

Baby -Out of- Wedlock

CO-PARENTING BASICS
FROM PREGNANCY TO CUSTODY



JIM & JESSICA BRAZ

Praise for *Baby Out of Wedlock*

CO-PARENTING BASICS FROM PREGNANCY TO CUSTODY

I highly recommend Baby Out of Wedlock to anyone who wants to learn the complicated dynamics of co-parenting while emphasizing the child's needs first.

— **Kevin Falkenstein, Family Law Attorney and Partner,
Moustakas Nelson LLC**

My work focuses on what can eventually happen in a worst-case situation. Unmarried parents who read Baby Out of Wedlock are taking a first step in the right direction.

— **Ginger Gentile, Director & Producer of the documentary *Erasing Family*
and one of Maria Shriver's Architects of Change**

In my behavioral health practice, I often see the emotional toll that custody battles have on unmarried parents and their children. Baby Out of Wedlock can make a difference in both parents' and their children's long-term mental health.

— **Francesca Santacroce, Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist
and Owner, Serenity Behavioral Health**

When a client is knowledgeable about the basics of family law, it makes my job easier, and everyone benefits. Baby Out of Wedlock is a great primer for anyone navigating the pregnancy-to-custody continuum.

— **Jessica E. Smith, Family Law Attorney and Partner, JSDC Law Offices**

Pregnancy out of wedlock can be an incredibly scary experience. This book, with its emphasis on the importance of mental health, is a great guide. It helps readers know they are not alone.

— **Rachel Cohen, Licensed Mental Health Counselor
and Clinical Supervisor, The Soho Center in New York City**

Baby Out of Wedlock provides answers to all the basic questions that inevitably challenge a co-parenting relationship. If both parents read this book, they can work together with less stress and anxiety while limiting the cost of lawyers.

— **Andrew Keegan, Actor and Co-Parent**

My work is all about how people get through adversity, and Baby Out of Wedlock has nailed its topic. Jim & Jessica Braz have written stories of who people need to be in order to navigate this experience. With their guidance, both parents and kids can live free of hostility, pain, and anguish.

— **Bob Litwin, Performance Coach
and Author of *Live the Best Story of Your Life***

Custody battles can spiral out of control if you let them. Baby Out of Wedlock helps both parents realize that compromise is always the best way forward.

— **Michael Schwartz, CFP, AEP, CEO of Magnus Financial Group LLC,
and Divorced Father**

I have been a licensed psychologist for over twenty-five years specializing in relationship and parenting issues, and I have known Jim and Jessica for over a decade. Their experience is real and their advice is practical. I highly recommend Baby Out of Wedlock to anyone who finds themselves in this situation.

— **Lenore Perrott, MS, Psychologist**

I highly recommend Baby Out of Wedlock for anyone looking for honest, fair, and real-life experience during the stressful time from pregnancy to custody and beyond. It is an excellent resource as it places the child's best interest paramount while working toward the all-important co-parenting relationship.

— **Patricia A. Cummings, Licensed Certified Social Worker-Clinical,
Maryland Court Certified Parenting Coordinator**

I've known Jim for over twenty years, and I remember when his daughter was born and how hard he had to struggle for parenting rights. His story is real, and his advice comes from experience.

— **Lisa Benson, Vice President, IMG Models**

Jessica made her share of mistakes in the early days, but since then she has clearly figured out how to make her co-parenting relationship successful. Read her book if you want to learn what works.

— **Olena Zinshtein, Stepparent and Owner of Key Nutrition LLC**

A great book that will clearly help anyone in a similar situation. The potential cost alone in navigating the process can be overwhelming, but this guide delivers sound advice and lessons learned. Well written and comprehensive.

— **Patrick Donohue, US Army Pilot and Father**

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FROM PREGNANCY TO CUSTODY

JIM & JESSICA BRAZ



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The events described in this book are based on actual events, but the names and personal details of the people involved, including the authors, have been changed to protect their privacy and their children's emotional development. Some other minor details have been changed for illustration purposes.

Jim and Jessica Braz are not lawyers. While they have real-life experience in the issues discussed here, they do not give legal advice in this book. Furthermore, child custody laws, child support calculations, and family law, in general, vary from state to state. Be sure to consult an attorney in the appropriate state for your custody litigation.

Jim and Jessica Braz are not doctors. While they have real-life experience in the issues discussed here, they do not give medical advice in this book. Be sure to consult your doctor on your specific medical situation.

Jim and Jessica Braz are not licensed therapists, mediators, or counselors. While they have real-life experience in the issues discussed here, you should consult licensed professionals as needed.

The advice given in this book does not hold Jim and Jessica Braz legally liable for any adverse outcomes you may have from following their advice.

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Contents

1 | **Why Read This Book? ... 1**

Purpose of This Book ... 2

What Makes Us Experts? ... 3

Jim's Story ... 4

Jessica's Story ... 6

Your Story ... 7

Changing Your Story ... 8

2 | **Surprise, I'm Pregnant ... 11**

Paternity Tests ... 12

3 | **First Things First ... 15**

Abortion? ... 15

Adoption? ... 17

Single Parent, Co-Parent, or Married Parents? ... 19

Should You Get Married Now? Later? Ever? ... 20

4 | **Play Nice ... 23**

Freaking Out ... 24

It's Harder on the Woman ... 27

Ask, Don't Tell ... 28

Type A or Type B? ... 30

Everything Will Change ... 32

Co-Parenting Decision-Making ... 33

High-Conflict Relationships and Parallel Parenting ... 35

5 | Pregnancy and Infant Questions... 39

- Doctor Visits during Pregnancy... 39
- Pregnancy Dos and Don'ts... 41
- Miscarriage and Premature Birth... 43
- Ultrasounds and Genetic Testing... 45
- Umbilical Cord Blood Banks... 46
- Hospital vs. Alternative Birthing... 49
- C-Section vs. Natural Birth... 53
- Vaccinations... 55
- SIDS and Sleep Training... 57
- Breastfeeding... 59
- Postpartum Depression and Other Issues... 60
- Substance Abuse... 62
- Parenting Styles... 64

6 | Legal Questions... 71

- Pregnancy Discrimination and Maternity Leave... 73
- Finding a Good Family Law Attorney in the Right Location... 75
- Custody — Physical vs. Legal and Sole vs. Joint... 79
- Visitation Rights... 86
- Custody Litigation Timeline... 91
- Evidence in a Custody Case... 101
- What Is a Parenting Plan? ... 106
- Dispute Resolution... 113
- What Is a Parenting Coordinator? ... 116
- What Is Arbitration? ... 121
- A Sample Consent Order and Parenting Plan... 122

7	Financial and Child Support Questions ... 147
	Child Support Calculations ... 148
	More about Child Support Calculations ... 152
	Medical Expenses and Extracurricular Activities ... 154
	Private School and College Savings ... 156
	Payment Mechanisms and Enforcement ... 158
	Attorney Fees ... 161
	Recalculating Child Support When Circumstances Change ... 164
	Baby Gear—Buy It or Save Your Money? ... 168

8	Getting Along for the Long Term ... 177
	What If I Want to Move? ... 178
	Makeup Visits ... 180
	Transitioning the Child from Parent to Parent ... 181
	Religion ... 183
	Stepparents ... 184
	Discipline—Different Homes, Different Rules ... 186
	Communication ... 187
	Child Comes First ... 190
	The Big Picture ... 192
	Connect with Us ... 193

About the Authors ... 196

1 | Why Read This Book?

According to research recently posted on the CDC website, *nearly 40%* of all births in the United States are to unmarried parents. That equals approximately 1,500,000 children born out of wedlock *every year*. Many of their 3,000,000 parents are worried, confused, and searching for answers. By comparison, there are only about 800,000 divorces in the United States each year.

If you are holding this book, then either you or someone you know has recently found out about an unexpected pregnancy. You are not married to the other parent-to-be, but you are weighing all the possibilities. You may have known the other person for years or barely more than one night. A hundred questions are going through your mind, and you have not slept well since you heard the news. In short, you are freaking out.

Purpose of This Book

The purpose of this book is to help the millions of new or soon-to-be mothers or fathers who are *not* in a traditional happy marriage. Ideally, you picked up this book the day after you heard the news, but more realistically, it's at least partway through the pregnancy or even past the birth. That's fine; this book will help you navigate nine months of pregnancy and get you through at least the first year of your child's life and then some.

If you are happily married or happily engaged, or even if you just know your partner is “the one,” then this book *is not* for you. You will have challenges as all parents do, but this book does not address them. There are lots of other books out there for you.

This book *is* for anyone in a serious long-term relationship, a casual short-term relationship, or even just a one-night stand that resulted in a pregnancy. It could also help anyone who is surprised by pregnancy with someone they are about to divorce, especially if it is your first child together.

This book is *not* about endorsing any single parenting style, but it *is* about learning how to be a great co-parent by getting off to the right start during the pregnancy.

This book *is* about learning from our personal mistakes and learning to see your co-parent's point of view to help you make better decisions for your child.

This book *is* about learning your rights and responsibilities as unmarried co-parents.

This book is *not* a substitute for a good family lawyer. Instead, it is a supplement, a navigation tool, and a lot cheaper than asking your lawyer every little question that pops in your head.

This book *is* about protecting your parenting rights while also “doing what's right” for the child, who will be best served by *two* involved parents.

If you are under eighteen, then you have extra challenges ahead of you that this book does not address except to say you will need to seek help from loved ones.

This book is designed to give you the answers you are looking for efficiently and straightforwardly. We know you are not in the mood for long-winded lessons or clever anecdotes right now. You want straight-talk answers ASAP.

What Makes Us Experts?

Why us? It's true my wife, Jessica, and I are not experts. We don't have PhDs in family or childhood development. We are not lawyers or therapists. If you want that kind of academic advice, there are probably better books out there. However, if you want real-world information that gets results and *works*, this is the book for you.

My wife and I wrote this book because about ten years ago, before we were a couple, we both lived through the same situation you are going through now. I had a daughter, and Jessica had a son, with other people we did not want to marry. We made a lot of mistakes back then. We learned from those mistakes, and we want to share what we learned with you.

We remember all the questions we had back then and how hard it was to get straight answers. Again, this book is not a substitute for a good family lawyer. You will definitely need a lawyer in this process, but you don't need to pay them an arm and a leg if you read this book carefully.

We hope this book will save you money by answering many of the "dumb" questions running through your mind right now, thereby keeping your lawyer's billable hours to a minimum. The book's price and the time it takes you to read it is nothing compared to the tens (maybe hundreds?) of thousands of dollars you can spend defending your parental rights. Jessica and I paid ungodly sums on legal bills (you'll

need to read on to find out how much exactly) just to establish standard legal custody and visitation rights with our babies out of wedlock, and our two cases never even went to trial.

If you take the advice in this book seriously, you shouldn't need to spend much on lawyers. If both parents read this book, the results will be even better, and your child will benefit from two cooperative and civil co-parents who understand and respect each other's roles.

Jim's Story

I don't want to get too personal with my story's details, but I want to give you enough background information to know the experience I'm offering you is legitimate. Your story will undoubtedly be different, but I guarantee you will face many of the same challenges I did.

It was Christmas week about twelve years ago when I reunited with an old flame; let's call her Mary to protect her identity. We had never slept together before this reunion night. It was consensual. We were both about thirty years old. I was raised in the suburbs of Philadelphia and was mildly successful at a bank in Manhattan. Mary was an executive assistant who had lived in Manhattan for a couple of years when we had dated a while back. At the time of our reunion, she was living in Arizona, and she loved it there. She grew up outside of Washington, DC, and her family was still there.

A couple of years before the fateful night she became pregnant, Mary and I had a relationship that lasted a few months. So we were not strangers, but we were not dating when she got pregnant. It was just one of those nights where one thing led to another and, well, you know. I had always practiced very safe sex my entire life, but I let my guard down this particular night. For her part, Mary had been practicing celibacy for a while at

the time, waiting for marriage, but on this night, well, I guess she let her guard down too.

Some readers may assume that Mary tried to trap me by getting pregnant on purpose. I don't think that's what happened for several reasons, one of them being that she was a very religious person. She belonged to a specific religion that didn't look kindly on premarital sex. For her, having a baby out of wedlock would have caused more than the typical amount of social stigma.

She may have just felt she was getting older, and it was time to start taking some chances. She might have assumed if it was God's will to give her a child, then we would just get married. Maybe that's what she thought, maybe not. But the point is, I don't think she tried to "trap" me in any way.

I'll tell more of my story with Mary as we move through the issues, but for now, you should also know that Mary and I were both never married to anyone before the pregnancy, and we had no other kids before our daughter, Kelly, was born.

Perhaps the most significant thing to know about me for this book is that I am a type A person. A planner. Punctual. A rational decision-maker. "Anal," Mary would say. I'm a by-the-book type of guy. I like to travel by train because they are efficient and reliable (this becomes important later in my story). Mary is the opposite; she prefers flexibility and likes last-minute decisions. She doesn't adhere well to schedules. She is an emotional decision-maker. She prefers to travel by car because they are more flexible and give her a feeling of control, even though she knows that, statistically, highways are more dangerous than trains. Mary is type B all the way. Unfortunately, we were both opinionated beyond belief, and neither of us was a pushover.

In short, our personalities were a recipe for disaster, and we both knew it and decided early on not to get married. We

were long-distance during the pregnancy, and every communication between us seemed to escalate into an argument. I was to blame for at least half those arguments for sure. The result was that by the time her due date rolled around, Mary and I were not on speaking terms, and I was starting to wonder if she had given birth without telling me and had possibly even gone into hiding with our child. It was not a good situation, but it was one you should be able to avoid if you read this book.

Jessica's Story

Jessica has a story that is similar but different from mine. She, too, was around thirty years old when she got pregnant unexpectedly. But Jess was dating her guy at the time, and for a while, they thought they might stay together and perhaps get married.

We'll call him Bill, and as with Mary, we are changing some of the unimportant background details to protect his identity. However, Jessica and I want to say now, in the beginning, that although we had our differences with Bill and Mary, this book is not meant to trash-talk them in any way. They are great parents to our children, and we have enormous respect for both of them. Any mention of our experiences with Bill and Mary in the book are meant only to illustrate to the reader some examples of what can go wrong if you don't learn from our mistakes. We will try to be fair and point out our faults as well as theirs.

Anyway, Jessica and Bill were dating for a year or two when she got pregnant by total surprise. Doctors had told Jess when she was younger that she would have trouble conceiving due to an irregularly shaped uterus, so perhaps she was less careful about birth control than she could have been.

Jessica was a registered nurse at Pennsylvania Hospital, and Bill was a hotel manager, where they both lived in Philadel-

phia. Bill was a few years older than Jess. Once they got over the pregnancy shock, they started to plan a life together with a baby coming.

As with Mary and me, the details don't matter too much here, but suffice it to say they found themselves incompatible as a couple a few months into the pregnancy. By the time her son, Adam, was born—six months before my daughter—Jessica and Bill were not on speaking terms either.

For background, both Bill and Jessica's parents were divorced. Jess and I both grew up in the suburbs of Philadelphia, and Bill grew up in Pittsburgh. Both Jess and Bill had good people in their lives, but I think it's fair to say both of them probably had a more challenging childhood than Mary and I did.

Your Story

Now that you have our background, you may be thinking, *Jim and Jessica are nothing like me because...* Indeed, our stories are undoubtedly different from yours in one way or another. These days, we are much more aware of how large a role race and socioeconomic backgrounds can play in people's lives. You may have inferred from the previous pages that all four of us never had to deal with racial discrimination, poverty, or abusive family relationships in our lives. If you are thinking that our circumstances are not nearly as challenging as yours, you might be partially right, but that doesn't mean there is nothing to learn from our experiences when it comes to having a baby born out of wedlock.

For example, one of Jessica's biggest problems was that Bill got poor legal advice from an attorney friend who did not practice family law. This led to a lot of simple misunderstandings that could easily have been avoided. Make sure you choose a lawyer specializing in *family law*; a friend working

pro bono will cause more harm than good if he doesn't practice family law.

This book is filled with little bits of advice like that, and most of it applies to anyone having a baby out of wedlock, regardless of race or socioeconomic background. Although your circumstances, history, and relationship with your co-parent are unique, most of what we discuss over the rest of the book will still apply to your story. If there are parts that don't, well, we hope you will be able to modify the information for your particular situation. If not, contact us on our website (BabyOutOfWedlock.com), and we might be able to point you to someone who can help.

Changing Your Story

Speaking of stories, it may help readers cope with this difficult situation if they realize the power they have to change their story. For years, we have worked with a motivational coach, Bob Litwin (BobLitwin.com), who wrote *Live the Best Story of Your Life*. His book is mostly about finding success in sports and business, but it applies to any challenge, including what you are going through now.

If you constantly tell yourself this pregnancy is a disaster, a nightmare, or someone else's fault, then you will stay stuck in the mental abyss you may feel you are in right now. On the other hand, if you start telling yourself another story, a positive story, then your reality will start to change for the better immediately.

When we say, "Tell yourself a positive story," we mean literally, *tell yourself* a positive story. Instead of waking up in the morning and feeling like a victim or unlucky or some other form of despair, try repeating a different line. Even say it out loud. It may seem like just words at first, but eventually, your brain will start to think differently.

For example, the negative story is that this pregnancy threw your life into a tailspin. The positive story is that this baby will give your life new meaning and purpose.

The old story is that you don't have enough money to legally defend your parenting rights, certainly not tens of thousands of dollars, so why bother even trying? The new story is that you are learning which issues attorneys can help with and which they cannot, and how you can get this done right without spending a fortune on legal bills. You just need to figure out what is worth fighting over and what is not.

The pessimistic story is that your co-parent is impossible to deal with and you are never going to see eye to eye. The optimistic story is that you will get along better with your co-parent once you learn how their brain works and get a few uncertainties answered in due time.

Again, this book is packed with advice that can help you change your baby-out-of-wedlock story. Will you use it? Will you actually start telling yourself a different story today? If you have to read this book twice for it to sink in, will you read it twice? Will you ask your co-parent to read it too? If you need to look for other coaches, therapists, or mental health professionals, will you also take that step? Or will you let yourself fall deeper into the abyss?

Enough preaching. Let's get started with what you need to know to survive the next few years. If your child is already born, you may be tempted to jump ahead to chapter 6, but we recommend you at least skim chapters 2 through 5 because there is some information in them that still applies to you.

2 | Surprise, I'm Pregnant

“I’m pregnant” are perhaps two of the most shocking words a person can utter. It’s a negative surprise for some, and for others, it’s a positive one, but no matter what, you are likely to remember for your entire life where you were and how you felt when you first said or heard those two words.

Women usually discover the news on their own from a pregnancy test, or perhaps from a doctor, but the shock can be just as great. Jessica took a pregnancy test, and then four more to be sure, when her period was late by a few days. If you are a woman reading this book, it’s probably not the right time in your life to be pregnant, or maybe you are not with the man you wanted to have children with, and the pregnancy news probably felt surreal.

I remember I was at dinner with family on a Friday night in Manhattan when I got Mary’s call. We had not been getting along very well since our “reunion” night, and I had a strange feeling when I saw her name ringing on my mobile phone that there was only one reason she would be calling me right now.

My gut was right. I took the call outside the restaurant. She said in a tearful voice, “Jim, I’m pregnant. You’re the father. I expect you to be responsible, and I hope you want to be involved.” I replied that I did want to be involved, and I definitely would be responsible, and I would call her back as soon as I came out of shock.

You no doubt have a similar story, and by now, it is sometime in the past, so we don’t want to waste too much time on this chapter aside from one crucial point to make about paternity tests before we move on to more significant issues.

Paternity Tests

If you are the woman in the story, you may or may not be sure who the father is. Mary was sure it was me because she hadn’t slept with anyone else, just as Jess knew it was Bill. Women with multiple partners cannot be sure who the father is without a test, and they should admit to themselves and their partners if there is uncertainty.

If you are the man in the story, your first reaction to the “I’m pregnant” news might be, “Are you sure I’m the father?” This is a fair question, but you want to be careful how you ask it.

Men need to keep in mind that the woman is not telling you this news unless she is pretty damn sure you are the father, and the last thing she wants to hear at this most stressful moment is you don’t believe her or you think she must have slept around with multiple people recently. That kind of response is nothing but a punch in the gut.

However, women should remember that while they may be 100% certain who the father is, the man does not have that same degree of certainty because he does not know for sure who else you have been with besides him. Jess was insulted at first when Bill asked for a paternity test three months after

Adam was born. Her lawyer was right to explain that Bill just wanted to be 100% sure, as sure as Jess was.

Raising a child is a lifetime commitment. Both parents deserve to be 100% certain who the father of the child is. Certainty is a good thing for all parties involved, including the child. Fortunately, it is easy enough to test for paternity with a cheek swab once the child is born. Your lawyer should insist on this test, and the courts will always order the test if either party requests it. In many jurisdictions, a paternity test is standard operating procedure.

Testing for parentage before birth requires extracting amniotic fluid from the mother's belly. It is not a riskless process, and while it may be appropriate in some extreme circumstances, it is probably not the right move for most readers. We believe the father cannot force the mother to take a pre-birth paternity test against her will. Most of you can wait until the child is born to test for paternity.

So guys, try your best not to dispute her when you hear the words, "I'm pregnant, and you are the father." And ladies, try not to be defensive if he asks, "Are you sure it's mine?" Neither parent should spend their time and energy arguing about a paternity test. A test will happen in due time if either of you wants it to happen. Both of our babies born out of wedlock had paternity tests performed even though none of us were disputing paternity.

The best thing a man can do when he learns about the pregnancy is to be supportive and take responsibility for his actions. If you slept with her, then there is at least a chance you are the father. Put yourselves in her shoes; she is probably more worried and scared than you are. Even if the child turns out not to be yours, for the time being, assume it is so you can move forward without needlessly upsetting the mother-to-be.

3 | First Things First

You certainly don't need to decide the weighty issues in this chapter before reading the rest of this book, but you will need to resolve them soon. These may be some of the most difficult choices you make in your entire life—or the easiest, depending on your perspective. Let's make sure you are thinking about the issues clearly and understand who has the ultimate decision-making power.

Abortion?

The first question mothers face is whether to keep the pregnancy or pursue an abortion. For some mothers like Mary and Jess, this was not even a question. They knew from day one that they were going to keep their babies, no matter how difficult it would be or what Bill and I had to say about it. Abortion was not an option for them, partly for religious reasons, but also because they were entering their thirties and knew they might not have another chance at motherhood. I am pro-life

in principle, so I agreed with Mary's decision, but it is a deeply personal decision that each *mother* has to make for herself.

We wrote "each mother" and not "each parent" because abortion is the mother's decision to make. If the mother wants to keep the baby and the father wants an abortion, Mom wins. If the father wants to keep the baby and the mother doesn't, well, Mom wins again. It's her body, and although you occasionally hear of a father asking the courts to force a woman to carry his baby to term, in practice, it's pretty much impossible to stop a woman who is determined to end her pregnancy.

The decision to abort will affect you for the rest of your life. You should get counseling before you decide, not just from a professional counselor but also from family and friends you respect. We believe the wisdom that comes with age is best for this sort of decision, so give more weight to advice from older folks who have the benefit of hindsight.

Hindsight is an amazing thing. I was scared to death when I found out Mary was pregnant. I'm sure Bill was, too, when he learned about Jessica's pregnancy. If Mary had said to me, "I'm going to get an abortion," I would have been distraught but probably felt some relief, too, if I'm honest about it. However, with the benefit of just a little hindsight, I can definitively say that my daughter, Kelly, was the best thing that ever happened to me. I am grateful Mary had the courage to choose life.

Jess and I think it's helpful for parents to consider the abortion question by transplanting themselves into old age many decades from now. Ask yourself which is more likely: Will you someday look back and regret raising a child, or is it more likely you will look back and regret having an abortion?

Regardless of how you answer that question, the point of this section is to make sure the father understands that abortion is ultimately the mother's decision. He should be honest with her so she can make the best decision possible.

If either parent plans to disappear and not be in the child's life, then at least have the decency to say so now rather than later. Just understand that you will likely be on the hook for child support if the other parent asks the courts for it, even if you don't want to be involved in raising the child. We will discuss child support in chapter 7.

Abortion laws vary from state to state, and the federal laws (*Roe v. Wade*) could change someday, too, so we cannot advise you on how or where to get an abortion if that is what you choose to do. But we recommend you finish reading this book before choosing abortion because you may change your mind when you realize being an unmarried co-parent is not as terrible as you may think.

Adoption?

If you decide to keep the pregnancy, the next question is whether you will raise the child yourself or give him up for adoption. The adoption decision can be even more difficult if you are especially young parents or if the pregnancy resulted from rape or other extreme circumstances. This book cannot address every situation or age bracket, but we certainly acknowledge that having our children at age thirty was less challenging than if we had been only twenty.

I wrote in the previous section that I was grateful Mary had the courage to choose life. Giving your child up for adoption also requires courage if you know you are not capable of raising a child for whatever reason. Carrying your child to term for nine months only to say goodbye after birth in some ways takes more courage than keeping the child in what you know is a hostile environment. Every situation is different, and the decision can torment you for life.

If you are a pregnant teenager, you have more challenges than older, more established individuals like Jess and I had

to deal with. Raising the child will require extra help from loved ones besides the father, who probably is also very young. Most of the advice in this book still applies to you, but if you don't have the benefit of family and a support network around you to lean on, adoption *might* be the best choice for you. On the other hand, while having a child at a young age means you will be giving up some freedom in your twenties, you will gain freedom in your forties. Think long-term and realize you are not the first person to do this. Everything can work out fine if you think things through.

Adoption, like abortion, is one of the most difficult decisions a person can make. There are professionals out there who can help you work through these issues, and you should seek them out before you make your decision. It may be tempting to look for some sort of middle ground, like an arrangement where someone adopts your child but you visit occasionally. This is known as an “open adoption,” and there will be a legal document that dictates your level of involvement with your child if you go this route. It may be the right choice for some people.

Again, this might be easy for us to say, given we didn't have any challenges like poverty, rape, or abuse to deal with, but our advice is to try to avoid the “middle ground” path. There is no simple middle ground when it comes to parenthood, and you may be doing the child a disservice if he spends his life comparing you to his legal guardian.

We think the same analysis applies to adoption as it does to abortion. Try to think about what you might regret more when you are old and gray—raising your child or giving him up for adoption.

Both parents should know, if the mother wants to give the child up for adoption, the biological father will probably have the right of first refusal. And it might be obvious, but a father cannot force a mother to give her child up for adoption.

Single Parent, Co-Parent, or Married Parents?

If you have decided to keep the pregnancy and raise your child rather than give him up for adoption, then the next question is what your relationship with the other parent will be like. You can take essentially three paths: single parent (child knows only one of you), co-parent (child knows both of you, but you're not a couple), or married parents.

If you love the other parent and want to spend your lives together, then, by all means, get married now, during the pregnancy. We can think of more than a few people who got married during an unexpected pregnancy and lived happily ever after for decades to come. In the old days, this was quite common. You can keep reading this book, but a lot of it won't apply to you once you're married.

On the other extreme, you might become a truly single parent, but that is not ideal for the child, and it's usually not something you can choose on your own. What we mean is, the other parent has to decide to be absent; you cannot choose to keep them away, nor can you make them stay if they don't want to. If one parent wants nothing to do with their child, you cannot force them to spend time parenting. However, they will always be on the hook for financial support unless they sign away their parental rights to a foster or stepparent.

If your child's other parent dies or runs away, never to be heard from again, then you will be a single parent (for now anyway). If the father is the Antichrist himself who raped the mother, perhaps it's possible to get the courts to keep him away from the child, but that would be pretty extraordinary. Even parents with substance abuse problems get some limited or supervised access to their children.

Assuming the other parent wants to be involved, or even if they disappear and then come back after an absence, it is a good bet the courts will not allow you to deny them access

to their biological child. Therefore, being a single parent is not something most people can choose; it is a situation some people are left with.

Children benefit from two parents' dual perspectives. Traditionally, this means a mother and father, but same-sex couples can provide the same range of perspectives (however, it's unlikely a same-sex couple would have an unplanned pregnancy). Two parental points of view are usually better than one, even if you don't think highly of the other parent. If you are a single parent, well, you don't have much reason to keep reading this book past chapter 5.

If you are not a single parent, make sure to always keep in mind that two parents are better than one as you discuss your child during the pregnancy and after the birth. You will frequently disagree with your co-parent, but if you try to remember that the child benefits from two points of view, even when they are at odds, it will help foster a healthy relationship between the three of you.

Should You Get Married Now? Later? Ever?

Assuming you are not going to be a single parent, then the likely question before you now is whether or not you will marry this person. This is where the rubber meets the road for most people reading this book. Many parents-to-be are just not sure whether they should get married, and the pressure of the pregnancy makes them feel they must decide immediately. We disagree.

Mary and I were long-distance during her pregnancy, and at first, I thought maybe it was my duty to get married right away and make it work. However, I realized a "shotgun wedding" would just create a very high probability of divorce in a number of years, probably when the child was at a vulnerable age. I calculated that by getting married right away, I

would be putting the odds in favor of a worse-case outcome (divorce) for my child.

I was open to the possibility of falling in love with Mary and getting married down the road, but I wanted it to happen naturally. I wanted to get married because of love and desire to be together, rather than because of some self-imposed timeline. I knew we had butted heads a lot when we dated years ago, and I figured it was foolish to think we would suddenly get along better because we shared a child.

I also realized that while divorce can tear a young child apart, if Mary and I were cooperative co-parents from the beginning, then our child would never know anything else. She may wonder why Mom and Dad were not under one roof someday, but she would never have to go through a painful separation.

It suddenly became clear that forcing marriage during pregnancy was the wrong choice for Mary and me. If you asked Mary, I'm sure she would agree that we made the right choice not to get married, even though at first she may have felt some stigma of being a single mother. If she ever had any marriage thoughts, I think they quickly faded after a few months of bickering during the pregnancy.

Jessica had a slightly different situation in that she was happily dating and maybe even in love when she got pregnant from Bill. But just a few months of apartment hunting and baby planning together during the pregnancy made them realize they were incompatible for marriage. One argument led to another during that stressful time. It's hard enough to move in or to raise a child together, but doing both at the same time is downright near impossible unless you are already totally committed to each other for life.

We have a friend who just learned she was pregnant, unexpectedly, this past year. She was in a committed relationship and in love at the time it happened. She is nearly forty,

so she was getting very nervous about her biological timeline, knowing it would be harder to have kids each year. Her parents were old-fashioned and wanted her to be married before the baby came.

Our friend and her guy moved in together during her pregnancy. By the time their baby arrived, they were still unsure about marriage, yet they were attached at the hip due to a shared apartment lease. If they get married, they might always wonder whether it's what they truly wanted or they just took the path of least resistance. Do these marriages have a high divorce rate?

If you are in love but not sure yet about marriage or living together, then we strongly suggest you take it one step at a time. First, get your baby born safely. Support each other during pregnancy. Be there for each other and the child when he is born. If you fall in love and find you work well as a team, then after the birth, and after you've proved to each other where your priorities are, get engaged and make plans to move in together.

On the other hand, if the two of you find you are not a good match and Cupid does not shoot you with the love arrow, then you will have a solid foundation to become happy, healthy, supportive *co-parents*. You won't have any regrets or divorce baggage. And your child will never know anything different than "Mom and Dad both take great care of me and work as a team even though they don't live together."

The remainder of this book assumes you are not getting married (in the near term) and you are not doing it alone as a single parent. You might get married down the road, but for now, you are *co-parents*, and you will need to learn to work together.

Return to the BabyOutOfWedlock website to learn more.
www.babyoutofwedlock.com/the-book