LATE STARTERS
For Many Reasons, More People Are Having Children Later In Life.

by AMANDA GRIFFIN

The black and white photo shows a handsome man in a suit holding a days-old infant in his arms. The baby’s face cannot be seen for all the blankets, but the man is gazing into the midst of the blankets with a serious face, oblivious to the friend at his elbow who is waiting to help him ascend the stairs into the house.

The last addition to the Grimes’ family came on Pat Raaz’s 45th birthday. Left to right: Eli, Pat, Arley Grimes, Jack, Harvey and Elle.

children will remember their grandfather, who died five years ago. I am faced with the issues of an aging, incapacitated mother while my friends still make beach trips with their mothers.

With all the accompanying blessings and sorrows, children born to parents later in life have been causes for celebration since the time of Abraham, the Jewish patriarch. The dying womb gives way to life, and the parents, though they may wrestle with mixed emotions, rise to the task of parenting. A generation ago, breed. Most will tell you quite frankly that they love their role in life.

I have such a wonderful family that I’m not looking for the light at the end of the tunnel,’’ says Arley Grimes, who along with her wife, Pat Raaz, are the parents of five children. The last, a daughter who followed four sons, was born on Pat’s 45th birthday.

“I don’t know anyone who has really told us we’re completely nuts. We’re pretty active still and get around quite well. I don’t feel as old as people probably perceive that I am.’’

Pat didn’t receive the news of her fifth pregnancy with equanimity, however.

“With this fifth child, it was a terrific struggle emotionally at that point in my life. Was I willing to make this commitment again? I had to be real honest and consider the health risks and even the question of terminating the pregnancy. It didn’t feel good to ask that question, and it was a very, very dark and difficult time for me, when I felt very alone and so closed in,” says Pat. She and her husband own The Development Group, a community development consulting and marketing firm.

“What got me over the hump was realizing that I could have this baby and all of the support I would need would be there for me. All of my children are so beautiful, and I knew how quickly the days go by. The ultimate gift was the gift of a girl on my 45th birthday with the face of an angel.”

There can be a certain stoicism or wisdom that comes with older parenting, especially if the parents have raised one or more children earlier and are then presented with a baby at 40. At least, that was the case with Celeste and Tom Castille, a surgeon, who were 41 and 42 respectively when their second child was born. Their first, a daughter, was 12 at the time of the birth.

“I find I’m much more patient with Luke and I’m not as worried about his development,’’ Celeste says. “I think I’m taking more time to enjoy him, and I’m not mentally rushing him to the next stage of development. For instance, he’s not potty trained, and when Sara was two, I immediately started potty training her because that’s what I thought I was supposed to do.”

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Celeste finds, however, that her circle of friends is smaller this time around.

"When Sara was a baby, we lived in New Orleans, and all of my friends had children, and their houses were baby proof, and we got together often. I have one friend with a child Luke's age, and I do find I'm a bit isolated."

Does anyone fear they're too old for the job? If they do, they're not likely to admit it.

"I don't have time to think about it," says registered nurse Charlene Reynolds, a medical paralegal for Onebane Donohue Bernard Torian Diaz McNamara and Abell Attorneys at Law. Charlene and Mike are the parents of six children ranging from 12 years to three months. The last was born when Charlene was 39.

"I feel like children are gifts from God, and I welcomed every one of them. There's no use looking for the negatives."

Hair coloring might be one way to disguise an older parent.

"I started thinking about how old I would be when Luke starts kindergarten and how old the other moms will be," says Celeste. "I guess I'll just have to dye my hair. I do think he will keep us younger, and we will tend to be more in touch with teen-agers longer than most people," Celeste says.

Grimes lost his father when he was 22. He hopes he doesn't put his children in the same situation.

"I've kind of adopted a local surrogate dad, or mentor might be a better word, a man I look up to and respect."

But, I plan on living a long time and hopefully that won't happen to my children," Grimes says.

Young couples today are waiting longer to have children, according to national statistics. Local experts say it's true in Acadiana as well.

In 1990 more women between the ages of 35 and 39 gave birth than in any year since 1963. Their birth rate represented a 60 percent increase from 1980 to 1990. The birth rate for women between the ages of 40 and 44 was higher in 1990 than in two decades. Their birth rate was higher by 41 percent than the birth rate in 1980, according to statistics from the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology.

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"More and more of my experience in counseling prior to a wedding has been with couples in their late 20s to early 30s. Even as they talk about having children, they are not so rushed to begin a family. They want to build a relationship first. It's as though they look around at their friends who got married, bought a house, had children and the next thing you know, the couple didn't know each other anymore," says Bob Burgess, senior pastor at Asbury United Methodist Church.

"I find them saying things that reflect on their own families, where the children came along quickly and the parents never really had the chance to get to know one another. Couples are saying, 'It's important for us to have a healthy relationship.'"

According to ACOG, 52 percent of women aged 35 to 39 years having their first child in 1990 were college graduates, compared with 33 percent of first-time mothers aged 25 to 29.

"Older parents are usually wiser and have had more time to think about parenting. They're not just grasping for straws about what they want to do as parents. They are much more attentive to their children and more ambitious for them as well," says Dr. Brent Prather, pediatrician and family advocate. "I'm generalizing, but as a rule I think they make wonderful parents."

The picture of the super-conscientious first-time parents, reading all of the right books to themselves and to their child, seeking out the best medical and psychological advice and making careful decisions regarding their child's care, is not far off the mark.

"We know that a personal parenting style is based a lot on experience and a parent's education level as well as how motivated they are to be parents," says Nancy Coghill, associate professor in child and family studies at USL and director of the USL Nursery School Laboratory. "I have found that older parents are more likely to read books and attend parenting seminars. I have observed that there seems to be a great interest in learning about children among the older parents. They are going into it with a conscious decision to be parents."

I t's a very particular woman who will late until her late 30s to begin bearing children.

"The patient profile of a woman who delays having children is a woman who is well educated, well motivated and healthy because of the healthy lifestyle she leads," says Dr. John Kempf, an obstetrician and gynecologist. "Of course she's going to have a healthy pregnancy because she's so healthy to begin with. The risk of genetic disorders does go up, but how a woman interprets those statistics just depends on how optimistic or pessimistic she is."

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hat's wrong with this picture, you might ask? This sounds like a recipe for a pound cake. Changing diapers for the first time at 40-something or knowing how to just say no to a demanding two-year-old is not as fun as, say, a vacation for two at the beach.

"Personally, I like to see young people have babies. Older parents, especially those with their first child later in life, might tend to allow too much freedom according to Dr. Spock's philosophy, and actually be afraid to do anything that might upset the child. I think when you're younger you instinctively set limits," Prather says.

"A baby born to a woman over the age of 35 is more likely to experience low birth weight and so will take a few more weeks to put weight on and sleep all night, and upper respiratory infections may be more common," Coghill says. "Combine those physical factors with older parents who are thinking of returning to a career, combined with their own aging, plus their own interests, and you can see a conflict.

"There also seems to be a connection between older parents being more sensitive to the temperament of their babies. A colicky baby or one who isn't crazy about being held is more difficult for an older parent because the parent's lifestyle and expectations are still moving forward and life with a difficult child seems to cause extra frustrations."

At least two experts in the field of children and counseling are grateful not to be in the 40-something parenting trench.

"I'm glad I was young and had terrific energy when we had our children; I don't have the energy for it now, even though I really miss having small children around the house," says Prather, father of three.

"It's probably good we don't have a baby, because I would spoil him rotten,"

Terry Zinner, a marriage counselor in Lafayette, says while 20 percent of parents are 80 percent finished with child rearing by the age of 35, the 20 percent who are just getting started are not necessarily abnormal.

"I have worked with adoption agencies, and most will not approve adoptions to parents over the age of 35, but I've also been involved in some adoptions to parents over the age of 35," Zinner says.

"Every case is individual and has to be considered separately."

Zinner knows someone with children who are 20, 16, 3 and 2. That parenting job doesn't interest him.

"I wouldn't trade places with him. It's a major sacrifice."

Zinner raises the ethical question of continuing parenthood well beyond its normal boundaries due to medical technology.

"The notion of motherhood at 60 would strike fear in the heart of the average woman, but some women want it, and yes, it is possible."

"There is a physician in Italy with a program called Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) which encompasses all of the high-tech low-impact options beyond the normal way. But just because we can get a woman pregnant at 60, does that mean we should? Personally, I think that's pushing the envelope," Kemp says.

"I'm not going to condemn these people, but I look at them with wistful bemusement and think, 'Boy, some people will do anything.'"