



Vonda Cooley, 40, of McCormick, S.C., enjoys getting outdoors with children Jonah, 2, Cara, 4, and Adriana, 6.



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The Truth About Motherhood Over Age 40

By Stephanie Green

Photos by John Harpring

FOR MANY WOMEN IN THEIR 40S, A BIG FOCUS OF LIFE IS ADVANCING OR resuming a career and raising teenage children. But, it is not an absolute pattern, and many women find themselves trading in a briefcase for burp cloths in this seasoned stage of life.

At the age of 42, Jean Outlaw was thriving in her career in the financial industry. And like most of their 40-something friends, she and her husband Eddie were busy raising their then teenage children Adria and Daniel.

Just as Outlaw was about to go through an exciting professional transition, she experienced a great personal shift, too.

"I found out I was pregnant, and I really wanted a second opinion," she says.

Starting all over again on the motherhood track was not a part of Jean's plan, but she and others have discovered that being a mom when you're in the "40 and over club" comes with benefits and a perspective that only come with age and experience.

"It took me a long time to get adjusted," Jean says. "But now I realize that my focus needed to shift and my son helped me to do that."

Deena Youngblood, 42, whose children range from ages 23 to 1, says she did not plan on having children after the age of 40. "But, I love being a mother, and I love having children," she says.



Jean Outlaw, right, of South Augusta, was 42 and had two teenagers when she discovered she was pregnant with son, William, 12.



Columbia County mother Deena Youngblood, 42, says the advantage of motherhood over 40 is that she's more relaxed with 1-year-old Lilleigh than she was with her two older children.

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Mellow Mom

With all of the firsts and phases that kids go through, it can be easy for a young or first-time mom to get overwhelmed by all of the developments and decisions of raising little ones.

"You definitely appreciate all of the different stages they go through. Although, I have to admit, now I don't get so caught up in the milestones," Youngblood says. Whether it's something routine or out-of-the-norm, with each child and year that goes by, she has learned for sure that "things will pass."

"I'm definitely not as uptight as I was when I was a young mom," says Youngblood. "I'm more confident about the decisions that I make and I'm just more relaxed. With my first two kids, I can remember running to the pediatrician if they sneezed. Now I pretty much wait until something green is coming out."

Outlaw says being an older and experienced mom has given her a déjà vu advantage. "You just know how to handle situations better each time," she says. She also feels that being experienced in the workplace is also an advantage that older moms have. "Well, you're not just starting out, and you understand that not everything is so critical. Also, when you've been in the workforce for a while, you've had an opportunity to show what you can do, and your level of commitment, so that when you do have to be out it's not as much of an issue,"

she says. "There's just much more pressure when you're first starting out and have to juggle work and family. And usually, there's less of a financial strain when you're older."

The Down Side of Being an Older Mom

Vonda Cooley, 40, mother of Adriana, Cara and Joshua, finds the age difference among her mommy peers to be a challenge. "When there's a group of parents, I always feel like the grandma of the group even though we're dealing with the same issues with our kids."

Cooley says she was shocked when she was recently mistaken for her children's grandmother.

"I was shopping in Kmart, and I was telling my kids to wait for me. Well, this lady looked over at us and said, 'Girls, wait for grandma.' That was the first time I'd gotten that, and I kindly told the lady that I'm their mother, even though I'm old enough to be their grandmother. The woman laughed and confessed that she had recently turned 42 and just became a grandmother."

Outlaw says she has had her own bout of social challenges in trying to maintain friendships with her peers. "I belong to this ladies group at my church where you have to be 40 and over to join. I miss a lot of the activities, because I'm the only

one in the group with such a young child," she says. "It sometimes frustrates me that they don't have to make arrangements for someone, but it is something I must constantly juggle. And while my friends are planning shopping trips and cruises, I'm learning new math."

Cooley says that she and her husband often think about their older age and what that means as their children get older.

"No one is guaranteed tomorrow," she says. "But, I do think about whether or not I will be here to see my grandchildren. Our kids will just be teenagers when we reach retirement age. And then we have our health to think about, too. As older parents, it seems like we're going to the doctor as much as they are."

Outlaw, now 53, says that she was planning to retire at age 55. "But now with William in the picture, I don't think that's going to happen."

On the Go

Keeping up with little ones can be a feat for any adult. And for those who are a little more mature, sometimes there's literally a little less get up and go.

"If I'm tired, it's not because I'm 42 and I have a child who is 1, but it's more because we have a house full of children," says Youngblood.

Cooley finds there are days when she is just too pooped to play. "Sometimes, I just don't have the energy," she says.

William's various activities keep Outlaw on the move, often when she'd rather not. "I often think, I

could be in for the evening," she says.

The Medical Issues

In addition to the mental and emotional energy it takes to parent a child, there are physical aspects that may be more of an issue for older moms.

"Women who are age 40 and over are at a higher risk for general medical complications, like diabetes and hypertension," says Dr. Erin Holsten, an Obstetrician and Gynecologist at the Medical College of Georgia. "And an advanced maternal age also yields the possibility of placenta problems, such as placenta previa and pre-term labor and delivery," she says. "There also tends to be an increased C-section rate among older mothers."

And because older moms are more likely to use some type of reproductive assisted technology, Dr. Holsten says there's an increased chance of a multiple birth, which is always riskier.

"When I went in at 40, I got all the statistics and risks," Youngblood says. "They're (medical professionals) definitely not as joyful as when you're 20 and pregnant. Don't let all the medical advice scare you. Be informed, but don't let it stop you."

And as far as Cooley is concerned, the benefits far outweigh the risks.

"Even though I was very close to 40 when we had our third child, he was actually the easiest and best pregnancy. I had absolutely no issues," she recalls. "Even my doctor remarked how well everything went." Oddly enough, she encountered some

complications with their first child. "I developed preeclampsia and our daughter was born prematurely. And if I had let the fear of what might have happened with our next two children, our lives would not be as enriched."

Cooley suggests approaching parenthood in your 40s with a lot of thought and prayer. "But I think it's one of the best things you can do," she says.


And, Dr. Holsten points out that, "women over 40 can definitely have a normal pregnancy."

Dismiss the Worry Factor

"When you're older and have children, you just know everything is going to be OK, whatever it is," suggests Outlaw.

"You just don't worry about the minor things that you won't even think about in a year or so," says Youngblood.

Cooley agrees. "I now know that I was not ready to be a parent in my 20s," she says. "But in my 40s, I'm more sure of myself. I've had more life experiences and I come to parenting with a bigger view of the world and of myself."

The benefits of age, to Cooley, include feeling more secure with where you are in life and viewing things from the standpoint of the whole family rather than as an individual. "These are fleeting moments. I need and want to be with my children, and I wouldn't have realized that in my 20s." 

STEPHANIE GREEN is an Augusta wife, mother of three and freelance writer.



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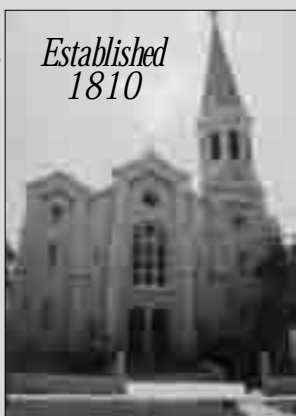
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