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Children of younger moms see benefits

By **Zachary Binney**

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Being a young mother might have at least some benefits, according to a new study from the Center on Aging at the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University. The study found that children whose mothers were under 25 when they gave birth are approximately twice as likely to reach age 100.

The study, conducted by Leonid Gavrilov, a research scientist at NORC, and his wife, Natalia Gavrilova, a research associate at the center, looked at a wide range of data on about 198 centenarians born in the U.S. between 1890 and 1893.

For each child, they looked at the age of the mother and father at birth and the region where the child was born, among other factors. The researchers hoped to explain why first born children have a better chance of living to 100, which they found in a previous study.

“The ‘young mother’ effect on exceptional longevity is surprising to us because it is a new finding, because it is so strong and statistically significant...and because it explains the ‘first-born order’ effect,” Gavrilova said.

She added that she had not expected a single factor—in this case the mother’s age—to nearly double a child’s chances of living to 100; she usually sees an increase or decrease of 20 to 30 percent from a given factor.

The researchers want to investigate the “young mother phenomenon” further to determine why it has such a strong effect on a child’s potential longevity while other factors, like the father’s age, have comparably little impact.

The researchers are considering a range of biomedical hypotheses. One idea is that a mother’s best eggs are used early in life, so those children born in her younger years have a biological propensity to live longer. Another theory suggests that younger mothers tend to be healthier and less susceptible to infections that could be detrimental to a child’s longevity.

Gavrilov and Gavrilova are also looking at a set of social explanations. One possibility, dubbed the “mothering hypothesis,” posits that children of younger mothers are exposed to maternal care and supervision for a longer time than children of older mothers and so are more likely to live longer. Similarly, the “younger siblings support” theory suggests that children of younger mothers tend to have a greater number of younger siblings who can care for them in their old age.

All of these ideas, however, are simply speculation, said the researchers, and further studies are required to untangle all the possible factors.

“The results of this study demonstrate that childhood conditions are indeed very important in determining the chances of exceptional longevity and justify...large-scale research efforts in this direction,” the report concluded.

Gavrilova noted that this and subsequent studies could have a great impact on perceptions of motherhood.

“This may have important social and actuarial implications, because so many women now decide to postpone childbearing due to career demands,” she said.

So should women be rushing to have children straight out of high school or college? Not so fast.

“This is the mother’s choice,” Gavrilova said. “If she is concerned about child health and longevity, then perhaps she may wish to have a child sooner rather than later. All we can do is help to make the mother’s choice become an informed decision.”

As for Gavrilova herself, the results are encouraging.

“I have a daughter, and I was 22 years old when she was born,” she said. “I have never thought about this biographic fact in a context of our study findings. But now...I think that it perhaps was not a bad idea to be a young mother.”

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