

2

Planning for Families

INTRODUCTION

Both women and men have an important role to play in planning a family. However, in some cultures contraception is considered to be a woman's responsibility, so many women make family planning decisions on their own. Ideally, the couple will discuss together how many children to have and when to have them. This communication about having children will help couples think about many issues — such as how they will provide for and raise their children. Health care providers, religious and community leaders, and other who discuss family issues with individuals or couples should help them think through and talk to each other about these important matters.

Couples need to plan ahead and talk about family planning before they start having sex and throughout their relationships as their circumstances change. This requires couples to learn to talk about sex and use contraception if they do not want to get pregnant soon after marriage. Many cultures expect a couple



to have children soon after they are married. Counselors need to educate husbands and other family members about healthy timing and spacing of

(Continued on page 16)

- 1** For couples, discussing the chance of pregnancy and seeking family planning counseling as soon as possible will help them prevent an unintended pregnancy.
- 2** Couples will be better able to provide and care for their families if they can decide whether and when to have a child based on their circumstances, including how many children they already have.
- 3** Family planning enables couples to time pregnancies in a way most beneficial to the mother's and children's health.
- 4** Men as well as women need to know that contraceptive methods help prevent unintended pregnancies.
- 5** Those who influence a couple in their decisions about having children need to understand the health benefits of delaying or spacing pregnancies and the importance of having the number of children the couple can provide and care for.
- 6** Families will be happier and more stable when women and men treat each other with kindness and respect. This respect includes never forcing a partner to have sex and avoiding all forms of violence.

pregnancies and encourage them to support women and couples if they want to postpone pregnancy.

Each pregnancy and childbirth is a good time for a couple to discuss if they have reached a desired family size and what they need to do to space or avoid a future pregnancy.

Young people need to think about the consequences of sex, including whether they are ready to raise a child. Unmarried and married couples may think of pregnancy and family planning in quite different ways. Most of the material in this booklet refers to all sexually active people. Chapter 9 provides information specific to unmarried young people.

Whether or not a couple has discussed family planning, most women visit family planning services alone. Whether women or men come alone or as a couple, they should always be welcomed and served with respect, regardless of age.

Discussions about planning a family raise issues related to gender roles. Counselors and others talking to couples about having children have an opportunity to promote mutual respect between men and women. Discussing mutual respect involves addressing the difficult issues of violence, including its harmful effects in the home and forcing a partner to have sex against her will.

WHEN PLANNING A FAMILY, A COUPLE NEEDS TO CONSIDER:

- The healthiest time to have their first child (*see Chapter 3*)
- The healthiest time for the next pregnancy (*see Chapter 4*)
- How many children they can support and when to stop having children (*see Chapter 5*)
- When a woman is most likely to become pregnant (*see Chapter 6*)
- What contraceptive method to use when they need to delay or avoid pregnancy (*see Chapter 7*)

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

FACT 1.

For couples, discussing the chance of pregnancy and seeking family planning counseling as soon as possible will help them prevent an unintended pregnancy.

Typically, when they start having sex, couples do not want to talk about using a contraceptive method. But they need to discuss contraception as soon as possible — and ideally before the start of sexual relations — to avoid an unintended pregnancy. Women and men can visit with a health worker or counselor to learn about contraceptive options and can choose a method that best suits them.

When both partners are involved in the selection of a method, this joint decision will help ensure that they will be happier with the method and will use it consistently and correctly every time they have sex. Ideally, couples will continue to talk together about their ideal family size and seek family planning counseling as life circumstances change.

In many cases a woman seeks family planning counseling on her own or with female friends. She may or may not have discussed family planning with her husband. Some women may worry that their husbands will disapprove, and so they prefer to keep the use of contraception private. A family planning counselor should welcome her and help the woman choose a method that is right for her situation, regardless if she comes with her husband or partner, or by herself.

Men, also, may seek family planning services without their partners. These men should also be welcomed by a family planning counselor and served.

FACT 2.

Couples will be better able to provide and care for their families if they can decide whether and when to have a child based on their circumstances, including how many children they already have.

For the health and well-being of the family, it is ideal for women and men to plan together when and whether to have a child and to take into consideration their life plans, education, desires for their children, and their jobs. This will help a couple make sure they will have enough money to feed, clothe, educate, and provide health care for each of their children.

Below are important questions for a couple to consider when thinking about whether or when to have a child. If a couple can answer yes to all of these questions, they will have confidence that it is a good time — for mother, baby, and family — to try to become pregnant.

- Is the woman at least 18 years old?
- Will the baby be born before the mother is 35 years old?
- Has there been at least two years since the last baby was born?
- Can the family afford to feed and educate another child?
- Does the couple want another child?



Once a decision has been made to delay or avoid pregnancy, a couple will need information about contraceptive options available to them and where to get family planning services. Those who counsel couples and share information about family planning in the community need to be aware of these important considerations in planning a family.

FACT 3.**Family planning enables couples to time pregnancies in a way most beneficial to the mother's and children's health.**

Couples should consider the health of the mother and children when planning a pregnancy. Women are in their healthiest years for childbearing between the ages 18 and 34. For the health of the mother and child, a couple needs to plan their first pregnancy when the woman is at least 18 years of age. If a woman is sexually active before age 18, she should use a contraceptive method to protect herself from a potentially dangerous or unintended pregnancy.

Couples should plan for at least two years between the birth of one child and trying to get pregnant again. After a miscarriage or abortion couples should wait six months before the woman tries to become pregnant again. Time between pregnancies allows the woman to regain her strength. This will help ensure that she and her child are healthier and have a better chance to survive.

When a woman is older than 34, the couple should know that pregnancy at this age carries risks for the health of both mother and child. At that age, a woman may want to choose a long-acting contraceptive method or a permanent method — either female sterilization or, for the man, vasectomy.

FACT 4.**Men as well as women need to know that contraceptive methods help prevent unintended pregnancies.**

Both men and women care about the health and well-being of the family. Therefore, knowing how family planning can contribute to this well-being is useful to both men and women. When a husband and wife plan how many children they want to have and how to space pregnancies, the man, woman, and children all benefit.

Communicating about family planning with men — as individuals, in groups, and as part of a couple — is an important part of promoting family planning. Men need to understand the choices and implications related to contraceptive options. They may choose to support their wives in using a method or consider using condoms or choose a vasectomy. In addition, men of all ages, married and unmarried, have other sexual health needs. They need good-quality services that support them and treat them with respect.

Men, like women, may have concerns about contraception, including how safe a method is, how long it takes for a woman to get pregnant when contraceptive use stops, and how different contraceptive methods may affect the couple's sex life. A family planning counselor can provide men and women with information about contraceptive methods and address specific concerns.

FACT 5.

Those who influence a couple in their decisions about having children need to understand the health benefits of delaying or spacing pregnancies and the importance of having the number of children the couple can provide and care for.

Often, members of the extended family and others may urge a newly married couple to have a child right away or to have children spaced closely together. These individuals, while they may care about the couple, may not be aware of the importance of delaying the first pregnancy and spacing subsequent pregnancies.

Relatives need to know that spacing births sufficiently gives each child a healthy start before the next child arrives and also gives the mother time to recover her strength. Spacing births also helps a couple to be able to provide food, education, and health care for each child — and to nurture each one adequately. The relatives need to understand the value in not pressuring the couple into having children too soon or too close together, and the importance of having the number of children the couple can provide and care for.

Communicating this information to relatives and friends is an important element of family planning education. Well-informed relatives and friends can encourage the couple to delay their first pregnancy, space subsequent pregnancies, and have only the number of children for whom they can provide and care for.

FACT 6.

Families will be happier and more stable when women and men treat each other with kindness and respect. This respect includes never forcing a partner to have sex and avoiding all forms of violence.

Both men and women need to understand the harm that results from coercive or forced sex, and violence directed toward women and children. Violence not only causes bodily harm to women but also can lead to depression and even suicide. Violence affects women's ability to care for the family. Children who are victims or witnesses of violence suffer serious emotional damage that can harm their ability throughout their lives to learn and to get along with others.

Women as well as men have the right to consent to sex or to refuse it — without fear of violence. Forced sex, even involving a married couple, may not consider contraception and thus result in an unwanted pregnancy. When men and women treat each other with respect, the family will be happier and more stable.

Attitudes about violence toward women are changing. More and more, men who are most respected in their communities believe that real men do not harm women or children. Communities are becoming less tolerant of violence towards women, including actions by police forces.