Becoming a parent for the first time is a major transition at any age, especially for an adolescent or young adult. While age is one important indicator of readiness for parenthood, other factors such as family circumstances and social support systems are also important and can influence young parents’ chances of success.

Parenthood and marriage are closely linked. More than 90 percent of first births occur within marriage in developing countries. With rising ages of marriage, the age of parenthood has been rising, but the gap between age at marriage and age at first birth has narrowed, falling from 22 to 16 months on average over the past two decades.

Rates of Early Childbearing Remain High Despite Decline

Despite a decline in the share of young women giving birth before the age of 16 or 18, rates of early childbearing remain high in many parts of the developing world. The percentage of young people giving birth before age 18 (the internationally recognized age of adulthood defined by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) is higher than 30 percent in Western and Middle Africa and more than 20 percent in South-Central and Southeast Asia, Eastern and Southern Africa, and Central America and the Caribbean (see table). Early childbearing tends to be higher in areas with high rates of early marriage.

**Early Childbearing Can Have Adverse Effects on Both Mother and Infant**

**Mother’s Health**

Most studies show that women under age 20 who bear a child face a greater risk of dying of maternal causes than women who become mothers in their 20s and 30s. Very young women who become pregnant and give birth may also suffer health consequences such as preterm labor, obstructed labor, and permanent damage to reproductive organs. Women who give birth as children tend to be rural, less well-educated, and poor.

**Infant Health**

Early childbearing can adversely affect the next generation. The younger the mother is, the higher the rate of low birth-weight births and of infant mortality. The mortality rate for babies born to mothers under age 20 is 100 per 1,000 live births, compared with rates of 72 and 74 for mothers ages 20 to 29 and ages 30 to 39, respectively. Low birth weight is also associated with health problems, such as breathing problems due to immature lungs.

**Socioeconomic Impact**

Mothers who give birth during adolescence fare worse economically than those who delay childbearing. They are more likely to live in poverty due to related factors including premature exit from school, reduced earnings prospects, reduced chances of community participation, greater isolation from peers and society, and a higher possibility of divorce or single parenthood.

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Looking to the Future

Maternal morbidity and mortality in the developing world are greatly influenced by poverty, poor nutrition, and limited access to medical services for problems of pregnancy and delivery. If young women can access contraception to delay their first birth and young pregnant women can access family planning, prenatal, and parenting programs, their health and chances of delivering a healthy baby improve to levels almost on par with those of older women.

Policy Recommendations

A panel of international experts convened by the National Research Council has made the following policy recommendations to encourage young women to wait longer before starting a family and to meet the needs of very young mothers:

- Family planning programs should reach out to newly married individuals and couples to assist them in planning their first births so that they are well-timed.
- Prenatal and delivery services should address the special needs of first-time parents by teaching them about pregnancy, delivery, breastfeeding, nutrition, and healthy baby care, as well as contraception and fatherhood.
- Schools should remove barriers that prevent young parents from returning to school.
- The effectiveness of family life education programs and interventions designed to delay childbirth should be evaluated.

Call to Action*

In order to achieve a world where young people can live healthy, productive, and fulfilling lives, governments, civil society, and young people themselves must promote policies and programs that support access to contraception, family planning, and prenatal and delivery services for youth as well as access to education for young parents.

Governments Should:

- Include young people on local, state, national, and international decisionmaking bodies that directly affect policies and programs regarding access to reproductive health, family planning, and prenatal and delivery services for youth, as well as access to education for young parents.
- Pass legislation and commit funds to increase access to reproductive health, family planning, and prenatal and delivery services for youth.
- Commit funds to implement and evaluate programs designed to delay childbirth as well as family life education programs in schools.

Civil Society Should:

- Demand laws and funds to ensure access to reproductive health, family planning, and prenatal and delivery services for youth.
- Demand laws and funds that allow young parents to stay in school.
- Sponsor young people as members of decisionmaking bodies affecting young people’s access to reproductive health, family planning, and prenatal and delivery services.
- Involve young people in developing and implementing programs designed to improve access to reproductive health, family planning, and prenatal and delivery services.

Young People Should:

- Speak out for their right to access contraception, family planning, and prenatal and delivery services, and to remain in school if they become parents.
- Lobby governments to pass legislation and allocate funds that ensure access to reproductive health services for youth and protect young parents’ right to education.
- Monitor and voice any problems with implementation of national policies as well as relevant commitments made in international agreements such as in the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD).

*Developed by Advocates for Youth, the Call to Action is based on the data and policy recommendations included in Growing Up Global.

Additional Resources


Copies of the full report (720 pages) are available from the National Academies Press, 500 Fifth St., NW, Lockbox 285, Washington, DC 20055; (800) 624-6242 or (202) 334-3313 (in the Washington metropolitan area); www.nap.edu.