

When to have a child? A new approach to the decision

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Women seeking to balance career, social life and family life in making the decision on when to have a child may benefit from applying formal decision-making science to this complex emotional choice.

“This decision is too complex to logically consider all the relevant aspects intuitively in one’s head,” write Professor Ralph Keeney and doctoral student Dinah Vernik of Duke’s Fuqua School of Business. “Yet, for many, it is too important and consequential to simply go with one’s feelings.”

The pair have demonstrated that using a formalized approach to this very personal decision may help a woman evaluate her options regarding the optimal time for her to attempt to conceive a first child. Their analysis, which was published in the current issue of the journal *Decision Analysis*, also reveals that women may have more options than they realize.

Keeney and Vernik developed a sophisticated logical decision model to help women weigh their options. Variables are plugged into the model which then attempts to balance the benefits of motherhood against its effects on career and social interests and the age-related concerns of diminishing fertility or an increased likelihood of conceiving a child with a genetic abnormality.

In their analyses, Keeney and Vernik illustrate their model by considering the situations of a 25-year-old doctoral student who desires

an academic career and a 20-year-old college student who plans to pursue a professional career.

The doctoral student must assess how motherhood might affect her likelihood of achieving tenure at a university, but the authors note that this situation also applies to professional women in medicine, law and other fields where there is significant pressure to reach a particular career milestone in a defined period of time.

If a woman feels that having a child in the early years of her career will limit her focus on work and thus significantly reduce her chances of receiving tenure, the model will indicate that the optimal age to begin to have a family is after she achieves that rank.

However, in the case of a woman who does not feel that motherhood will be a significant barrier to her pursuit of a particular milestone, the model suggests attempting to conceive a first child at a younger age. Specifically, the model can calculate for any specific situation the level of anticipated negative career impact at which an individual woman may wish to postpone having a child.

The example of a 20-year-old college student illustrates the situation when a woman claims she does not want to have a child until she reaches a certain age, say 35 years old. The model suggests that, especially in cases where both family life and career are important to the woman, having a child much earlier may be a better long-term solution than waiting until she is more established in her career.

"It may seem surprising to suggest having a child at a younger age, even if the woman places no importance on having a child until a certain age," Vernik said. "But the model takes into account the fact that taking a maternity leave has less impact on the future career of a woman who is a student or in the beginning of her professional life. This woman's child

will also be older and slightly more independent by the time the woman has reached the critical years of her career."

The researchers stress that their model should not be interpreted as prescribing solutions for women, but instead as a formalized way for helping them sort through conflicting pressures and considerations related to beginning a family.

"We use decision analysis all the time to guide complex business and policy questions and decisions, so why not use the structured approach to improve our understanding for making important personal decisions"" Keeney asked.

"A model like this doesn't, and shouldn't, preclude the role of emotion, input from the woman's partner, and other factors in personal decision making," Keeney said. But it does allow a woman to weight different factors according to her values, and then consider those factors in relation to each other in a systematic way."

Source: Duke University

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