

PregnancyToday

Should You Marry Your Baby Daddy?

options for pregnant single moms

By Shannon McKelden



Once, if a single woman found herself pregnant, she automatically married her baby's father. But these days, women have more choices. Marry, stay single, live with the baby's father. These are all viable options, but how can you know which is best for you?

The rules may be different, but deciding what's best for you and your child isn't always easy. Weighing the pros and cons of marriage carefully is important. Thankfully, in the 21st century, women have more options.

"The tide has turned in our society as to what is acceptable," says Brette McWhorter Sember, former attorney and author of *Unmarried*

with Children: The Complete Guide for Unmarried Families (Adams Media, 2008) "It's easier now than ever to be an unmarried mother. Our society has made changes to accommodate this. The system is equipped to deal with the situation now, whereas before it was not."

Marriage and Pregnancy

Each choice carries with it pros and cons. Some considerations are legal. "The pros of marriage are that your legal rights are completely spelled out towards each other and your child," says Sember. "Should your relationship end, there is a clear mechanism for making plans for the future with regard to your child – divorce court."

Sometimes the choice is more personal. "I felt that if I was going to be a good family woman that I should set an example with my own family," says Angelita Paniagua, a Boston-based doula and mother of one. "I accept other people's choices and respect their views on the subject, but for me marriage was more comfortable."

Often, deciding to marry takes time. Tara Aiken of Portsmouth, N.H., married her "baby daddy" this past September. Their child is 3 years old. "We had been together for four years, but the relationship was on the rocks when I found out I was pregnant," says Aiken. "We didn't want to get married just because we were having a child, although we did feel the pressure. We stayed together for the sake of saving our family and fell back in love in the process – so we got married."

Maryann Reid, founder of Marry Your Baby Daddy Day, which will hold its third annual event in Charlotte, N.C., September 2009, believes fewer couples with children marry because women started to settle for less. "The pros of marrying are security, credibility and stability for the home and child," says Reid, who cites that more black couples with children choose not to marry. But Reid also believes in making the right decision. "[They] should get married if she and he agree that their love is ready for the next step. They should not get married if one of them is not ready. Nobody should be forced."

Sember warns that marrying for the wrong reason may put your child through a divorce, which can be difficult. "Divorce is also an expensive way to end a relationship," she says.

Deciding Not to Marry the Baby Daddy

Sometimes staying single is the right decision. Atlanta TV news host Renee Rayles became pregnant her senior year of college. "At that point it hit me that my relationship would now be serious, or should be," says Rayles, also the author of

The Super, Sexy, Single Mom on a Budget (So Bubbly Publishing, 2009). "At that point, I realized this was not the person I wanted to spend the rest of my life with – forever."

Melissa Murphy of Babylon, N.Y., found herself pregnant at age 27, by a man she'd been in a relationship with for a year. He seemed perfect at the time, but Murphy held off on the actual marriage. "I wore an engagement ring for three years but never once set a date," she says. "I think deep inside I knew we would never marry. He often wanted to just go to city hall but I never agreed. We were too up and down and I was never truly happy with him." She knew she'd made the right choice when their relationship deteriorated.

However, choosing not to marry your baby's father has consequences that should be thought through before making the decision. "Although unmarried moms are more common and accepted than ever before, there is still a stigma," says Sember. "When you and your partner are unmarried, there are a lot of things that are not spelled out if you are together. Financial responsibilities can be confusing and ownership of property is also not as simple. If you split up, you may have to go through a confusing legal process – paternity, then custody. There is no clear legal mechanism to help you resolve financial and property disputes if you break up."

On the other hand, there can also be benefits. "You do have the ability to just walk away if there is no joint property, which can be easier," says Sember. "And if paternity is never legally established, you can just walk away if he has no interest in custody and never have to get into a battle about that if you don't want him in your child's life."

Most important, consider whether you'll be happy with this man as a husband. "Think of life without the child," says Caitlin Green of Pittsburgh, Pa., who didn't marry the father of her two children. "Would you still be with this man? Will you be happy as empty-nesters? Will you bring your children up in an environment of fighting and negativity? If this man wouldn't be your husband without the child, why make him your husband due to the child? Trust me, I know the pain that's involved here, but two mature happy adults co-parenting without being in a relationship is much healthier for the child and better for all parties in the long run."

With support, single parenting is definitely doable. "I never planned to be a single mother, and there are days I truly miss having a partnership," says Murphy. "Parenting is a lifetime responsibility and you get no vacation from it."

With her family's love and support, though, Murphy and her daughter are thriving. "It does bother me that she will not grow up with her father in her life," she says. "I know it will affect her in some way, but growing up in a volatile house would have affected her worse, I'm sure."

Can't Decide if You Should Marry?

If you're undecided, where can you turn? First, Rayles suggests talking to the child's father and have an open and honest conversation about how you both feel and see the future.

Family and friends, too, can offer advice but may have strong (perhaps biased) opinions. Your minister may offer counseling of a spiritual nature and, of course, if you have legal questions regarding custody issues, be sure to seek the advice of an attorney. Premarital counseling is also a great idea. "I wish I had done the pre-wedding counseling," says Paniagua. "I saw a video for one and there were so many things that I did not think of."

In the end, though, only you can decide whether marrying your baby's father is the right thing to do. "Whether you marry or not should be a decision you make based on what you want for your future, not based on what you think you should do or what people are pressuring you to do," says Sember.