SO WHEN ARE YOU HAVING KIDS?

The Definitive Guide for Those Who Aren't Sure If, When, or How They Want to Become Parents

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sounds true
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INTRODUCTION

AT SOME POINT IN your life, you've probably entertained the question of whether or not you want kids. In the back of your mind, you might have picked out a name you liked or imagined what a child would look like with your eyes and your partner's nose. Or maybe it's the other way around: you love other people's children but can't imagine having kids of your own. You might be thinking, *How can I have a baby when there is a mountain of dirty laundry that's practically festering in the corner of my room?* Or perhaps you're wondering how you can afford childcare on top of your student loans. And is your biological clock really ticking as loud as all of the egg-freezing ads popping up on your Facebook feed seem to suggest?

The truth is, you have more time to start a family than you probably think you do. Exactly how much time depends on a whole host of factors; the first, of course, being fertility. But even within the confines of fertility, there's still a lot of variability. Contrary to your aunt's snide comments at every family gathering, it's possible to become a parent later in life. There are fertility treatments, of course, but there are also adoption and fostering, which are not as age sensitive as your own biology.

Deciding to become a parent is one of the biggest decisions you'll ever make, if not the biggest. Despite the huge responsibility of having a child, the only how-tos you'll find on the subject are how to get pregnant and how to raise a child once you have one. There's very little information out there for people who are unsure if, when, or how they want to become a parent.

Think about the decisions you've made that have altered the course of your life. If you went to college, you probably researched schools, looked into scholarships, and calculated how long it would take to pay off your student loans. When you began applying for jobs, you likely researched the company and the benefits it provided. Or maybe you bought a house—good for you!—chances are you did a lot of research before deciding on a home and a mortgage.

Most of us don't actively plan for parenthood because we assume it will happen one day. You go to school, you get a job, you get married, you buy a house, and then you have kids. Sometimes the order is switched around a bit, but that's the gist of life, or so we're told.

In the past, deciding to have kids wasn't as difficult because it was practically mandated that you settle down with a partner of the opposite sex and procreate. As society's views progressed, parenthood began to look a lot different. Women don't have to be "homemakers" anymore. Today, the average age of a first-time mom is 26.3, five years older than it was in the 1970s.[1] For women with a college degree, it's even higher—30.3.[2]

Of course, it's not just cisgender men and women having kids. Same-sex couples, people who aren't partnered, and transgender folks can use assistive reproductive technologies to have biological children or children conceived using donor conception and/or surrogates. And with same-sex marriage now a federally protected right, queer couples can legally adopt children in all 50 states.

With so many options available, how do you choose and settle on a timeline that doesn't give you a panic attack? The answer is something we'll work through in this book. And when I say we, I mean we. You, the person reading this, and me, the person writing it.

I've always known I wanted kids, but wanting kids isn't the same as being ready for them. When I was 24, I was diagnosed with diminished ovarian reserve. If you want kids, you should have them now, my doctor told me. As if it was that easy. Sure, in some hypothetical universe where I was older, more established in my career, and a homeowner, I was ready. But in reality, at 24, in my fifth-floor walk-up, with tens of thousands of dollars in student loans, having kids felt irresponsible.

The depression that followed my infertility diagnosis was all-encompassing. I was consumed by a deep desire to get pregnant. Desperate, I tried giving up gluten, sugar, alcohol, and caffeine. I even debated signing up for a clinical trial that would dice up my ovaries, marinate them in a "growing medium," and reimplant them in my body in the hopes of producing more eggs. I wanted—needed—to know my body could do it. Even if it killed me.

Fortunately, I was able to realize that being cool with dying in childbirth just to one-up my body was a sign that I was very much not okay.

I started seeing a therapist, who, by some cosmic coincidence, happened to be involuntarily childless. And because time was of the essence, I made an appointment to see a fertility specialist. When I told him I wasn't ready to have kids and couldn't really afford egg freezing but still wanted to explore my options, his advice to me was to start having unprotected sex because "you never know, miracles happen."

Disappointed by his lackluster medical advice, I sought out a second specialist known for helping young cancer patients preserve their fertility. I don't remember much of the appointment because my brain stopped processing the conversation after he told my partner of two years that he was "a good man for being with someone like me."

Modern medicine, at that time, felt like a dead-end. It didn't seem worth spending money I didn't have on egg freezing, since there was no guarantee of success. Plus, I still wasn't ready to get pregnant. Instead, I decided to take a break from doctors and save some money so that when I was ready to do in vitro fertilization (IVF), I could afford it.

My break wasn't without anxiety. I knew I had to create a timeline. My ovaries were in bad shape, likely due to the five endometriosis surgeries I had as a teen, but I was back to menstruating and ovulating every month—a good sign. How do you know when you're ready to have kids? I asked everyone I could—friends, family, strangers at bars—only to receive a sea of *I don't knows* or arbitrary checkpoints that relied on a privilege I didn't have: time.

As alone as I felt, the deeper I dug, the more I realized my apprehension was fairly common. There were plenty of other 20- to 30-somethings, with and without fertility issues, asking difficult questions about modern parenthood. Questions like *How can I afford to have a baby in a gig economy?* or *Does it even make sense to have kids given the effect of global warming on the planet?* Fed up by the lack of answers, I began doing my own research. Research that ultimately helped me feel confident enough to begin fertility treatments.

I hope that this book can do something similar for you. This is your book. Write in it, highlight sections, dog-ear pages you want to come back to, take a photo of a page from the chapter about managing external expectations and send it to your mom when she starts talking about grandkids. You can even scream at it if the idea of family planning all feels like too much. I won't be offended.

This book contains four sections designed to help you determine if, when, and how you'd like to become a parent. I recommend reading the book cover to cover. (And no, I'm not just saying that because I wrote it.) Part of the reason you should read the book in its entirety is because it's written inclusively. There is no section dedicated to the LGBTQIA+ community because queer experiences show up throughout the book instead of being limited to just one chapter. If you're interested in adoption, you may think only the main adoption section applies to you, but adoption comes up frequently throughout the book as it relates to different scenarios, and you'd be missing out by not reading them. But there's another reason why you should read the whole book: you might be inspired to change course. I know I was.

Hearing stories from people who pursued different routes to parenthood made me realize there are other ways to build a family. I'm no longer willing to risk my life to get pregnant, because I want to live to be a mom. I want to watch my child grow, show them the beauty of the world (even when it's hard to find), and help them finish their class project the night before it's due because procrastination runs in the family, genetics be damned.

Learning about all of the different ways to become a parent might make you feel differently too. Alternatively, you may finish this book and decide parenthood really isn't for you. And that's great too. This is a judgment-free place for you to explore your options and figure out a decision-making timeline that works for you. I can't tell you what to do, but I can provide you with research, expert opinions, and personal stories from people who've been where you are so that you can make an informed decision about what's best for you. This way, the next time someone asks when you're having kids you'll know the answer—not that it's any of their business.

PART I

DO YOU WANT KIDS?

1

THE WAITING GAME

WHEN SHE WAS 30, Amanda Smith told herself, and her mom, that 35 was the perfect age to have kids. She had a plan, and a nearly perfect one at that. Amanda would get a five-year intrauterine device (IUD) to prevent pregnancy, and by the time it was scheduled to come out, she'd be in a relationship and ready to have kids. If she didn't have a partner, she'd do it alone. But surely she would meet someone who was ready to settle down by then.

While 35 might have seemed like the age where "one does those things" to 30-year-old Amanda, a now 36-year-old single Amanda would have to disagree. "I'm angry," she says. "This isn't where I thought my life would be. It's unfair and it's shitty. I'm watching my friends have kids, and the prospect of doing it on my own with what adulthood looks like now is so difficult."

Amanda isn't alone in feeling unprepared for parenthood. Birth rates for cisgender women 30 and older have been on the rise since 1990. Today, more children are born to those between the ages of 30 and 34 than any other age group. And birthing parents over the age of 35 have a higher birth rate than teens, which was not the case decades ago.[1]

It makes sense that so many of us are waiting. The average US student loan debt is $36,510 per borrower for federal student loans and $54,921 for private loans, the median home price $374,900, and a year of daycare more

than $17,000.[2] However, while waiting for the "perfect time" might seem like it increases the odds of being socially, financially, and emotionally ready, sociologist Lauren Jade Martin, PhD, argues that this relatively new societal pressure problematically reinforces the idea that there are certain conditions you must meet before having kids. This gives those who are relatively privileged freedom to reproduce while others struggle to meet the same bar of preparedness.[3]

Delaying childbearing is more common among those who are highly educated or middle-class.[4] Research suggests this is due to the way different socioeconomic groups view having children. Middle-class and highly educated young people tend to be more risk-averse, whereas those in lower socioeconomic groups view children as a way of finding meaning in a world that limits their options for upward mobility.[5]

Setting conditions might seem like a foolproof way to assess your readiness for parenthood, but meeting your goals doesn't guarantee you'll feel ready to have kids. Martin studied 72 childless women in the US between the ages of 25 and 40 and divided them into three groups according to their fertility intentions: delayers, people who would like to have children; debaters, people who could go either way; and decliners, those who didn't want kids. When she interviewed them again, four years later, only some of the people in the delayer and debater groups had children, and none of the people in the decliner group had. Some people ended up having children after achieving their goals. However, others continued to remain childless even after meeting their initial conditions. Those who still didn't feel comfortable having kids continued to move their goalposts, leading Martin to believe the group's decision to put off parenthood had more to do with personal choice than external factors.[6]

This isn't to say that delaying kids is bad. Research suggests waiting to have kids has its benefits. Older parents are more likely to experience an increase in life satisfaction following childbirth.[7] And those who delay having children tend to feel more in control of their lives and experience less depression than those who have children before turning 23. However, while cisgender men tend to benefit the longer they delay parenthood, cisgender women start to lose those benefits after they turn 30.[8]

Rather than make a decision now, Amanda took out an insurance policy: she froze her eggs. It wasn't an easy choice. Amanda, a writer living in Los Angeles, questioned spending over $10,000 on the egg-freezing process when she wasn't even 100 percent sure she wanted kids. But in the end, she decided that removing the burden of choice was worth the price tag. She didn't want to look back in five years and wish she had done something, so she bought herself more time.

"I will probably reassess at 40," she says. "I don't think that I would want to have a kid much older than that. I can't imagine having the energy and bandwidth for a baby at 45. I definitely feel like I could change my mind again when I hit 40, but freezing my eggs removes the burden of needing to make that decision."

Making a decision is hard. It's not just finances or societal pressures; it's a whole slew of factors that vary from person to person and can change over time. If you want to understand how you feel, it's worth looking outward, at all the ways society and our upbringing shape our understanding of parenthood, and then inward, at what you want from your life, and whether the benefits and stresses of parenthood align with those goals, which we'll begin to do over the next few chapters.

I always wanted to be a mom, but I'm not sure I'd call it a "decision." For me, it was just what you do: go to college, find a job, get married, have kids. I don't think I ever considered the alternative. I was 29 when I got married and was desperate to start trying. I went off birth control and thought it would be easy. A few months later, I started paying attention to things like ovulation cycles and cervical mucus. We tried like this for a year, because all the doctors said we had to try for at least a year on our own, and then started seeing a fertility specialist. All of our tests came back fine; they called it unexplained infertility. It took three rounds of intrauterine insemination, but then we were finally pregnant. I was 32 when I had my son.

For the most part, I do not enjoy parenthood, which is surprising given how much I wanted to be a mom. I wish I had known the depths of self-sacrifice required. I wish I could go back to my 25-year-old self and tell her to enjoy the life she's living, to really think about all that would change upon becoming a parent, to give her all the information I have now so she can then decide if and when she's actually ready to be a mom. Maybe I would have made the same choice, but I really wish I had known.

I am the primary parent. I think it can be summed up into the fact that the two of us are living completely different lives. He works full-time and I work part-time, manage the house, look after the kids, manage their care, manage their calendars, read parenting books, and research how to parent our kids at specific ages. The list goes on. The mental load I carry is heavy and it seems as if such a load doesn't exist for him. We've done some work to better divide the house chores, but it's just scratched the surface. I feel alone a lot of the time and that somehow our values don't align, which I never thought before kids. We're interviewing couples therapists, but at this point, I'd rather be happy and separated than try to muddle through more of this.

Kathleen, 37, California, she/her, accountant, cisgender, straight, married

WHY DO PEOPLE HAVE KIDS?

Ethicist Christine Overall writes, "In contemporary Western culture, it ironically appears that one needs to have reasons not to have children, but no reasons are required to have them. . . . No one says to a newly pregnant woman or the proud father of a newborn, 'Why did you choose to have that child? What are your reasons?'"[9]

When asked why they decided to have kids, an overwhelming majority of parents surveyed by the Pew Research Center, 87 percent, answered, "The joy of having children." However, nearly half of those same parents also said, "There wasn't a reason; it just happened."[10] These almost contradictory answers illustrate what we're taught to think of parenthood and what little thought, historically, goes into decision-making.

Deciding to become a parent is complicated, which is why some people opt not to decide and leave it up to fate. Though on the decline, unplanned pregnancies make up nearly half of US births each year.[11] Children provide what researchers call "uncertainty reduction."[12] Humans are naturally inclined to want to reduce uncertainty. We do this in one of two ways: we collect information so that we can make decisions with as little risk as possible, or we pick courses of action that have a predictable, set path. This book is the first strategy in action. You're learning about parenthood and its alternatives so that you can make the best decision for yourself and reduce the risk that you'll regret your future choices. Deciding to have children, without any research, is the second form of uncertainty reduction. Children put us on a set path because they are a long-term obligation. When you have children, it is assumed you will care for them for at least the next 18 years. So while you might not know what your future holds, you at least know that raising a child will be part of it.

A fear of the future is a pretty powerful thing. When I asked people who were *almost* certain they didn't want kids what the holdout was, the overwhelming answer was concern over who would take care of them as they age. Of course, having kids doesn't ensure you'll have someone who will care for you when you get old, but the thought of having a family to help you navigate aging is less anxiety-provoking than the idea of being alone or in a nursing home.

However, research shows parents are more likely to give aid to their adult children than receive it.[13] It sounds bleak, but there is no guarantee your children will take care of you. You could end up estranged from your children, they could die before you, or they could put you in a nursing home because they can't manage your care. If end-of-life care is the only reason you're thinking about becoming a parent, you'd probably be better off taking the hundreds of thousands of dollars you'd spend over your