

Is 50 Too Old To Have A Baby?

Should we get child-rearing out of the way while we're younger or wait until we're more settled in life? Two women tell us what they think

YES Our bodies were made to carry children in our teens and twenties

says Nicola Horlick

I'm frequently asked to speak to groups of women, some young and some more mature, and I always make the point that education and building a career should not preclude motherhood. I've had six children and a career, so I know it's possible to do both. However, I met the father of my children when I was 20 and was married by the age of 23. We had our first baby when we were both 25. Even then (29 years ago), I was relatively young. My daughters' friends are career-focused and seem unlikely to embrace motherhood in their twenties.

The question is, will they be ready to have children in their thirties or forties or will they wait until their fifties? If they do wait and rely on IVF as the means of reproducing, is there anything wrong with that?

At the end of last year, two US technology companies announced

'Being educated and expecting to have a career has given us a huge dilemma'

that they were going to provide an allowance towards the cost of freezing eggs for their young female employees. The press was immediately fascinated and I spent most of the day at the BBC doing interview after interview on the subject. In many ways, freezing eggs while you're young is a sensible step to overcoming the ticking biological clock – although the rate of success in using frozen eggs for IVF is not high apparently. If better results can be achieved in the future

though, then this approach could help to overcome the higher risk of Down's syndrome and other issues that affect children of older mothers.

But it's not just health issues that arise when a mother is much older. Dealing with small children is physically exhausting. Breastfeeding is more difficult for older mothers, too – extensive studies show that breastfed babies have a higher intellect than bottle-fed babies. In addition, older mothers have less time with their children and may not live to see their grandchildren. My grandmother was 25 when she had my mother, who was 22 when she had me. This meant that my mother was only 47 when I had my first child and my grandmother was 72. My grandmother only died four years ago and so all of my children had the benefit of both

a maternal grandmother and great-grandmother for all of those years – something I would argue was very beneficial to them. It also meant that my mother was able to help me a great deal with the children when they were little because she was young and fit.

Being educated and expecting to have a career has created a huge dilemma for women. My strong view is that they should not delay having children. Our bodies were made to carry



children in our late teens and twenties, not our fifties. Of course it's important to find the right partner before having a child, but our daughters should be encouraged not to put this off for too long and to bring forward the starting of a family in their life plans. At the same time, it's incumbent on society to provide as much support as possible through the better provision of childcare and proper maternity rights. Many complain about the European Union and the red tape it creates, but at least it's allowed the introduction of better parental rights.

My conclusion? Yes, 50 is too old to have a baby and we should encourage young women to conceive in their twenties and thirties. I had my first baby when I was 25 and my last when I was 38. Believe me, I noticed the difference.

What do you think?

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NO

No one questions if a man of 50 is too old

says Naomi Gryn

Late motherhood is nothing new. My own grandmother – after whom my daughter Sadie was named – was born when her parents were both in their late forties. But she was the last of five children and the difference today is the growing number of women, such as me, who are only starting our families long past our peak fertility.

In my twenties, I thought I could have it all: education, a successful career, romance and adventure, plus enough time to raise six kids. Approaching 30, I wondered if I should curb my activities as a documentary filmmaker – long working hours, often travelling at short notice – and briefly thought about getting a proper job at Channel 4 because the maternity benefits looked attractive, even though the right guy hadn't yet shown up.

People put off having children for all sorts of reasons: the prohibitive cost of a family-sized home, the likelihood of your relationship failing, or because you can't keep an eye on your career path if you're breastfeeding on demand or rushing to meet your kids after school.

I didn't consciously choose to delay. Aged 33, a near-fatal car crash left me with a head injury and post-traumatic stress disorder. I was nearly 40 before I felt good again. I met my partner, Pete, in 2002 on a flight to Nice, and by the time we both realised how much we wanted to create a family, I was in my mid-forties.

We nearly missed our opportunity weighing up all the pros and cons. Was I too old? What if I withered before our child was fully independent? On the other hand, I'm fit and healthy, my family has a history of longevity – my grandmother died recently aged 106, while my grandfather died at 99 – and Pete is eight years younger than me.

There was some reassurance knowing that there were tests for

chromosomal abnormalities and a menu of assisted reproductive techniques, even if costs for fertility treatment are high and success rates low, and for older women there are some additional health risks in pregnancy.

Two miscarriages later, we started to explore fertility clinics in Britain and abroad. After three failed cycles of IVF, I turned 50 and wanted to give up. Pete, however, is a born fighter and found a clinic in Barcelona that would treat me until I turned 51. Our first attempt failed. But the clinic extended its deadline by three months so we could use the two embryos still in their freezer. By then, it seemed like a futile pursuit. I don't know why I took that last roll of the dice, but now I wake up every morning feeling blessed that I did.

If I had more energy in my twenties, it was dissipated in a thousand different directions. I probably make a better parent now than I would have then. I have more patience, more life skills to impart, fewer unfulfilled ambitions. I am more financially stable and have learnt to follow my instincts.

I wouldn't have been invited to take part in this debate if I were a man. No one questions whether a man of 50 is too old to father a child. But if women weren't intended to have babies later in life, why would we continue menstruating into middle age?

The most important thing is how this affects our daughter. Sadie is bright and happy and confident. She doesn't worry about my age. She knows only that her mum and dad love her more than anything else in the world and, in the end, that's what really matters.

