

TAKING THE PLUNGE: WHEN TO START A FAMILY

Bringing another human being into the world is one of life's most momentous decisions. Some people plan and strategize before making the big move—and others just do it

BY [KATE ROPE](#)

IT TOOK MY HUSBAND AND ME NEARLY FOUR YEARS TO TRY FOR KID No. 2. Not because we didn't love our first (she's amazing, of course), but because I had a medically complicated pregnancy and severe postpartum anxiety. We were shell-shocked by that one-two punch. But when my daughter turned 3, I began to feel a mysterious and persistent drive to have a second child. I wasn't done parenting babies. My husband was hesitant. "I want to survey the rocks before we jump," he kept insisting. "I just want to jump!" I shot back. I won. We jumped. And—with the exception of one sleep-deprived moment early on when my husband yelled at me, "I told you I wanted to survey the rocks!"—we landed safely.

People come to parenting with a library's worth of plotlines. Some survey the rocks and make deliberate moves. Others jump. And many—no matter their intentions—find the timeline and decision so manipulated by the vagaries of reproduction that the word "plan" loses all meaning.

But it would appear that family planning is on the rise. According to a new report by the National Center for Health Statistics, the U.S.



The percentage of families with only one child has doubled, from 11% to 22%, over the past four decades.

birth rate hit a 30-year record low in 2017, dipping below the “replacement rate” that ensures the propagation of a population. The only age group in which the birth rate went up was women in their early 40s, leading experts to suggest that the growing movement to postpone family building is contributing to the drop in births.

That’s the big picture. But what about on the micro level? What are the special fears, desires, strategies and other thought processes behind one of life’s most consequential decisions?

DELAYING PARENTHOOD

is often portrayed as a financially smart move that gives partners time to save money and develop careers. But Jeanne Sager, 35, a social-media editor and freelance writer in upstate New York, took the opposite tack. She and her husband married at the tender ages of 18 and 22, respectively, and closed on their house shortly before Sager’s 21st birthday. “We had a 20-year mortgage, and we decided we would start having our babies so we could try and pay off our mortgage and then free up money to pay off college debt,” says Sager. “We didn’t want our child to have a massive amount of debt coming out of college, because we looked at everyone around us who was struggling with it.”

Sager’s plan panned out. “In five years, our daughter will be graduating, and we will be mortgage-free,” she says, noting that her daughter is “already looking at very expensive schools.” Other upsides for Sager include not having “as huge a generational gap” with her daughter—for instance, when it comes to using new technology, so daunting to some older parents. Plus, she and her husband are looking forward to spend-

ing time together after their daughter graduates doing “those fun things that people tend to do before having kids.”

But there are also downsides. Sager points to “a little bit of judgment from other parents about the fact that I had a child as young as I did.” And although their gambit is paying off now, she and her husband did struggle financially in the beginning because they weren’t “advanced enough” in their careers. “I had to cut back my job in the beginning because of the insane cost of childcare,” says Sager. “It was a lot of juggling.”



Jeanne Sager with her husband, Jonathan, and their daughter, Jillian

“I HAD A stereotypical Gen X approach to planning,” says Suzanne Brown, 43, a business consultant and mom to two in Austin, Texas. The author of *Mompowerment: Insights from Professional Part-Time Working Moms Who Balance Career and Family*, she had her first child in her mid-30s. “You get to a certain level, you’ve hit your career and financial goals, you have your babies.” Brown says the approach worked well for her, “but I have since changed my opinion on waiting to have kids. As a work-life-balance expert now, I definitely think differently.”

Brown was particularly struck by one conversation she had during

her research. “I interviewed a professional, part-time working mom who’s an ob-gyn, and she said to me, ‘I sit here day in and day out dealing with infertility. One in eight women will have challenges with fertility, and those issues only get worse as you get older.’” Brown, who has seen many friends struggle through the heartache of multiple rounds of in vitro fertilization, thinks that as a culture, “we haven’t come to terms with that.”

So her goal was to reconcile the binary propo-

sition of career advancement or family building by interviewing more than 100 women who have made it work through planning and part-time work. “It’s amazing what these women have been able to achieve,” says Brown. “I interviewed women who make six figures and only work 25 hours per week.” Brown’s conclusion? “It’s not necessarily about getting to a certain point of success in your career.” Instead, it’s about “life planning at the beginning of your career to give you more options along the way.”

Brown suggests that women look into finding career sponsors and mentors who can help them make bold moves early in their career to move up more quickly and that they also connect with moms and other women in their workplace to compare notes on the challenges and needs that families have. Then, says Brown, you can “collectively go to your senior leadership and say, ‘This is the struggle. We want to do our best. What can you as an organization do to help us out?’” By doing so, women (and men) can capitalize on the movement among corporations to better support families with parental leave and flexible work schedules. “It doesn’t have to be this linear approach that I think the vast majority of us take,” says Brown. “There are a lot of different paths.”

BECOMING A PARENT—or adding a child to your family—is a life-transforming experience that will profoundly shape your emotional well-being, stress levels and happiness for years to come. So psychologists recommend thinking through the impact of bringing a person onboard.

“Are you open to experiencing something that’s going to be huge and profound but you don’t get to control?” asks Sarah Best, a licensed clinical social worker and therapist in Manhattan who specializes in reproductive mental health. “An adventure that’s likely to include a lot of joy but can also be stressful, scary or disappointing at times?” When Best sees moms and dads struggling with the transition to parenthood, it is usually “when their experience of parenting deviates really wildly from what they assumed it would be.”

Which is why she recommends thinking deeply about why you want to parent a child. “Are you just checking a box or trying to meet someone else’s ideas about how things should look?” Best says. “Or is it because you’re ready to have a huge, unpredictable human experience?”

Answering that big question might involve “talking with friends, spiritual advisers, mentors or a therapist,” suggests Samantha Rodman, a clinical psychologist in Maryland and the founder of DrPsychMom.com. It also requires being honest with yourself. “Most people know in their heart whether they want to do something or not. If you’re still trying to figure out the exact right time, that might be an indication that it’s not the right time.”

IF YOU ARE pursuing parenthood with a partner, it’s important to be real about whether you have a solid friendship,” Best recommends. “Do you know each other’s strengths and weaknesses? Can you talk about difficult things—like money or religious differences—with respect, even when you disagree? Can you give each other a lot of slack? Having a solid friend in your partner is what makes the pursuit of parenthood and co-parenting doable when things get tough.” If you are embarking on parenthood on your own, says Best, “do you have supports in your community that you can rely on?”

Even Sager, who started her family early, was glad that she and her husband had spent four years as a married couple before heading into parenthood. “We definitely did not want to have a child when we first got married,” says Sager. “By the time we’d been married for four years, we’d had time to enjoy each other and build that foundation. Having four years of a relationship together did make us stronger.”

HAVING SOLID SUPPORT and strong connections can also be crucial if your plans are hijacked. “When experiences like infertility or loss complicate the family-building process,” says Best, “it’s essential to actively care for yourself and communicate your needs with loved ones.”

And it’s also useful to remember that you are embarking on a journey that is impossible to fully anticipate, with inevitable twists, turns and unexpected challenges. And planning can, at times, feel like folly. At least that’s how Shana Westlake, 35, an events consultant and mom to two in Rockville, Md., sees it. “If you spend all your time planning, it’s never going to happen,” Westlake says. “All your ducks are never going to be in a row. I think a lot of parents are surprised by how much you can figure out on the fly.” □