

Late motherhood: having a baby over 50 has been magical

Elle Macpherson may become a mother again in her fifties. Naomi Gryn knows what that's like

Yesterday I got a phone call — had I seen the reports that Elle Macpherson might be preparing to become a mother again at 50, using a surrogate? I get calls like this whenever older mothers are in the headlines, because I also had a child at the about same age — 51 — although this was my first child (Elle has two boys from a previous marriage), and I was lucky enough to carry her myself.

Sadie is now two years and four months old. She is happy and affectionate, fearless in the playground, climbing apparatus meant for children several times her age, and often striking up conversations with older children even though her vocabulary is still limited. She loves outings to the supermarket, helping me to grind coffee beans and do laundry, and getting her retinue of stuffed toys to speak in silly voices when she isn't dunking her doll, Baby, in the bathtub.

No one tells a childless woman how much fun it is to have a baby, and these past months have been even more magical than I could have imagined, although I'm not going to pretend that looking after a boisterous toddler isn't stressful: Sadie doesn't yet understand deadlines or road safety or why she isn't allowed to shout in the cinema. This weekend we celebrated the bar mitzvah of her cousin Jacob, and I spent most of the morning trying to stop her from charging down the aisle of the synagogue, and cursing my high-heel boots.

Three years ago, I was running out of time. My partner Pete and I had two embryos left in the freezer of a

fertility clinic in Barcelona and, by March 2012 I'd be too old to receive them. With two miscarriages and four previous attempts at IVF embryo transfers, it felt like a futile mission, but in February we decided to give the dice one last roll.

We had met in August 2002 on a flight to Nice. I was 42 and Pete eight years younger. He'd been a soldier and a fireman; he boxed and did triathlons for fun. I was more inclined towards yoga and dinner parties.

Women have been led to believe that we can have it all: get an education, fulfil career and travel ambitions, find a life partner, make a home and raise a family. I worked in television production, which rewarded dedication and long working hours with just enough creative satisfaction that, for most of my optimum childbearing years, I steered clear of any man who might clip my wings.

My quest for adventure came unstuck when I was injured in a car crash in 1994 and I spent the rest of my thirties recovering from a head injury and post-traumatic stress disorder. The death of my father only compounded things.

I made peace several times with my childlessness, but once Pete and I agreed that we wanted a child together, with each failed attempt, we became more conscious of what we were missing. The



impulse to procreate is indeed a powerful force.

No one blinks an eyelid when a man fathers a child in middle age, but when a woman over 45 has a baby it's news, no matter how it happens. Last week Cate Blanchett, 45, adopted a daughter — she has three sons — and that too was a cause for comment.

In the medical profession, a woman of my age seeking to carry a child herself creates havoc. When I went to the recurrent miscarriage clinic at St Mary's, west London, a consultant refused to test Pete because I was in my mid forties. "Let's draw a line under this," she said blithely, judging my reproductive prospects on my age rather than my follicle-stimulating hormone levels.

Once I got pregnant with Sadie, although I was in excellent health all the way through, the obstetrician frowned at the notion of a natural birth: "The likelihood is that you'll have a long and difficult labour, and then you'll need an emergency caesarean anyway." I didn't want to challenge her, because that was my worst-case scenario too.

When we turned to IVF, the private clinics we visited in London had high fees and poor success rates, so we looked overseas. We spent a small fortune on three failed attempts at fertility treatment in Cape Town.

Each time you get pregnant or have a cycle of fertility treatment, you imagine a beautiful baby-filled future. Then your hopes are painfully dashed. At 50 I was ready to give up, but Pete is a born fighter. He found a clinic in Barcelona that treats women up to the age of 51. With just one more menstrual cycle

left, we flew out. Again it didn't work. The clinic extended its deadline by three months for us to use the remaining embryos. I don't know why we bothered. By then it seemed like an impossible dream.

I still find it incredible that we pulled it off. Sadie was born by caesarean section at University College London Hospital, and motherhood has been everything I hoped it would be.

We think of women having babies past the age of 45 as a modern phenomenon, yet in 1939, out of 614,479 births in England and Wales, some 2,147 were to women over 45. (My grandmother Sadie — after whom Sadie is named, and who lived to 106, was born to parents both in their late forties.) Then came birth control and the number of older mothers decreased until 1977, when only 454 out of 569,259 babies were born to women over 45. From there, figures have steadily risen.

In 2013, out of 698,512 live births, 2,010 babies were by women over 45. In 2012 there were 154 babies born to mothers in their 50s, a rise of a third in a year, and more than double the 69 births to over-50s in 2008.

More worrying to my mind is that one in five women aged 45 are still childless. For many that has been a conscious choice, but for so many others, it's a source of heartache.

I'm not championing later motherhood as a lifestyle choice: if I could have had Sadie earlier, I would have, if only because it would have been so much fun to have had her along for more of the ride. When I wrote about Sadie soon after she was born, all sorts of ghastly trolls



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Naomi Gryn pictured in pregnancy and with her daughter, Sadie. The model and businesswoman Elle Macpherson, above left, is rumoured to be expecting a child via a surrogate mother

expressed their disgust. I don't know what fiftysomething is supposed to feel like — I still love dancing at parties and shouting into the wind, and hope that once Sadie is at school I'll be usefully employable. Some people ask if I have less energy than younger mothers; all the mothers in the playground look tired, whatever their age.

Alastair Sutcliffe, a consultant paediatrician at UCLH and Great Ormond Street hospital, acknowledges that there is a difference between chronological and biological age (your age in years as opposed to your age at a cellular level). "People don't look younger," he says, "unless they're biologically younger." I've never looked my age: this has now turned into a major advantage.

People express surprise when I tell them how old I am, so presumably — despite lack of sleep or relaxation — I still look younger than my years. Sadie is too young to understand that there's anything unusual about her mum, but many of the children we know have mothers not so very much younger than me. When I try to gauge

differences, it's mostly over attitudes about going back to work: I wanted a child for so long that I'd rather spend these glorious early years with her than bust my guts to pay someone else to look after her. I'll be nearly 70 when Sadie leaves school. I've taken a gamble that I'll remain fit and healthy at least until then. How will I deal with Sadie's teenage angst? It's a teenager's job to challenge authority — I hope only that I won't lose my sense of humour.

If Elle Macpherson is indeed about to have a child in middle age then it's a joyful affirmation of life and family. I hope it won't give younger women false hope about the success rates of using frozen eggs and other assisted reproduction techniques (although when money is no object, it certainly widens your options). Delaying childbirth in the face of rising property prices and the instability of relationships is one of the toughest conundrums of our age.

Why I decided not to try for a child in my forties

By Shane Watson

I thought long and hard about whether to try for a baby when I was in my early forties. I say I thought, as if it were a private quandary, when the reality was more like a free-for-all debate involving everyone I love or respect. The only person close to me that I didn't discuss it with was my mother, for the simple reason that she would have been horrified.

Long before I met my husband (also in his forties, and a father of three) she would say: "It's too late for you to have your own, but you'll meet a man who has children and that will be just as good."

It would never have entered her head that I should try to have a child, with him, at that late stage. My mother is of a generation who believe you accept the hand that nature deals you and make the best of what you've got — not from any strong religious conviction, but because otherwise life is endlessly dissatisfying.

Her attitude to my childless state was that it was just the way my life had worked out and to wish it any other way was pointless and a bit — well — childish.

Had I told her I was examining the options she would, I know, have been worried — not about the significantly increased risk of foetal abnormalities — but for the future of the child who would be (if all went according to plan) about 13 when I was pushing 60.

"Poor little thing," she'd have said. "It's not fair on it."

Meanwhile, the moment that it was clear that the man was a permanent fixture, everyone else in my life wanted to discuss the baby question, urgently, and fairness to "It" never came up. The arguments, on both sides, concerned only what was best for me: how much stress the process would put me under (given that with my history of endometriosis I'd be looking at IVF) versus how much pleasure my own baby (or triplets) would bring. My closest girlfriends were divided down the middle. An old male friend when I was babbling about the pros and cons (I want a baby! But do I... now?!) wisely said: "Why don't you just see what happens?"

A woman I knew not well but liked very much gripped me in the street, and told me that I Had To Try, that I would never know greater happiness, and that she had a doctor who could fix it. I spent nights round the kitchen table with mothers who said, "go for it, we'll help, it's easy"

and others who said "it nearly finished me off and I was five years younger than you".

There was a period of about a year when everywhere I went the subject came up and every woman (almost always women) had a strong opinion as to what I should do. Roughly 90 per cent said that I owed it to myself to try. If there was even a glimmer of a chance I needed to experience motherhood, on principle, for me, me, me.

I never had any sense of these women being motivated by anything other than goodwill, but I could count on the fingers of one hand the times I was asked what He thought, or what my circumstances at home were, or whether I imagined I'd be any good at it. My age appeared to be an irrelevance. Want it, have it was the message.

As it happens I was living in a maelstrom of teenage hormones and worse. My home was far from the calm place you would want to raise a baby and my plate was pretty full on the domestic front. My doctor advised that it was possible but a long shot. In the end I decided against trying, not for any of these reasons but because I felt in my gut that I was the right age to be mothering teenagers but not to be starting from scratch.

It wasn't about fear of being the

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mum at the school gate who gets mistaken for granny. I wasn't worried about being tired, or out of touch, or even dying before they were settled (well, given they leave home in their thirties these days). I just felt that the best time, the right time, the natural time, had been and gone, and I had been dealt a different hand. In short it was too late.

It's a shame in lots of ways. I could have had a whole brood of ducky babies, but I didn't; and I long since stopped believing the cruel fiction that only by giving birth can you really experience being a woman. I was encouraged to do it for myself and, in the end, I didn't do it for myself, and maybe a bit for "It", who deserved someone younger with more years ahead of her. I think Mum was right.

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