcy. They're seventy-five percent more likely to be late paying their bills. And they're also far more likely to face foreclosures on their homes. Most of these people are not, by usual standards, poor. They're middle-class couples who are in deep financial trouble in large part because they have kids."³¹ According to another study, parenthood is often associated with higher rates of depression.³²

No wonder, then, that many people decide to have just one child, or maybe two. For many parents—not themselves excessively selfish, or ideologically committed to childlessness, or ruled by ambition alone—the most compelling reason not to have more children is to benefit the child they already have. They are the modern democratic versions of the old Roman patriarchs—seeking not to preserve the family wealth they already possess, but to ensure that the next generation gets the best medical care, attends the best schools, and lives in the nicest neighborhoods. At its worst, this parental desire to give each child the best things possible can deform into a desire for (only) the "best child"—a misplaced quest for perfection through procreation and child-rearing, treating one's only son or daughter as the means to fulfill one's own private hungers. At its best, however, having only one child, or maybe two, is an effort by parents to act responsibly in a world of high economic expectations. Anti-children in effect, they are pro-child in intention.

THE CRISIS OF THE WELFARE STATE

Yet therein also lies the social dilemma: The one-child family may flourish economically, but, as we have seen, a society of one-child families can lead to "market failure" on a disastrous scale, especially when, as in our own system, the young are expected to pay for the old through various entitlement programs like Social Security and Medicare. Private wealth can lead to public impoverishment.

Admittedly, the relationship between demographics and economic prosperity is a complicated matter. In dysfunctional nations that still lack market economies, keeping fertility low is a form of short-term humanitarianism, reducing the extent of general misery. Moreover, it is quite possible that dramatic fertility reductions in countries like India and China have had beneficial economic effects, by limiting the number of dependent children, freeing women to join the "productive" sector, and temporarily expanding the working-age population. But even in such societies, this "demographic dividend" will eventually need to be repaid as the population ages and the ratio of young workers to elderly dependents reverses itself. When that happens, these aging societies will either need to produce more children (short-term dependents but future workers) or impose the one-child logic of brutality at the end of life instead of at the beginning, by euthanizing the old when they can no longer support themselves or contribute to the state.

In America, Europe, and the world's other advanced democracies, this same demographic shift—more elderly dependents, fewer workers, the overall graying of society—is already here and getting worse. Today's remedial measures—such as increased daycare benefits in Sweden and tax incentives for couples with children in France—are modest to a fault: too small to convince potential parents to have children (or more children), and likely only to increase the costs of already ballooning entitlements.

And today's worries are mild compared with what is almost certainly coming when the baby boomers retire. True, those who have only one child or no children are usually wealthier throughout the course of their lives than those who bear the economic costs of raising the young, and so they should have ample capacity to save for their own retirements. True, too, childless societies in which people accumulate assets during youth, spend them down when they are old, and leave nothing behind can perhaps manage a smooth transition to extinction. Alternatively, one can imagine a renewal through immigration, with young workers born in the heyday of African or South

American fertility moving to North America and Europe to make a living for themselves and to support the graying natives.

But merely to state such "solutions" is to reveal that they are partial at best. After all, the inability or unwillingness to see oneself as old and in need of care, or to envision a world that will continue after one is gone, might inhibit rather than enhance the accumulation of adequate resources to pay for old age, just as it inhibits the creation of "human capital" in the form of children. While some middle-class couples with two incomes and no children (or one child) would be able to pay for their own health care until death, using money their neighbors have spent to send their three children to college, many will not think adequately about the needs of old age until it arrives. And they will almost certainly exert their oversized political power to preserve their personal entitlements when it comes time to collect them. As for immigration, despite America's track record of success in integrating newcomers, deep reservoirs of discontent have already gathered on this matter, as recent debates have demonstrated. Meanwhile, the democratic nations of Europe, with little success in integrating immigrants and with expanding and radicalizing Muslim populations, feel a need to close their doors at the very moment when their economic survival requires them to remain open.

Ironically, even a sudden upswing in European and American birthrates would not offer an immediate answer to today's demographic crisis. Children enter the world as helpless infants, not as high-tech entrepreneurs or geriatric nurses. At the same time, state programs intended to encourage higher fertility or to ease the economic burden of raising children are very expensive and will only worsen the fiscal situation, at least temporarily. No matter what we do, some amount of short-term economic pain is almost inevitable.

FIDELITY AND HOPE

Of course, what matters most is the long term, and what will determine the long-term fate of modern democracies is not economics but

culture. No one will have children to improve the balance sheets of a nation's pension system. Only a new attitude toward procreation and child-rearing can ensure that Western civilization as we know it has a future. That civilization is hopefully not as secular and individualistic as Phillip Longman apparently believes it should be—for if it is, even his pro-child tax proposals are unlikely to inspire the childless to have children or those with one child to have more. But modern civilization is also unlikely to become as religiously serious as George Weigel and others hope. Much as we need a generation moved by Hannah's maternal longings, we cannot rely on her unshakeable faith to fuel it. The Haredi Jews, the Mormons, and the orthodox Catholics who reject modern birth control will continue to reproduce in high numbers. But they will always remain subcultures within modernity; the democratic future cannot rest on their piety alone.

If there is any hope for the modern West, we need a compelling humanistic answer to the question "Why have children?"—and in the plural, not the singular. This answer needs to resonate with those who are open to religious faith but uncertain that God wills them to be fruitful. It needs to appeal to those who appreciate the material benefits of modern life but are not so governed by modern ambitions alone that having more children seems like robbing opportunity from the one or two children they already have. And it needs to demonstrate that in seeking the perfect or perfectly happy child, modern parents would deny their offspring the greatest benefit of all: brothers and sisters with whom to grow up.

The philosopher Gabriel Marcel, in a pair of lectures delivered in Europe in the early 1940s, points us in the right direction. "By this inextricable combination of things from the past and things to come," he said, "the mystery of the family is defined—a mystery in which I am involved from the mere fact that I exist." Even the most modern individual can discover that he is not "endowed with an absolute existence" of his own, but caught up in a web of familial relations whether he likes it or not.³³ By seeing the present in light of the past and the future, the happiness-seeking individual will perhaps make room in

his home for a new generation to seek happiness after he is gone. Just as we ourselves are the “incarnation” of past generations, so on our shoulders do the hopes of our ancestors rest; we are links to the future or else we are the end of the past. In our children, the past that we incarnate is potentially preserved or redeemed; in our children, the sweet abundance of the present is appreciated anew; in our children, the future—of our families, our people, and our beliefs—is at least given a chance.

Looking backward, having children is an act of *fidelity* to one's near and distant ancestors, a way to repay the generosity they invested in the children they reared, or to redeem the tribulations of one's own childhood by bestowing generous life on sons and daughters. Looking forward, having children is an act of *hope*, a belief in the possibility of a human future, inhabited not by an immortal self but by novel beings with fresh possibilities. And looking to the present, having children is a way to experience anew the simple delight in *being* that every mature person loses over time, sharing in a life untroubled by the psychological burdens and grave responsibilities of adulthood, filled with wonder at everyday things that we no longer even notice. From one imperfect generation to the next, children renew life in the face of finitude.

Of course, there will always be many reasons to have children—some compelling and some trivial, some selfish and some generous, some morally praiseworthy and some morally troubling. We can have children as future warriors for the state, or to succeed in all the ways that we failed, or to care for us when we are old. We can have children because we believe propagating our genes will improve the race, or to prove that we can accomplish something, or to remedy our loneliness. We can have children to pass on the name of a dead relative, or to save a sibling dying of cancer, or as a gift to the husband or wife whom we love. But the best reasons to have children are never the most specific. For there is a vast gulf, as Marcel put it, between those who “dole out only the smallest possible number of descendants compatible” with their self-regarding purposes and “those who, in a sort of prodigality of their whole being, sow the seed of life without ulterior motive.”

There is a great difference between the reluctant parent who subordinates child-rearing to his pre-existing plans and projects, and the would-be parent “who is the bearer of some message which he must communicate, of some flame which he must kindle and pass on.”

According to a recent Gallup poll, 70 percent of childless women over 40 regret that they have no children.³⁴ Such a statistic is reason for great sadness but perhaps also modest hope: sadness for what the childless have never experienced, hope that their sad experience will awaken the generations that follow to embrace the adventure of motherhood and fatherhood, with all the sacrifice and joy involved in raising up one's descendants.



SCIENCE

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How Older Parenthood Will Upend American Society

The scary consequences of the grayest generation.

By Judith Shulevitz

@JudithShulevitz

Photo: Vince Bucci/Getty Images

Over the past half century, parenthood has undergone a change so simple yet so profound we are only beginning to grasp the enormity of its implications. It is that we have our children much later than we used to. This has come to seem perfectly unremarkable; indeed, we take note of it only when celebrities push it to extremes—when Tony Randall has his first child at 77; Larry King, his fifth child by his seventh wife at 66; Elizabeth Edwards, her last child at 50. This new gerontological voyeurism—I think of it as doddering-parent porn—was at its maximally gratifying in 2008, when, in almost simultaneous and near-Biblical acts of belated fertility, two 70-year-old women in India gave birth, thanks to donor eggs and disturbingly enthusiastic

doctors. One woman's husband was 72; the other's was 77.

These, though, are the headlines. The real story is less titillating, but it tells us a great deal more about how we'll be living in the coming years: what our families and our workforce will look like, how healthy we'll be, and also—not to be too eugenicist about it—the future well-being of the human race.

That women become mothers later than they used to will surprise no one. All you have to do is study the faces of the women pushing baby strollers, especially on the streets of coastal cities or their suburban counterparts. American first-time mothers have [aged about four years](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr61/nvsr61_01.pdf) - http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr61/nvsr61_01.pdf - since 1970—as of 2010, they were 25.4 as opposed to 21.5. That average, of course, obscures a lot of regional, ethnic, and educational variation. The average new mother from Massachusetts, for instance, was 28; the Mississippian was 22.9. The Asian American first-time mother was 29.1; the African American 23.1. A college-educated woman had a [better than one-in-three](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr051.pdf) - <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr051.pdf> - chance of having her first child at 30 or older; the odds that a woman with less education would wait that long were no better than one in ten.

It badly misstates the phenomenon to associate it only with women: Fathers have been getting older at the same rate as mothers. First-time fathers have been about three years older than first-time mothers for several decades, and they still are. The average American man is between 27 and 28 when he becomes a father. Meanwhile, as the U.S. birth rate slumps due to the recession, only men and women over 40 have kept having more babies than they did in the past.

In short, the growth spurt in American parenthood is not among rich septuagenarians or famous political wives approaching or past menopause, but among roughly middle-aged couples with moderate age gaps between them, like my husband and me. OK, I'll admit it. We're on the outer edge of the demographic bulge. My husband was in his mid-forties and I was 37—two years past the age when doctors start scribbling AMA, Advanced Maternal Age, on the charts of mothers-to-be—before we called a fertility doctor. The doctor called back and told us to wait a few more months. We waited, then went in. The office occupied a brownstone basement just off the tonier stretches of New York's Madison Avenue, though its tan, sleek sofas held a large proportion of Orthodox Jewish women likely to

have come from another borough. The doctor, oddly, had a collection of brightly colored porcelain dwarves on the shelf behind his desk. I thought he put them there to let you know that he had a sense of humor about the whole fertility racket.

The steps he told us we'd have to take, though, were distinctly unfunny. We'd start with a test to evaluate my fortysomething husband's sperm. If it passed muster, we'd move on to "injectables," such as follicle-stimulating and luteinizing hormones. The most popular fertility drug is clomiphene citrate, marketed as Clomid or Serophene, which would encourage my tired ovaries to push those eggs out into the world. (This was a few years back; nowadays, most people take these as pills, which are increasingly common and available, without prescription and possibly in dangerously adulterated form, over the Internet.) I was to shoot Clomid into my thigh five days a month. Had I ever injected anything, such as insulin, into myself? No, I had not. The very idea gave me the willies. I was being pushed into a world I had read about with intense dislike, in which older women endure ever more harrowing procedures in their desperation to cheat time.

If Clomid didn't work, we'd move into alphabet-soup mode: IVF (in vitro fertilization), ICSI (intracytoplasmic sperm injection), GIFT (gamete intrafallopian transfer), even ZIFT (zygote intrafallopian transfer). All these scary-sounding reproductive technologies involved taking stuff out of my body and putting it back in. Did these procedures, or the hormones that came with them, pose risks to me or to my fetus? The doctor shrugged. There are always risks, he said, especially when you're older, but no one is quite sure whether they come from advanced maternal age itself or from the procedures.

My husband passed his test. I started on my routines. With the help of a minor, non-IVF-related surgical intervention and Clomid, which had the mild side effects of making me feel jellyfish-like and blurring my already myopic vision, I got pregnant.

My baby boy seemed perfect. When he was three, though, the pediatrician told me that he had a fine-motor delay; I was skeptical, but after a while began to notice him struggling to grasp pencils and tie his shoes. An investigator from the local board of education confirmed that my son needed occupational therapy. This, I discovered, was another little culture, with its own mystifying vocabulary. My son was diagnosed with a mild case of "sensory-integration disorder," a condition with symptoms that overlapped with less medical terms like "excitable" and "sensitive."

Sitting on child-sized chairs outside the little gyms in which he exercised an upper body deemed to have poor muscle tone, I realized that here was a subculture of a subculture: that of mothers who spend hours a week getting services for developmentally challenged children. It seemed to me that an unusually large proportion of these women were older, although I didn't know whether to make anything of that or dismiss it as the effect of living just outside a city—New York—where many women establish themselves in their professions before they have children.

I also spent those 50-minute sessions wondering: What if my son's individual experience, meaningless from a statistical point of view, hinted at a collective problem? As my children grew and, happily, thrived (I managed to have my daughter by natural means), I kept meeting children of friends and acquaintances, all roughly my age, who had Asperger's, autism, obsessive-compulsive disorder, attention-deficit disorder, sensory-integration disorder. Curious as to whether there were more developmental disabilities than there used to be, I looked it up and found that, [according to the Centers for Disease Control](http://www.cdc.gov/features/dsdev_disabilities/index.html) - http://www.cdc.gov/features/dsdev_disabilities/index.html - , learning problems, attention-deficit disorders, autism and related disorders, and developmental delays increased about 17 percent between 1997 and 2008. One in six American children was reported as having a developmental disability between 2006 and 2008. That's about 1.8 million more children than a decade earlier.

Soon, I learned that medical researchers, sociologists, and demographers were more worried about the proliferation of older parents than my friends and I were. They talked to me at length about a vicious cycle of declining fertility, especially in the industrialized world, and also about the damage caused by assisted-reproductive technologies (ART) that are commonly used on people past their peak childbearing years. This past May, an [article in the *New England Journal of Medicine*](http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa1008095) - <http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa1008095> - found that 8.3 percent of children born with the help of ART had defects, whereas, of those born without it, only 5.8 percent had defects.

A phrase I heard repeatedly during these conversations was “natural experiment.” As in, we're conducting a vast empirical study upon an unthinkable large population: all the babies conceived by older parents, plus those parents, plus their grandparents, who after all have to wait a lot longer than they used to for grandchildren. It was impressed upon me that parents like us, with our aging reproductive systems and avid consumption of

fertility treatments, would change the nature of family life. We might even change the course of our evolutionary future. For we are bringing fewer children into the world and producing a generation that will be subtly different — “phenotypically and biochemically different,” as one study I read put it — from previous generations.

What science tells us about the aging parental body should alarm us more than it does. Age diminishes a woman’s fertility; every woman knows that, although several surveys have shown that women — and men — consistently underestimate how sharp the drop-off can be for women after age 35. The effects of maternal age on children aren’t as well-understood. As that age creeps upward, so do the chances that children will carry a chromosomal abnormality, such as a trisomy. In a trisomy, a third chromosome inserts itself into one of the 23 pairs that most of us carry, so that a child’s cells carry 47 instead of 46 chromosomes. The most notorious trisomy is Down syndrome. There are two other common ones: Patau syndrome, which gives children cleft palates, mental retardation, and an 80 percent likelihood of dying in their first year; and Edwards syndrome, which features oddly shaped heads, clenched hands, and slow growth. Half of all Edwards syndrome babies die in the first week of life.

The risk that a pregnancy will yield a trisomy rises from 2-3 percent when a woman is in her twenties to 30 percent when a woman is in her forties. A fetus faces other obstacles on the way to health and well-being when born to an older mother: spontaneous abortion, premature birth, being a twin or triplet, cerebral palsy, and low birth weight. (This last leads to chronic health problems later in children’s lives.)

We have been conditioned to think of reproductive age as a female-only concern, but it isn’t. For decades, neonatologists have known about birth defects linked to older fathers: dwarfism, Apert syndrome (a bone disorder that may result in an elongated head), Marfan syndrome (a disorder of the connective tissue that results in weirdly tall, skinny bodies), and cleft palates. But the associations between parental age and birth defects were largely speculative until this year, when researchers in Iceland, using radically more powerful ways of looking at genomes, established that men pass on more *de novo* — that is, non-inherited and spontaneously occurring — genetic mutations to their children as they get older. [In the scientists’ study, published in *Nature*](http://www.nature.com/nature/journal) - <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal>

/v488/n7412/full/nature11396.html - , they concluded that the number of genetic mutations that can be acquired from a father increases by two every year of his life, and doubles every 16, so that a 36-year-old man is twice as likely as a 20-year-old to bequeath de novo mutations to his children.

The *Nature* study ended by saying that the greater number of older dads could help to explain the 78 percent rise in autism cases over the past decade. Researchers have suspected links between autism and parental age for years. [One much-cited study from 2006](http://archpsyc.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=668208) - <http://archpsyc.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=668208> - argued that the risk of bearing an autistic child jumps from six in 10,000 before a man reaches 30 to 32 in 10,000 when he's 40—a more than fivefold increase. When he reaches 50, it goes up to 52 in 10,000. It should be noted that there are many skeptics when it comes to explaining the increase of autism; one school of thought holds that it's the result of more doctors making diagnoses, better equipment and information for the doctors to make them with, and a vocal parent lobby that encourages them. But it increasingly looks as if autism cases have risen more than overdiagnosis can account for and that parental age, particularly paternal age, has something to do with that fact.

Why do older men make such unreliable sperm? Well, for one thing, unlike women, who are born with all their eggs, men start making sperm at puberty and keep doing so all their lives. Each time a gonad cell divides to make spermatozoa, that's another chance for its DNA to make a copy error. The gonads of a man who is 40 will have divided 610 times; at 50, that number goes up to 840. For another thing, as a man ages, his DNA's self-repair mechanisms work less well.

To the danger of age-related genetic mutations, geneticists are starting to add the danger of age-related *epigenetic* mutations—that is, changes in the way genes in sperm express themselves. Epigenetics, a newish branch of genetics, studies how molecules latch onto genes or unhitch from them, directing many of the body's crucial activities. The single most important process orchestrated by epigenetic notations is the stupendously complex unfurling of the fetus. This extra-genetic music is written, in part, by life itself. Epigenetically influenced traits, such as mental functioning and body size, are affected by the food we eat, the cigarettes we smoke, the toxins we ingest—and, of course, our age. Sociologists have devoted many man-hours to demonstrating that older parents are richer, smarter, and more loving, on the whole, than younger ones. And yet the tragic

irony of epigenetics is that the same wised-up, more mature parents have had longer to absorb air-borne pollution, endocrine disruptors, pesticides, and herbicides. They may have endured more stress, be it from poverty or overwork or lack of social status. All those assaults on the cells that make sperm DNA can add epimutations to regular mutations.

At the center of research on older fathers, genetics, and neurological dysfunctions is Avi Reichenberg, a tall, wiry psychiatrist from King's College in London. He jumps up a lot as he talks, and he has an ironic awareness of how nervous his work makes people, especially men. He can identify: He had his children relatively late—mid-thirties—and fretted throughout his wife's pregnancies. Besides, he tells me, the fungibility of sperm is just plain disturbing. Reichenberg likes to tell people about all the different ways that environmental influences alter epigenetic patterns on sperm DNA. That old wives' tale about hot baths or tight underwear leading to male infertility? It's true. "Usually when you give that talk, men sitting like that"—he crossed his legs—"go like this," he said, opening them back up.

Dolores Malaspina, a short, elegantly coiffed psychiatrist who speaks in long, urgent paragraphs, has also spent her life worrying people about aging men's effects on their children's mental state—in fact, she could be said to be the dean of older-father alarmism. In 2001, [Malaspina co-authored a ground-breaking study](http://archpsyc.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=481752) - <http://archpsyc.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=481752> - that concluded that men over 50 were three times more likely than men under 25 to father a schizophrenic child. Malaspina and her team derived that figure from a satisfyingly large population sample: 87,907 children born in Jerusalem between 1964 and 1976. (Luckily, the Israeli Ministry of Health recorded the ages of their fathers.) Malaspina argued that the odds of bearing a schizophrenic child moved up in a straight line as a man got older. Other researchers dismissed her findings, arguing that men who waited so long to have children were much more likely to be somewhat schizophrenic themselves. But Malaspina's conclusions have held up. [A 2003 Danish study](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12860771) - <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12860771> - of 7,704 schizophrenics came up with results similar to Malaspina's, although it concluded that a man's chances of having a schizophrenic child jumped sharply at 55, rather than trending steadily upward after 35.

"I often hear from teachers that the children of much older fathers seem more likely to have learning or social issues," she told me. Now, she said, she'd proved that they can be.

Showing that aging men have as much to worry about as aging women, she told me, is a blow for equality between the sexes. “It’s a paradigm shift,” she said.

This paradigm shift may do more than just tip the balance of concern away from older mothers toward older fathers; it may also transform our definition of mental illness itself. “It’s been my hypothesis, though it is only a hypothesis at this point, that most of the disorders that afflict neuropsychiatric patients—depression, schizophrenia, and autism, at least the more extreme cases—have their basis in the early processes of brain maturation,” Dr. Jay Gingrich, a professor of psychobiology at the New York State Psychiatric Institute and a former colleague of Malaspina’s, told me. Recent mouse studies have uncovered actual architectural differences between the brains of offspring of older fathers and those of younger fathers. Gingrich and his team looked at the epigenetic markings on the genes in those older-fathered and younger-fathered brains and found disparities between them, too. “So then we said: ‘Wow, that’s amazing. Let’s double down and see whether we can see differences in the sperm DNA of the older and younger fathers,’” Gingrich said. And they didn’t just see it, he continued; they saw it “in spades—with an order of magnitude more prominent in sperm than in the brain.” While more research needs to be done on how older sperm may translate into mental illness, Gingrich is confident that the link exists. “It’s a fascinating smoking gun,” he says.

Epigenetics is also forcing medical researchers to reopen questions about fertility treatments that had been written off as answered and done with. Fertility doctors do a lot of things to sperm and eggs that have not been rigorously tested, including keeping them in liquids (“culture media,” they’re called) teeming with chemicals that may or may not scramble an embryo’s development—no one knows for sure. There just isn’t a lot of data to work with: The fertility industry, which is notoriously under-regulated, does not give the government reports on what happens to the children it produces. As Wendy Chavkin, a professor of obstetrics and population studies at Columbia University’s school of public health, says, “We keep pulling off these technological marvels without the sober tracking of data you’d want to see before these things become widespread all over the world.”

Clomid, or clomiphene citrate, which has become almost as common as aspirin in women undergoing fertility treatments, came out particularly badly in the recent *New England Journal of Medicine* study - <http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa1008095> - that rang alarm bells about ART and birth defects. “I think it’s an absolute time bomb,”

Michael Davies, the study's lead researcher and a professor of pediatrics at the University of Adelaide in Australia, told me. "We estimate that there may be in excess of 500 preventable major birth defects occurring annually across Australia as a direct result of this drug," he wrote in a fact sheet he sent me. Dr. Jennita Reefhuis, an epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control, worries that Clomid might build up in women's bodies when they take it repeatedly, rather than washing out of the body as it is supposed to. If so, the hormonal changes induced by the drug may misdirect early fetal development.

Another popular procedure coming under renewed scrutiny is ICSI (intracytoplasmic sperm injection). In ICSI, sperm or a part of a sperm is injected directly into an extracted egg. In the early '90s, when doctors first started using ICSI, they added it to in vitro fertilization only when men had low sperm counts, but today doctors perform ICSI almost routinely—[procedures more than doubled](http://www.cdc.gov/art/art2008/section5.htm) - <http://www.cdc.gov/art/art2008/section5.htm> - between 1999 and 2008. And yet, ICSI shows up in the studies as having higher rates of birth defects than any other popular fertility procedure. Among other possible reasons, ICSI allows sperm to bypass a crucial step in the fertilization of the egg—the binding of the head of the sperm with the coat of the egg. Forcing the sperm to penetrate the coat may be nature's way of maintaining quality control.

A remarkable feature of the new older parenting is how happy women seem to be about it. It's considered a feminist triumph, in part because it's the product of feminist breakthroughs: birth control, which gives women the power to pace their own fertility, and access to good jobs, which gives them reason to delay it. Women simply assume that having a serious career means having children later and that failing to follow that schedule condemns them to a lifetime of reduced opportunity—and they're not wrong about that. So each time an age limit is breached or a new ART procedure is announced, it's met with celebration. Once again, technology has given us the chance to lead our lives in the proper sequence: education, then work, then financial stability, then children.

As a result, the twenties have turned into a lull in the life cycle, when many young men and women educate themselves and embark on careers or journeys of self-discovery, or whatever it is one does when not surrounded by diapers and toys. This is by no means a

bad thing, for children or for adults. [Study after study has shown](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17605519) - <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17605519> - that the children of older parents grow up in wealthier households, lead more stable lives, and do better in school. After all, their parents are grown-ups.

But the experience of being an older parent also has its emotional disadvantages. For one thing, as soon as we procrastinators manage to have kids, we also become members of the “sandwich generation.” That is, we’re caught between our toddlers tugging on one hand and our parents talking on the phone in the other, giving us the latest updates on their ailments. Grandparents well into their senescence provide less of the support younger grandparents offer—the babysitting, the spoiling, the special bonds between children and their elders through which family traditions are passed.

Another downside of bearing children late is that parents may not have all the children they dreamed of having, which can cause considerable pain. [Long-term studies have shown](http://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/B:POPU.0000021074) - <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/B:POPU.0000021074> - that, when people put off having children till their mid-thirties and later, they fail to reach “intended family size”—that is, they produce fewer children than they’d said they’d meant to when interviewed a decade or so earlier. A matter of lesser irritation (but still some annoyance) is the way strangers and even our children’s friends confuse us with our own parents. My husband has twice been mistaken for our daughter’s grandfather; he laughs it off, but when the same thing happened to a woman I know, she was stung.

What haunts me about my children, though, is not the embarrassment they feel when their friends study my wrinkles or my husband’s salt-and-pepper temples. It’s the actuarial risk I run of dying before they’re ready to face the world. At an American Society for Reproductive Medicine meeting last year, two psychologists and a gynecologist antagonized a room full of fertility experts by making the unpopular but fairly obvious point that older parents die earlier in their children’s lives. (“We got a lot of blowback in terms of reproductive rights and all that,” the gynecologist told me.) A mother who is 35 when her child is born is [more likely than not to have died by the time that child is 46](http://www.ssa.gov/oact/STATS/table4c6.html) - <http://www.ssa.gov/oact/STATS/table4c6.html> - . The one who is 45 may have bowed out of her child’s life when he’s 37. The odds are slightly worse for fathers: The 35-year-old new father can hope to live to see his child turn 42. The 45-year-old one has until the child is 33.

These numbers may sound humdrum, but even under the best scenarios, the death of a parent who had children late, not to mention the long period of decline that precedes it, will befall those daughters and sons when they still need their parents' help—because, let's face it, even grown-up children rely on their parents more than they used to. They need them for guidance at the start of their careers, and they could probably also use some extra cash for the rent or the cable bill, if their parents can swing it. “If you don't have children till your forties, they won't be launched until you're in your sixties,” Suzanne Bianchi, a sociologist who studies families, pointed out to me. In today's bad economy, young people need education, then, if they can afford it, more education, and even internships. They may not go off the parental payroll until their mid- to late-twenties. Children also need their parents not to need *them* just when they've had children of their own.

There's an entire body of sociological literature on how parents' deaths affect children, and it suggests that losing a parent distresses young adults more than older adults, low-income young adults more than high-income ones, and daughters more than sons. Curiously, the early death of a mother [correlates to a decline in physical health in both sexes](http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/2096138?uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21101454111591) - [http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/2096138? uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21101454111591](http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/2096138?uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21101454111591) - , and the early death of a father correlates to increased drinking among young men, perhaps because more men than women have drinking problems and their sons are more likely to copy them.

All these problems will be exacerbated if we aging parents are, in fact, producing a growing subpopulation of children with neurological or other disorders who will require a lifetime of care. Schizophrenia, for instance, usually sets in during a child's late teens or early twenties. Avi Reichenberg sums up the problem bluntly. “Who is going to take care of that child?” he asked me. “Some seventy-five-year-old demented father?”

This question preys on the mind of every parent whose child suffers a disability, whether that parent is elderly or not. The best answer to it that I've ever heard came from a 43-year-old father I met named Patrick Spillman, whose first child, Grace, a four-and-a-half-year-old, has a mild case of cerebral palsy. (Her mother was 46 when Grace was born.) In his last job, Spillman, stocky and blunt, directed FreshDirect's coffee department. Now, he's a full-time father and advocate for his daughter. He spends his days taking Grace to doctors and therapists and orthotic-boot-makers, as well as making won't-take-no-for-an-

answer phone calls to state and city agencies that might provide financial or therapeutic assistance. How does he face the prospect of disappearing from her life? A whole lot better than I would. (My lame-joke answer, when my children ask me that question, is that I plan to live forever.) “We’re putting money aside now,” he said. Into a trust, he adds, so that government agencies can’t count it against her when she or a caregiver goes looking for Medicaid or other benefits.

Spillman also prepares Grace for the future by practicing tough love on her, refusing to do for her anything she could possibly do for herself. Her mother, he says, sometimes pleads with him to help Grace more as she stumbles over the tasks of daily life. But he won’t. At her tender age, Grace already dresses and undresses herself; every morning, Spillman explained, they do a little “tag check dance” to make sure nothing’s inside out. When, he says, someone makes fun of her way of walking and chewing and speaking, as he believes someone will inevitably do, “I want her to have years and years of confidence behind her.” He adds, “She’s going to go to college. She will be well-adjusted. She won’t be able to live on a nineteenth-floor walk-up, but she will live a normal life.”

When we look back at this era from some point in the future, I believe we’ll identify the worldwide fertility plunge as the most important legacy of old-age parenting. A half-century ago, demographers were issuing neo-Malthusian manifestoes about the overpeopling of the Earth. Nowadays, they talk about the disappearance of the young. [Fertility has fallen below replacement rates](http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/worldfertility2009/fertility_wallchart09_%20Front.pdf) - http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/worldfertility2009/fertility_wallchart09_%20Front.pdf - in the majority of the 224 countries—developing as well as developed—from which the United Nations collects such information, which means that more people die in those places than are born. Baby-making has slumped by an astonishing 45 percent around the world since 1975. By 2010, the average number of births per woman had dropped from 4.7 to 2.6. No trend that large has a simple explanation, but the biggest factor, according to population experts, is the rising age of parents—mothers, really—at the birth of their first children. That number, above all others, predicts how large a family will ultimately be.

Fewer people, of course, means less demand for food, land, energy, and all the Earth’s other limited resources. But the environmental benefits have to be balanced against the

social costs. Countries that can't replenish their own numbers won't have younger workers to replace those who retire. Older workers will have to be retrained to cope with the new technologies that have transmogrified the workplace. Retraining the old is more expensive than allowing them to retire to make way for workers comfortable with computers, social media, and cutting-edge modes of production. And who will take care of the older generations if there aren't enough in the younger ones?

If you're a doctor, you see clearly what is to be done, and you're sure it will be. "People are going to change their reproductive habits," said Alan S. Brown, a professor of psychiatry and epidemiology at the Columbia University medical school and the editor of an important anthology on the origins of schizophrenia. They will simply have to "procreate earlier," he replied. As for men worried about the effects of age on children, they will "bank sperm and freeze it."

Would-be mothers have been freezing their eggs since the mid-'80s. Potential fathers don't seem likely to rush out to bank their sperm any time soon, though. Dr. Bruce Gilbert, a urologist and fertility specialist who runs a private sperm bank on Long Island, told me he has heard of few men doing so, if any. Doctors have a hard enough time convincing men to store their sperm when they're facing cancer treatments that may poison their gonads, Gilbert said. The only time he saw an influx of men coming in to store sperm was during the first Gulf war, when soldiers were being shipped out to battlefields awash in toxic agents. Moreover, sperm banking is too expensive to undertake lightly, up to \$850 for processing, then \$300 to \$500 a year for storage. "There needs to be a lot more at stake than concern about aging and potential for genetic alterations," Gilbert said. "It has to be something more immediate."

What else can be done? Partly the same old things that are already being done, though perhaps not passionately enough. Doctors will have to get out the word about how much male and female fertility wanes after 35; make it clear that fertility treatments work less well with age; warn that tinkering with reproductive material at the very earliest stages of a fetus's growth may have molecular effects we're only beginning to understand.

But I'm not convinced that medical advice alone will lead people to "procreate earlier." You don't buck decades-old, worldwide trends that easily. The problem seems particularly hard to solve in the United States, where it's difficult to imagine legislators adopting the

kinds of policies it will take to stop the fertility collapse.

Demographers and sociologists agree about what those policies are. The main obstacle to be overcome is the unequal division of the opportunity cost of babies. When women enjoy the same access to education and professional advancement as men but face penalties for reproducing, then, unsurprisingly, they don't. Some experts hold that, to make up for mothers' lost incomes, we should simply hand over cash for children: direct and indirect subsidies, tax exemptions, mortgage-forgiveness programs. Cash-for-babies programs have been tried all over the world—Hungary and Russia, among other places—with mixed results; the subsidies seem to do little in the short term, but may stem the ebbing tide somewhat over the long term. [One optimistic study done in 2003](http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/20058901?uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21101454228111) - <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/20058901?uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21101454228111> - of 18 European countries that had been giving families economic benefits long enough for them to kick in found a 25 percent increase in women's fertility for every 10 percent increase in child benefits.

More immediately effective are policies in place in many countries in Western Europe (France, Italy, Sweden) that help women and men juggle work and child rearing. These include subsidized child care, generous parental leaves, and laws that guarantee parents' jobs when they go back to work. Programs that let parents stay in the workforce instead of dropping out allow them to earn more over the course of their lifetimes.

Sweden and France, the two showcases for such egalitarian family policies, have among [the highest rates of fertility in the Western half of Europe](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db21.pdf) - <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db21.pdf> - . Sweden, however, ties its generous paid parental leaves to how much a parent has been making and how long she has been working, which largely leaves out all the people in their twenties who aren't working yet because they're still in school or a training program. In other words, even a country with one of the most liberal family policies in the world gives steeply reduced benefits to its most ambitious and promising citizens at the very moment when they should be starting their families.

It won't be easy to make the world more baby-friendly, but if we were to try, we'd have to restructure the professions so that the most intensely competitive stage of a career doesn't occur right at the moment when couples should be lavishing attention on infants. We'd have to stop thinking of work-life balance as a women's problem, and reframe it as a

basic human right. Changes like these are going to be a long time coming, but I can't help hoping they happen before my children confront the Hobson's choices that made me wait so long to have them.

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Apple and Facebook offer to freeze eggs for female staff

Facebook has started offering female staff up to \$20,000 to have their eggs frozen and Apple will pay for its female employees to go through the same process from January

By Katherine Rushton, US Business Editor

9:32PM BST 14 Oct 2014

Apple and Facebook have upped the ante in their battle for the best talent by offering to pay for female employees to freeze their eggs.

Facebook has started offering female staff up to \$20,000 (£12, 570) for so-called oocyte-cryopreservation, so that they can delay having children until later in their careers. The process typically costs between \$10,000 and \$15,000, plus an additional \$1,000-a-year to keep the harvested eggs on ice.

The social network is also offering help to men who want to become parents. All staff will be entitled to help with adopting, and a “host of other fertility services”, the company said.

Meanwhile, Apple has said it plans to start paying for **egg freezing** from January.

Both companies hope that the move will help them to attract more female staff, and retain them for longer by reducing the pressure on them to have children before a particular age.

Women’s fertility goes into steady decline after the age of 35, and falls even more rapidly after 40 – around the age when many professional women are hitting their stride. Instead of progressing up the ladder to senior positions, many women having children end up dropping out of the workforce, leading to a loss of experienced talent.

The offer to help female executives to free their eggs will also help to mark Apple and Facebook out from much of the rest of the technology sector, which is dominated by male executives. Last week, Microsoft’s chief executive, Satya Nadella, angered men and women around the world when he said that female staff should rely on ‘karma’ rather than asking for a pay rise.

He has since retracted his comment, but Microsoft still faces an uphill battle to convince female executive that it is a good place for them to work.

Meanwhile, Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's chief operating officer, has long been an advocate of gender quality in the work place. In her book, *Lean In*, she repeatedly urged women not to limit their career choices to fit around children, but to be as ambitious as they can.

Facebook's egg freezing policy is designed to give them more freedom to do just that. However, it is likely to come in for criticism from traditionalists who believe that women should have children when they are still relatively young, rather than trying to fit them around their work. Critics are also likely to raise fears about the unintended consequences of the scheme, which could place additional pressure on female executives to delay motherhood until later on in their careers.

Ms Sandberg, 45, has two children of her own. Both she and her husband leave work at 5.30pm every day to see them.

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All Joy and No Fun

Agnes R. Howard September 9, 2014 - 4:23pm



[1]

The Paradox of Modern Parenthood

Jennifer Senior
HarperCollins, \$26.99, 308 pp.

Jennifer Senior's *All Joy and No Fun* [2] is much more serious than its playful cover—with the title spelled out in alphabet magnets—implies. Senior, a contributing editor at *New York* magazine, profiles parents and surveys family-related trends in sociology, psychology, and economics to contend that raising comfortable, happy children pummels the adults who do it. Her focus is middle-class Americans, by definition families with many things going well: parents have jobs, poverty is remote, kids go to college. But within these parameters, conditions for parents can be rough. Studies from as early as the 1950s find that parents are “considerably *less* happy” than nonparents. Why, then, do people have children at all, now that having them is not a necessity but a choice? Senior explains that though childrearing has disadvantages—no fun—there are some reasons—joy—to do it anyway.

Those measures are imperfect, incommensurate; “fun” has an easy tally of pros and cons; “joy” includes weighty but imprecise elements like meaning and purpose. The cons of childrearing are numerous, including sleep deprivation, marital strain, multiplied housework, expense, worry, and conflicts with teenagers, plus less time for adult pursuits and accomplishments. “Flow” is a catchall term Senior adopts to describe what parents lose; instead of enjoying “our own sense of agency, of *mastery*,” adults who care for young children oscillate between poles of boredom and anxiety.

Parenthood in America has been dramatically reshaped by social and economic changes, especially since World War II. With impressive range, Senior manages to lasso just about

every recent development into her argument. She surveys our shift from an industrial to an information economy, which has rendered children “economically worthless but emotionally priceless,” in sociologist Viviana Zelizer’s memorable language; the loss of family folkways, or “rigid, immutable social structures” dictating how children should be reared; globalization, that flat world filled with motivated foreigners and competitive Tiger Moms; women’s increased workforce participation; preoccupation with kids’ safety; mass electronic entertainment; new neuroscientific theorizing about kids’ prefrontal cortex, whose immature structure makes attention short and risk attractive; emerging adulthood; homework demands; the disappearance of family dinner; and much more.

Senior is careful not to place guilt on working mothers, though she notes that they feel it anyway, continually worrying that they are not doing enough. Instead she explores how the increase in working moms—half of those with kids aged three to five worked full time in 2010—has led to significant changes in the division of labor between spouses, the need to outsource childcare, and the styles of mothering embraced by those who stay at home. Broader educational and professional opportunities have changed the job description of stay-at-home motherhood, as smart, skillful women who turn from the workforce to childrearing transform childrearing into a project to suit their abilities.

Some of Senior’s sharpest critiques come in the chapter called “Concerted Cultivation,” about parents’ intense involvement in their kids’ interests, academics, and social life. The families profiled here squeeze in scouting meetings around Sanskrit lessons, football, piano, tee-ball, gymnastics, and chess club—a “carpool Hades” for the parents who orchestrate it all. We behave this way, Senior ventures, because we lack both script and standard. Normlessness underlies the confused striving of middle-class neighborhoods. Nor do we have a bar to measure whether parenting has succeeded or failed. Ours is substantially a democratic problem. Absent long-held customs to dictate how nurturing should be done, class lines to lock children into—and out of—certain opportunities, and close relatives and communities to help, mothers and fathers individually have to figure out family life.

Some frustrations are generated not just by normlessness, but by the varied authorities who press priorities on families. Senior says surprisingly little about two powerful agencies nudging parents to do-this-not-that: schools and doctors. Doctors in particular do an outsized share of norm-adjusting. New parents often give their child’s doctor the first and last word on correct care, concerning morals and manners as well as growth curves and eye charts. Our children’s pediatrician served me with reprimands for consuming 2 percent milk, for applying too little sunscreen, for failing to keep an eight-year-old in a booster seat, and for refusing the HPV vaccine.

Senior regrets many trends, like the overscheduling of activities, superfluity of kids’ toys, focus on happiness, and paranoia about safety, which together do seem to make parenting more arduous. I would tag other culprits as well. The expectation that everything for children be “fun”—not just playdates, vacations, and themed birthday bashes, but even things that are not really supposed to be delightful (teeth-brushing, shoe-tying, long division)—is what makes parenting *not* fun. Parents also have to deal with the lower behavioral standards of youth culture, which accords social permission to trash talk, eye-rolling, and sullenness. Concerted cultivation might yield more fun for children, but it comes at a high cost.

A problem Senior only hints at is the skewed balance of work and leisure in adulthood and

childhood. If childhood is construed as a leisured stretch of school and play, adults are ordained as those who work. But overemphasis on kids' cultivation straitens their role in the family, making them consumers of others' labor rather than contributors to the family weal. Long hours devoted to special hobbies and structured amusements leave kids highly cultivated but helpless: See how many eight-year-olds at soccer practice, star athletes, rely on parents to tie their cleats. Meanwhile, the intensive focus on one's own brood can pull charity in too tightly, as families use up resources that might be directed to others.

Painstakingly, Senior keeps score in husband-wife chore wars—ratifying, as most studies do, that women still do too much—but her scorecard is wrong. Divisions of household labor are almost always toted up between mom and dad, with children only reckoned in as makers of messes. Having kids share housework communicates a few powerful lessons: they learn that they are part of a family rather than the center of its attention; that scrubbing toilets is not beneath their dignity, a duty reserved for mothers or poor people; that human excellence is measured not just by report cards or trophies but by the ability to take care of oneself and have skill left over to lend a hand to somebody else.

Big questions roil just under the surface of Senior's brisk survey. What are children for? Where does the line fall between the physical (and often unpleasant) work of maintaining their bodies and the nurturing that is distinctive to a mother or father, the gift of self out of love? If having children is simply an option adults can choose or decline, with a package of harms and benefits to be known before it is chosen, parents feel pressed to justify childrearing on the basis of what it does for them. It should not be the job of individual moms and dads to invent reasons why their children are worth having.

Many reasons beyond enjoyment figure into the vocation of parenthood: longing for a kind of immortality, obligation to ancestors, or embodiment of a couple's own loving union. Though Senior has a lot to say about the effects of childrearing on marriage—tensions over work and disciplinary strategies—she acknowledges no organic connection between the two. That exuberant Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* says this about the connection of marriage and childrearing: "By their very nature, the institution of matrimony itself and conjugal love are ordained for the procreation and education of children, and find in them their ultimate crown." What impresses me is the presence of "education" right there in the sequence—the idea that choosing to act on a romantic stirring may obligate you later to teach a child to write his name or sing a prayer or set a table.

Childrearing connected to conjugal love merits a place in the life of adults that has little to do with the fun kids might allow. The strongest reasons to have children are very different from the reasons one might like them after they've arrived.

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MAY 7, 2014

Opting out? About 10% of highly educated moms are staying at home

BY GRETCHEN LIVINGSTON ([HTTP://WWW.PEWRESEARCH.ORG/AUTHOR/GLIVINGSTON/](http://www.pewresearch.org/author/glivingston/))



Credit: Igor Demchenkov / Getty Images

About one-in-ten mothers with a Master's degree or more are staying at home in order to care for their family, according to a new Pew Research Center analysis of census data. Among mothers with professional degrees, such as medical degrees, law degrees or nursing degrees, 11% are relatively affluent and are out of the workforce in order to care for their families. This is true for 9% of Master's degree holders and 6% of mothers with a Ph.D.

These so-called "opt-out moms" (roughly 10% of all highly educated mothers) make up just 1% of the nation's 35 million mothers ages 18 to 69 who are living with their children younger than 18. For our purposes, "opt-out moms" are mothers who have at least a Master's degree, an annual family income of \$75,000 or more; a working husband; and who state that they are out of the workforce in order to care for their family.

Lisa Belkin first coined the term "opting out" (<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/26/magazine/26WOMEN.html>) in 2003, to describe highly educated, high-achieving women who seemingly chose to "opt out, ratchet back, and redefine work" (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/09/opting-out-opt-in-decade-later_n_3733790.html?view=print&comm_ref=false) "after becoming mothers. Ever since then, the phenomenon of "opt-out" mothers has been a subject of much media fascination—the idea that such ambitious, professionally-successful women would put their careers aside, for the opportunity to focus exclusively on their families seemed to really strike a chord.

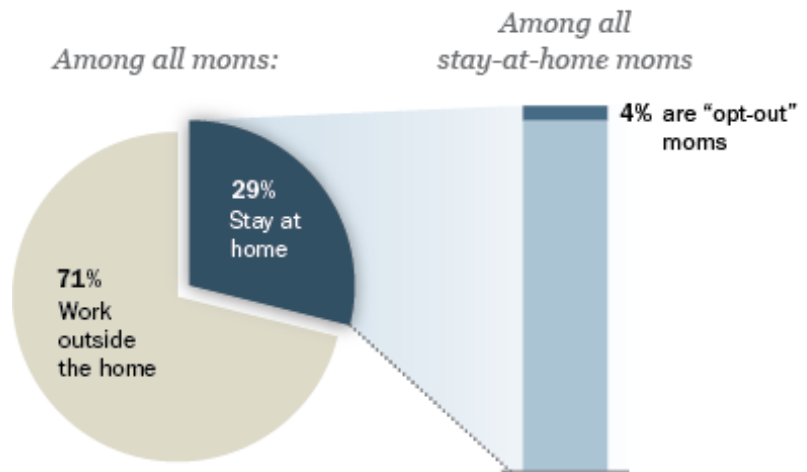
And yet, when examining the total population of mothers who stay at home with their children, these so-called “opt-out moms” make up a very small share (4%). Most of the recent growth in stay-at-home moms has been driven by those with less education, according to a recent Pew Research Center report.

(<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/04/08/after-decades-of-decline-a-rise-in-stay-at-home-mothers/>)

Affluent, highly educated women who exit the workforce may not be “opting out”. Some suggest that they are being pushed out

Highly Educated “Opt-Out” Moms Are a Small Group

Among moms who stay at home, fewer than one-in-twenty are highly educated “opt-out” moms



Note: Based on mothers ages 18–69 with own child(ren) younger than 18 in the household. Among these moms, “opt-out” mothers are married with a working husband, have at least a Master’s degree, have annual family incomes of \$75,000 or more, and state that they are not working in order to care for family.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of March Current Population Surveys Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS-CPS), 2013

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(<http://www.asanet.org/images/press/docs/pdf/Fallo7CNTFeature.pdf>) , due to the difficulties of balancing work and family in the U.S. Indeed, a 2009 Center for Work-Life Policy survey (<http://hbr.org/2010/06/off-ramps-and-on-ramps-revisited/ar/1>) of “highly qualified” (<http://hbr.org/2005/03/off-ramps-and-on-ramps-keeping-talented-women-on-the-road-to-success/ar/1>) women (with advanced degrees, or with high-honors undergraduate degrees), found that among those who had stepped away from their careers (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/work-in-progress/2010/12/13/career-off-ramps-are-taking-an-increasing-toll-on-womens-careers/>) , fully 69% said they would not have done so if their workplace offered more flexible work arrangements.

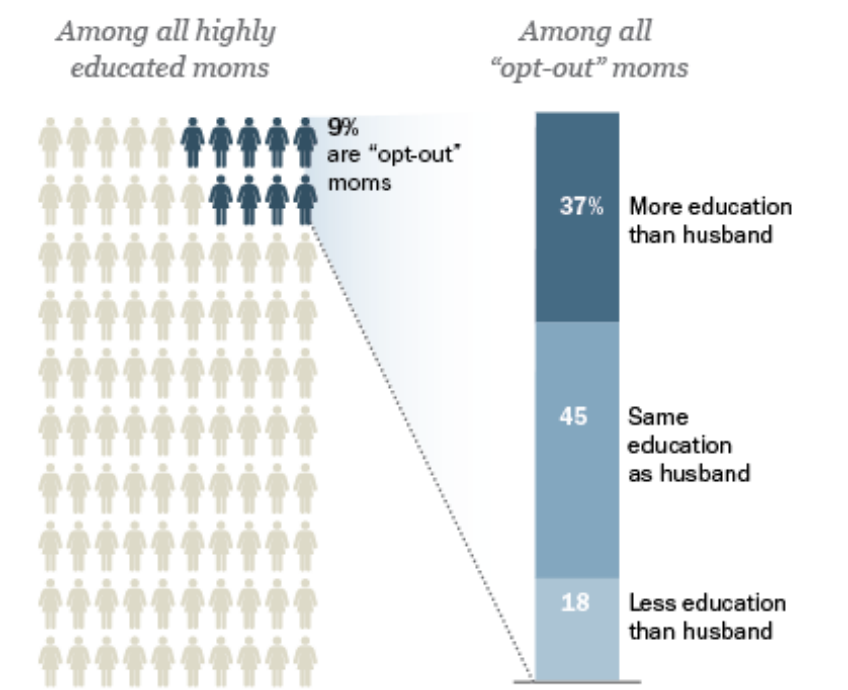
Leaving the workforce is not necessarily a permanent step. In that 2009 survey, fully 89% of those highly qualified women who had left their careers (the plurality of whom did so to care for family) reported that they did plan to return to work. Seventy percent did so, typically after about two and a half years (<http://hbr.org/2010/06/off-ramps-and-on-ramps-revisited/ar/1>) out of the workforce. Furthermore, Pew Research Center analyses indicate that the likelihood of being a stay-at-home mother is higher for those with preschool-aged children (<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/04/08/after-decades-of-decline-a-rise-in-stay-at-home-mothers/>) – presumably because many moms return to work once their kids are in school.

In families with these highly educated, affluent non-working moms, it may be the husbands who are bringing home the bacon, but in 37% of the cases, it is the stay-at-home wives who actually have a higher level of education. In 45% of these families, the spouses have equal educational attainment, and in about 18% of the cases, the husbands have more education than their wives. An estimate using a slightly different methodology suggests that the share of all U.S. married couples where the wife has more education (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/02/12/record-share-of-wives-are-more-educated-than-their-husbands/>) than the husband is about 21%.

Looking at these elite stay-at-home moms a bit differently—fully 69% identify as white. A disproportionate share (19%) is Asian, while 7% are Hispanic, and 3% are black. They tend to be a bit older than other moms; about eight-in-ten are ages 35 to 69. Their median annual family income is well over \$100,000.

While a relatively small share of all mothers has a Master’s degree or more, the educational attainment of all mothers has been growing steadily (<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/05/10/record-share-of-new-mothers-are-college-educated/>) in recent decades. This trend has been driven by both the increasing educational levels of all women, and the fact that fertility rates for the college-educated have not fallen as much as rates for the less educated.

About One-in-Ten Highly Educated Mothers “Opt Out”



“Highly educated mothers” have at least a Master’s degree, are ages 18–69 and are living with their own child(ren) younger than 18. Among these moms, “opt-out” mothers are married with working husband, annual family income above \$75,000 and say they are not working in order to care for family. A professional degree is considered equivalent to a Ph.D for the purpose of the comparison of spousal educational attainment.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of March Current Population Surveys Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS-CPS), 2012-2013
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Gretchen Livingston (<http://www.pewresearch.org/author/glivingston/>) is a Senior Researcher at the Pew Research Center’s Hispanic Trends Project and the Pew Social & Demographic Trends Project.
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5 Comments

The crucial importance of stay-at-home wives

Charles Murray

November 3, 2014 10:34 am | *AEIdeas*



I'll cut President Obama some slack. When he said that women staying at home with the kids is "[not a choice we want Americans to make](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/10/31/remarks-president-women-and-economy-providence-ri)" (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/10/31/remarks-president-women-and-economy-providence-ri>), I assume he meant that it shouldn't be a choice that women are *forced* to make. Even so, I have a beef with the tunnel vision that accompanies the conversation about women staying at home, as if it's a

balancing act between income and child care.

“What’s your schedule today?” I asked my wife a few minutes ago. Today, it starts with a trip into the nearby small city to do volunteer work for the local Literacy Council, which provides free English instruction for immigrants. That’s today. Tomorrow, it will be one of a half-dozen other civic obligations she has chosen to take on. She’s not unusual. In that crucially important reality—she’s not unusual—is something that needs to be front and center when we talk about women who “stay at home.” Better parental care is one of the benefits, but I think the effects on America’s social capital are even more important.

“Social capital” is the academicians’ term for the resource that makes American civil society work. It is organized things like teaching English to immigrants or serving on the town council. It is also the guy who shovels snow from the sidewalk of the old lady who lives alone across the street. It is parents at PTA meetings, church-goers organizing Christmas plays, candy strippers at the local hospital, and neighbors keeping an eye on each other’s houses when no one is home.

The point is that many of the important forms of social capital take more time than a person holding a full-time job can afford. Who has been the primary engine for creating America’s social capital throughout its history, making our civil society one of the sociological wonders of the world? People without full-time jobs. The overwhelming majority of those people have been wives.

Every aspect of family and community life gets an infusion of vitality and depth from wives who are not working full time. If you live in a place that you cherish because “it’s a great community,” think of the things you have in mind that make it a great community (scenery and restaurants don’t count), and then think about who bears the brunt of the load in making those things happen. If you live in a place that is not a community—it’s just a collection of unrelated people, living anonymously, without social capital—think of the reasons why it is not a community. One of the answers will be that no one has spare time for that kind of thing.

I’m not knocking the importance of stay-at-home moms for raising children. I just want us to realize that stay-at-home *wives* are one of the resources that have made America America. It is entirely understandable that some wives work full time, either for the fulfillment of a vocation or to make money—the same reasons men work full time. But when either partner in a marriage—and it will usually be the wife—chooses to devote full time to being a parent and neighbor instead, that choice should not just be accepted, but celebrated.

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This article was found online at:

<http://www.aei.org/publication/crucial-importance-stay-home-wives/>

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Why 43% of Women With Children Leave Their Jobs, and How to Get Them Back

By Paulette Light



CBS

I read *Lean In* expecting a manifesto for my generation. Instead, I found myself in a statistic on the bottom of page 98. "43% of highly qualified women with children are leaving careers or off-ramping for a period of time." This is me. I am the 43 percent. For those of us who left the traditional workforce to

raise their kids with full intention of returning to the workplace, Sheryl Sandberg provides no advice or strategies for re-entry.

I have a similar background to Sandberg. With a BA from Columbia, a Masters from Harvard and an MBA from Wharton, I also spent time as a management consultant, working long hours. My OB still jokes about my phone call when I was seven months pregnant to ask if I could go with work to visit an oil rig in Jakarta (the answer was no). I negotiated the first maternity leave ever for a consultant in my office. There had never been a woman at my level who had gotten pregnant before. I was back at work after 10 weeks as I always thought I would, leaving my baby with my supportive husband and a nanny.

I was missing out on key moments in my daughter's life and I was an exhausted, nervous wreck. It would be an easy story to say that my consulting firm pushed me out—but it was the opposite. They tried hard to keep me. They let me work from home often and take time off for appointments. "Just get the job done," they said. That was the problem, though—getting the job done was all about giving everything to the job, and that wasn't sustainable for me once I had a child. I don't fault my firm at all. They are a scrappy service business that needs to consistently deliver high value to their clients by working better and harder. I was good at my job, which was why they were willing to accommodate me—but it was also why, after having my second child, I had to leave.

Leaving the workforce was not easy for me. I spent many a mommygroup crying in the bathroom after other moms declared that being a stay at home mom fulfilled everything they had ever hoped for in life—the best job ever! I mourned my career, and the role where people listened to me, where there were right answers. That couldn't have been the farther from the truth as a mom. Turns out that you can graph milk intake in many different ways, but it still doesn't mean your five-month-old will sleep through the night.

Today, I am the mother of four kids. People often react to that information with "Wow, you must have your hands full". I often say back with a laugh, "I am very competitive," and it's only partly a joke. I always wanted four kids, having had such a great childhood growing up in a family of six. I wasn't willing to compromise on the life that I wanted, though I knew that it would delay my re-entry into the workforce even longer and solidify my role as "mom" for the long haul.

As a stay-at-home mom, I have struggled with guilt, boredom, and feeling overwhelmed, coupled with moments of intense gratitude for being able to be there for my kids. I am aware that by moving from a profit center (making money) to a cost center (costing money), I have limited the choices that my husband has for his career. I know how lucky I am to have a partner who supports me in all ways, taking on more

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than his fair share of housework and parenting, sharing my philosophy, backing my ventures and listening to my struggles. It has not been easy, but we have tried our best to impart to our kids that what we do shows what we value- and we value our family above all else.

My "years off" have not been without accomplishment. I have been able to leverage my skillset to take on key volunteer roles and hopefully make a difference in my community. I created a neighborhood preschool and co-founded a synagogue. When a local charter school asked me to write their business plan, I got more involved, eventually chairing their board, reorganizing their org structure and expanding their schools. When people were having trouble finding great nannies, I started a nanny agency and ran it for a few years. Currently, I am working on a web startup called Momstamp that features trusted recommendations for service-providers and products.

When my fourth child enrolled in kindergarten, I realized the day had come: I was ready to lean in again. But how? As many of us lift our heads up after years of raising kids, the prospects of returning to the workforce are daunting, even though many of us would like to go back. Many of the structural issues that made work so difficult to sustain once I had kids seem even more insurmountable now.

I definitely can't go back to the 100-hour workweeks, so that type of job is out. Because I leaned in so much in my 20s, I created a no-win situation for myself in my 40s. I trained for a high-power management role, one where you can't really pickup where you left off after being absent for over ten years. By leaving the workforce, I lost all of my accumulated experience and expertise—exactly what made my company want to negotiate family-friendly parameters with me before I left.

So where does that leave the people who may even want to switch paths and have lost time and value while others have been accumulating it? Do we start again? Will the salary of starting again even pay for the childcare we need? Is it worth it? Sandberg writes that women who take time out of the workforce pay a big career penalty. "Only 74% of professional women will rejoin the workforce in any capacity, and 40% will return to full time jobs." I am surprised the numbers are that high.

I searched the top [2012 Working Mother family-friendly companies](#)—and was somewhat surprised to see that the top ones include Bank of America, Deloitte, and Ernst and Young. When I delved deeper into what landed them on the list, I was disheartened because only one of the family friendly criteria (telecommuting) was of interest to me. Of course, I applaud companies for offering smoking cessation programs, lactation rooms, health screenings, and adoption assistance. While I have no doubt that I could use the onsite nap room that 23 percent of the best family friendly companies provide, those perks don't meet my key family needs and I doubt they will bring the 43 percent back in.

I also searched a few sites that have flextime or family-friendly jobs available, but the job titles are vague at best and most don't report compensation. It was very difficult to truly measure whether any specific position was worth applying for. On top of which, most of these positions (nurse, software developer, speech pathologist, online tax advisor) require new training or skillsets above and beyond what's currently in my toolbelt despite my various Ivy League (albeit dusty) diplomas.

I decided the only way for me to lean in was to make it happen on my own terms: to start a business. I have some momentum with Momstamp, I know it meets a key need and hopefully I'll succeed. If not, I'm not sure there is a seat at corporate America's conference table any time soon.

At least not the way corporate America looks right now. To be clear, I feel no entitlement to have a business accommodate me just because I am a "high achieving" mom. After all, this is business. The role of business is to generate value for their shareholders. Full stop. Only when moms can show that there is true value to the work they can provide when they come back to the workforce will businesses reach out to us. I am not arguing that I am owed anything for past performance, only that I could potentially be a valuable player if work could be structured differently.

I do believe there is a solution: closed-end projects where a business gives clear deliverables and milestones. If you want high-achieving mothers back in the workforce, don't give us an office and a work week filled with facetime, give us something to get done and tell us when you need it by. This is where Sheryl Sandberg and her colleagues are in a real position to make a tangible difference to us 43 percent. Post clear project needs in a place parents know about (onramp.me? backtowork.me?) and watch how many of us apply. Consider the management, negotiation, budgeting skills we gained in our years out of the workforce and the skills that many of us never lost. Highly qualified parents could do strategic analysis, build financial models, write legal briefs or PR pieces, generate blog posts or plan corporate conferences.

Project-based work provides many benefits to both businesses and those re-entering. Freelancers don't hit the bottom line as hard as because they aren't paid benefits. With clear project descriptions, deadlines, and compensation, more moms who may be overqualified for a position might decide that they are willing to help out with a project because it meets their needs in the short term. I am sure that many moms will even step up to do a project even at the cost of their family because the timing is only temporary. As the business and the mom work together more, maybe a full-time job will come of it when all parties understand the value.

Bring back the 43 percent into the workforce. Help us add value—you just have to structure the job so that we can.

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