



Why Do You Want to Have Children?

How can you love so much someone who drives you so crazy and makes such constant demands? How can you devote yourself to a vocation in which you are certain to be made peripheral, if not redundant? How can we joyfully embrace the notion that we have ceased to be the center of our own universe?

—Anna Quindlen¹

Here's something most parents would agree on: the child sleeping on your shoulder is worth about a billion bucks. Despite the late nights, sleep deprivation, stress, strained family finances, lack of balance between work and home, and other unwanted pressures unique to you only, each developmental step—first words, first steps, first book read—is more inspiring and fascinating than the previous one.

It's like falling in love. Parents become enthralled with their children's accomplishments, their tiniest expressions, and the love

they give parents in return. Raising a family isn't always easy, but most of us come to feel that it's worth whatever time or money or dreams we gave up to make it possible. In short, we can't remember what life was like before parenthood—and some of us even want to become parents again and again.

Simple and powerful as these motivations are, we make the decision to have a child, to stop having children, or to add to the family for all sorts of conscious and unconscious reasons—emotional, psychological, financial, pragmatic, even spiritual. Sometimes these reasons clash with our real needs, of which we may be unaware.

For most of us, parenthood doesn't quite work out as we had envisioned. Most of the time, that's because we base our dream of the perfect family on unexplored motivations and experiences that come into focus only after our children are born.

I'm assuming that you're reading this book to learn how you can choose the perfect family size for you and your partner. Underneath all the various issues we will address in the rest of this book—timing, small families versus large families, cultural and religious issues, special needs and blended families—is one fundamental question: *Why do you want to have children in the first place?* The desire to be a parent is not universal and automatic, so . . . what's *your* reason?

REALITY CHECK

How Much Does It Cost to Raise a Child?

Hal is a thirty-eight-year-old software engineer married to Kristen, a thirty-nine-year-old graphic designer. They have been married for six years, live in Center City, Philadelphia, and have one child, a three-year-old daughter. When the recession hit, they found themselves struggling financially. Reluctantly, but after much discussion and soul searching, they've decided to stop at one child—for now, at least. Kristin explains, "If we were better off financially, it wouldn't even be a question."

It costs a lot of money to provide our children with food, clothing, education, and adequate health care for two decades—or more, if a graduate degree is required. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s 2009 annual report, the average middle-income, two-parent family can expect to spend from \$11,650 to \$13,530 per year, depending on the age of the child.² And with private education and top-level health care, that amount can be a lot more.

When you and your partner are contemplating an increase in family size, you need to consider both *direct and indirect costs*. Direct costs related to children include housing, food, education, clothing, and medical care. Housing is an important consideration as your family size grows and you need more room.

Indirect costs, also known as *opportunity costs*, can have a significant impact on your finances, but are not easy to predict or calculate. Opportunity costs relate to the money or investments that you forfeit because of the presence of children. Women are usually more affected by these costs than men are. In order to raise and nurture children, women who temporarily leave their jobs often become ineligible for promotions, lose seniority, and miss out on salary increases.

When I speak to thoughtful couples like Hal and Kristin who would love to have another child but simply can’t afford to do so, I wish I had cash grants to distribute! I believe that when you are determining the right size for your family, financial considerations should play a part—but there are many other issues to consider.

Understanding Your Motivations

Back in 1979, researchers Lois Wladis Hoffman and Jean Denby Manis asked 1,569 married women under age forty, along with 456 of their husbands, to answer the question “What would you say are some of the advantages or good things about having children, compared to not having children at all?” The highest-ranked answers—the essential reasons most people gave for having a child—were love, family, and companionship in concert with “stimulation and fun” (babies and children as a continual source

of parental fascination and pleasure). Far down the list were such reasons as carrying on family tradition, achieving a higher place in society, and self-replication.³

Today, more than thirty years later, my own research shows that these reasons have stayed pretty much the same: the primary reason to have your first child is that you and your partner want to raise and love a child. And the primary reason to have another child is the powerful love you have for your first child, and the fulfilling, rewarding experience you expect to have as a parent.

Each of us as an individual has an obligation to think about why we want children and what our expectations are. And each set of life partners has the same obligation. Because after thirty-two years as a marriage and family therapist, I've learned that sooner or later, these issues are going to come up—and when they do, they will rock your family, your relationships, and your experience as a parent.

Please take this opportunity to consider your motivations and expectations now. We'll look at three important areas: social pressures (family, friends and colleagues, and the media), your own childhood experiences, and the reality behind your unexplored expectations.

Social Pressures

No matter what your family, your friends, or even the magazines you read say, the choice is always yours: you are under no obligation to have a child, or to have another child, or not to have another child. It is my firm belief that no external pressure should be brought to bear on a couple to have a child or to increase their family size. But that doesn't mean you won't experience such pressure. You will, and you need to be prepared to handle it by understanding your feelings.

Ideally, the motivation to have a child comes from inside, from committed partners whose lives are in sync and whose goals for family life and family well-being are aligned. Often, however, the decision to have children, or more children, is made in response to the needs and wants of others.

Providing Grandchildren

“I never thought about having kids right away,” Bryn told me. “My husband and I figured we’d wait a few more years, but my mom and dad kept hammering away: ‘When are you going to give us grandchildren like your brother did?’ We started feeling really guilty, and finally, I guess we just caved.”

“Giving your parents grandchildren” sounds like a nice idea, but the birth of a child to fulfill the needs of the grandparents—who probably have an ideal number of grandchildren in mind!—will not necessarily fulfill your own needs or best serve your family.

Everyone’s Doing It

“It seemed like all my friends were pregnant. After Jim and I got married, they kept asking me if we were trying, how many kids we wanted, why I wasn’t pregnant yet . . . After a while, I started to panic. Why *weren’t* we trying? Is there something wrong with our marriage?”

Starting a family because your friends have children and you don’t reminds me of a question popular with mothers everywhere: “If Johnny jumps off a bridge, does that mean you have to?” You don’t have to go along with the crowd, especially when it will affect the life of a new person in the world. If you’re feeling this kind of pressure, take some time to get to know your own mind before plunging ahead.

Feeling It Would Be Selfish Not to Have a Child Right Now

“Everyone—our family, our friends, the people at work—made us feel like we were crazy for not rushing to have children after we got married,” says Andre, who has no children yet. “We said we liked traveling, we liked feeling free, but they’re making us feel like bad people who only care about ourselves.”

Jen, forty-nine, teaches biochemistry in a Boston medical school. She was hit hard by postpartum depression after her daughter was born, and made the decision to stop at one child despite her friends' comments. "It was hard when our friends and acquaintances asked, 'When are you going to have another one?' There were times when I would find myself almost wanting to mislead people into thinking that we were having fertility problems just so they would leave us the heck alone."

To Give Your Child a Sibling

To many, it seems logical to want to give their firstborn a playmate and companion he or she can count on throughout life. But the goal here is to meet the needs of your actual child, not your own needs.

The perspective that only children are lonely and spoiled has been disproven by numerous research studies. It simply is not true. Bottom line: parents should never feel obligated to have a child just to create a companion. If both parents are in good health, their marriage is sturdy, and they treasure their first child and dearly want another, then having another child is appropriate.

Jen's husband, Marty, says, "We discussed how it would be good for our daughter to have a sibling. Socially and emotionally, siblings are important." In the end, however, they decided that the best thing for the family overall would be to stop at one. (We'll discuss only children more deeply in Chapter Four.)

Feeling as Though It's Your "Duty" to Have Children

As objective and logical as we may try to be about choosing family size, our cultural heritage and spiritual beliefs often come into play. Some religious and cultural traditions favor large families; others frown on birth control. (We'll take a closer look at large families in Chapter Four, and at cultural and religious traditions in Chapter Five.) If your heritage is a vital part of your approach to family life, this is an area to take seriously.

Your Childhood Experiences

Our childhood experiences have an enormous impact on all aspects of our lives. And when it comes to family and children, the urge to replicate the great times we had or to avoid reproducing our terrible childhoods can have a powerful shaping effect on our relationships and families as adults.

Your Own Parents Were Great Role Models

“I have such great childhood memories,” Rebekah told me. “Camping and fishing vacations, playing card games as a family, when my dad taught me to ride a bike . . . I feel really fortunate to have parents who respected me when I was little, and I want to be just as good a parent to my kids.”

Like Rebekah, you may have been blessed with a healthy, happy childhood. You couldn’t ask for better role models than your parents. If you’ve absorbed their influences, this bodes well for your own family.

Your Own Parents Were Difficult

“I wasn’t literally abused or anything, but sometimes it felt like it,” recalls Jeff. “They’d be okay sometimes, but when they drank, they drank too much and were pretty unpredictable.” I could see that Jeff was still angry at his parents. “Boundaries? They never heard of them. I basically had to parent myself, making it up as I went along. So the idea of being a parent myself is a little scary. I don’t have a lot of skills, and I don’t want to repeat their mistakes.”

If you, like so many people, feel that your parenting skills are shaky, you may want to look for a parent support group. Most communities have resources for parents running their own groups, or groups run by a professional counselor or clinician. Check online or on bulletin boards at schools, churches, synagogues, or supermarkets. If you’d prefer, there are lots of family therapists who can work with you. Ask your medical doctor, friends, teachers,

neighbors, or extended family to recommend one; ask for a preliminary session first to see if it's a good fit.

You're Close to Your Siblings

"My mother has two brothers and two sisters," Hal told me. "I have tons of cousins, and I really like that. I like having a big family and having that bond. When we get old, I'd like to think of the kids coming over and visiting. If we had the money, it's great to take kids on family trips and the like. I always thought to myself, I would like to have a big family, too."

"I am the oldest of a bunch of siblings," says Marty, who is hoping to have three or four children. "I tell people that when you have a sibling, you both have suffered through the same good or bad parenting together, so there's camaraderie. I feel fondly about my siblings, and I make an effort to be in touch with each of them."

You and Your Siblings Don't Get Along

"My sister always told me everything was fine until I came along," says Sara, shaking her head. "Then, to her mind at least, everything she did was wrong in our parents' eyes, and I was the princess. That certainly wasn't my experience, but to this day we have a strained relationship. So I'm a little wary of what can happen between siblings."

Uncomfortable sibling relationships can color your idea of what makes a happy family. Not all brothers and sisters get along, either as children or as adults. But your experience as a child will not necessarily carry over to your own family.

Expectations: Myth Versus Reality

As logical as we may think we're being when we consider the perfect family size, we often have psychological and emotional motivations we haven't acknowledged. As parents, we can unwittingly put great burdens on our children to deliver the emotional

satisfaction we yearned for in our own childhood hopes and dreams. So many failed athletes, scholars, actors, and business tycoons unfairly try to manipulate, cajole, and coerce their kids to feed selfish needs that are not really the children's responsibility at all.

REALITY CHECK

Gender Issues

Hal and Kristin told me how they felt during Kristin's pregnancy with their daughter. Their experience is fairly typical of that of many parents who are pinning their hopes on their child's being a particular gender.

"I was supportive during pregnancy," says Hal, "when we thought it was going to be a boy."

"We had a feeling it was a boy," says Kristin. "Everyone said that with boys, you 'glow.' Everyone has a theory, and apparently I was glowing. I wanted a girl so badly that I thought to myself, *I know it will be a boy.*"

"When it wasn't a boy, I was devastated," admits Hal. "But that lasted one day. So it's a girl, I thought to myself. Okay, whatever! My daughter is a girly girl, but still loads of fun, and athletic. She's a baseball fan, and we love to sit and watch games together. She is truly a daddy's girl. She's a combination of my wife and myself. I am happier with my daughter than my friends who have sons. Boy, what they're going through!"

Expecting that your child will be a certain gender, and conceiving another child with the express purpose of achieving your ideal gender balance, may sound logical—but it's not a compelling reason to add to your family.

First, until technology advances further, you can't choose the sex of your child. Second, if the new baby is not the gender you hoped for, won't that be a disappointment? Settling for second best is not the way to bring a precious baby into this world.

Hope, instead, for your baby to grow up to be a healthy, happy person in his or her own right! And be prepared to love your child for herself or himself, no matter what.

We may also unconsciously expect to receive positive emotional and psychological benefits from our children beyond these social and material accomplishments. It is not uncommon, for example, for parents to believe that their children will be their “best friends,” and to feel slighted when sons and daughters turn out to have personalities very different from theirs, or make “unsuitable” friends of their own. Parents may also expect that older children will naturally want to care for younger children, or that they will be loving companions and caregivers later in life. Such expectations can easily strain the relationship between parent and child and interfere with the child’s healthy development.

As you consider the common statements in the following headings, think about what lies behind them. Do they really represent what you feel or what might actually happen? Is this expectation really a good reason to have a child?

You Want a Distraction from Your Adult Problems

“When I was pregnant with my first child,” says Joanna, “I remember feeling this great sense of relief that I could finally stop thinking about me and whether I should stay in my job, which I hated, and what I should do with my life. I would have someone else to think about! Now that I have two children, going to work every morning almost seems like a vacation, and I am so busy worrying about the kids and do they have what they need and when do I need to sign them up for camp that I almost never think about myself.”

Children will certainly distract you from yourself—perhaps more than you suspected. Two children are twice as distracting as one . . . you get the idea. It’s tempting to have children because you need a new direction in life. But being a parent, fundamentally, needs to be about your child—not about his or her function in your life. You, me, all of us need to have adult lives of our own.

Remember, children grow up and leave. If you’re dependent on them for distraction or any other form of emotional duty, you’re

only putting off the inevitable—not to mention placing unhealthy pressure on your children.

You Want to Keep from Being Lonely Later

“My husband was much older than me when we got married, and I realized that he would probably die before I did, and I would be alone for who knows how many years,” says Chris. “All of a sudden I had to get pregnant. I just didn’t want to end up a lonely old lady with no family to love and no one to love me.”

Just as we don’t know what lies in store for us later in life, we also can’t predict what our children will be like as adults. Your child may love you very much, but his or her career may mean that your adult child will be living far away from you and visiting only infrequently, despite your mutual desire to be close. In the worst case, if your child feels pressure to care for you in your later years, he or she may do so resentfully, or run as far away as possible to escape this burden.

You Want to Give Yourself a Best Friend

It’s not up to you to be your child’s friend—for that task, there are other children. And it’s certainly not up to your child to be *your* friend—in this relationship, it’s your responsibility to be the grown-up. In later years, as your child matures into an adult, you may be fortunate enough to forge a true friendship; but your primary relationship will always be as parent and child.

If you still think it’s possible to be your child’s best friend, here’s a reality check from Jen: “When I was more available to our daughter during the day, she said that she was an only child and all the other kids at school have tons of siblings—so I was therefore her best friend as well as her mother. But now my work schedule means that I leave at 5:30 A.M. and return at 7:00 P.M. every day. When she wants to really heap on the guilt, she says, ‘Now I can’t even have these conversations with you!’ Of course, she’s telling

me these things and telling me that she *can't* tell me these things. I pointed that irony out to her once, and it didn't go over very well."

You Want to Replicate Yourself

"Our two boys are nothing like us," Geoff told me. "I guess I never thought about it consciously, but I just assumed—especially because they were boys—that we would go fishing, play Little League, watch sports, do all that boy stuff together. But my older son is a computer geek, and my younger son wants to be a chef. He spends all his time in the kitchen with my wife."

The only thing you can know for sure is that each of your children will come into this world with his or her own distinctive personality. Your children may, of course, be just like your partner or your Uncle Fred or your mom—but chances are just as good that they will be like no one in your family at all. If one of your children *is* like you and shares your values, that's great. But even so, your children will have opinions and personality quirks that are theirs and theirs alone.

You Want to Fulfill Your Own Unfulfilled Dreams

If you always wanted to write a novel, build a business empire, or travel the world, it is possible that your children will live out these dreams. But why should they shoulder these burdens instead of finding their own dreams? It's still possible for *you* to accomplish some of the things you haven't yet achieved. And it is up to your child to discover a whole new set of his or her own goals worth striving for. One of those may be the one you had in mind, but it may not.

Some parents seek to have a child to fill a personal void of self-esteem. Adults with a poor self-image may have a child as a method of creating their own fan club and to augment feelings of self-worth. What better way to do that than to create another human being who is 100 percent dependent on you for everything,

starting at minute one? This is not healthy for the child; it is not useful for the parent either.

Another major arena in which this has become evident these days is sports, where parents, rather than cheering on and encouraging their youngsters to be part of a team effort and be healthier through exercise, show their dark side by exhibiting inappropriate behavior or living out the fantasy of unachieved sports superiority. It is inexcusable for parents to attempt to see their own personal dreams fulfilled at the expense of their children's healthy development.

It Will Be Fun to Have Children!

Having children can be a great deal of fun—take it from a father of four. But being a parent also means getting up in the middle of the night when you're already exhausted, staying up and worrying when your child comes in later than expected, having your private time interrupted to settle a dispute between siblings, offering support when your child is devastated by a poor grade or a cutting remark . . . this kind of “fun” never stops!

And there is also some evidence that parenthood doesn't always make people “happy”: “Using data sets from Europe and America, numerous scholars have found evidence that, on aggregate, many parents report statistically significantly lower levels of happiness, life satisfaction, marital satisfaction, and mental well-being compared with non-parents.”⁴

Your children can give you a great deal of pleasure, but it's important to be realistic. Nothing is fun all the time! My mother-in-law put it this way: “Little kids don't let you eat; big kids don't let you sleep!”

You're Afraid That You Can't Handle More Than One Child

“I never anticipated the kinds of changes a baby would make in our lives,” says Nadia. “We're always exhausted! I can't even take

a shower alone. I can't imagine how parents of twins do it, and I can't see how I can manage another child."

A not uncommon reason for choosing to stop at one or two children is the parents' feeling that they have their hands full already and wouldn't be capable of handling even one more child. This fear or conviction may be valid, but don't forget you can get help—from your partner, family, and friends; from teachers, coaches, even the older sibling . . . The concept "it takes a village" is quite true. (We'll look more closely at large and small families in Chapter Four.)

You've Made Your Plan

You may have planned your perfect family size from childhood, with names picked out and everything. But real life rarely matches up to fantasy families. (We'll discuss the "ideal" family size in more detail in Chapter Four.)

Share your expectation—whether it's of two girls and two boys, one perfect child, or a houseful of kids. Talk seriously with your partner and see if your fantasies match up. Then be prepared for nature to hand you some surprises!

Try Not to Worry—Aim for Contentment

As the saying goes, "Don't worry, be happy!" But when it comes to parenthood, that's easier said than done.

Kittens and puppies don't raise themselves, and neither do children. Parents are responsible for the well-being of these new people—teaching them the ropes, keeping them as safe as possible, guarding their health, making sure they get an education, imparting strong values . . . a lifelong responsibility that doesn't magically disappear when the child turns sixteen, eighteen, or twenty-one.

Good parents worry about their children. From the moment they are born, and even during pregnancy, we worry about their physical health and well-being. Early on, we worry and ask ourselves,

“How good a job am I doing as a parent?” And then there’s the larger worry that no matter how good a job we do as parents, our children might still come to harm because the world is fraught with troubles: drugs, crime, wars, pollution, nuclear disaster, and terrorism. That’s a lot to worry about!

If happiness is an elusive state—particularly, it seems, for parents—what should we strive for? Contentment, I believe, is more easily achieved. An inner satisfaction that transcends life’s unhappy moments is a wonderful goal for each adult and child in your family.

Considering why you want to have children—understanding your motivations, exploring your reasonable and unreasonable expectations—will give you a firm foundation on which to build a contented family life. When you accept your role as loving parent to each unique human being who becomes part of your family—expecting to be surprised, and willing to be there for the lows as well as the highs of parenting—contentment will be well within reach.

Self-Test

Why Do You Want to Have Children?

Please consider the following statements carefully. If you’d like to use them as a multiple-choice test to get a snapshot of where you stand on various issues we’ve raised, follow the rating system below. If you’d like to think more deeply about yourself in relation to certain issues, I encourage you to write down your thoughts in a journal.

I also encourage you to consider these statements in concert with your partner. It’s a great way to discover how you differ in your attitudes toward children and family, and to find shared areas of agreement that will help make your choices easier.

There are no objective points to add up as you review your responses: your decisions here are subjective. You and your partner will determine the weight of each statement as it pertains to your needs. Feel free to revisit these statements. You may find that over time, your responses will change.

If your responses bring up hidden issues you have never considered, or reveal problem areas in your marriage that need work, I encourage you to seek help. You can find support from family or parenting support groups (run either by peers or by professionals—teachers, counselors, therapists, clergy, or others in the community) or from licensed therapists. Insist that a major focus of the outside support should be the goal of preparing yourself to have a first child or another child, or simply being able to agree, “Our family is complete.”

A wise professor of mine once stated, “There are no problems, only projects.” If you decide on support or counseling, start soon. Both of your biological clocks are ticking!

Social Pressures

I want to give my parents a grandchild.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DON'T KNOW DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

All of my friends have children.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DON'T KNOW DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

People tell me it would be “selfish” not to have children.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DON'T KNOW DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

I want to give my child a sibling.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DON'T KNOW DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

My tradition favors large families—it’s our duty to procreate.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DON'T KNOW DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

Your Childhood Experiences

My parents were great when I was growing up.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DON'T KNOW DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

My parents were terrible role models.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DON'T KNOW DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

I’m close to my siblings.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DON'T KNOW DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

I have poor relationships with my siblings.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DON'T KNOW DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

Expectations: Myth Versus Reality

A child will be a great distraction from my own issues.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DON'T KNOW DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

I don't want to be lonely later in life.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DON'T KNOW DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

My child will be my best friend.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DON'T KNOW DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

My child will be like me and have my values.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DON'T KNOW DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

My child will accomplish what I never achieved.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DON'T KNOW DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

It will be fun to have children!

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DON'T KNOW DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

I don't think I can handle one more child.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DON'T KNOW DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

