



One person's
bundle of joy is
another's **worst
nightmare.**
(Bunny ears
or not.)

*Does this picture
make you feel*
broody?

*If the answer is no, you're **NOT ALONE.** For some women,
becoming a mother feels like the most **NATURAL THING** in the world.
For others, it's a decision that **HAUNTS THEM.** Is the difference genetic?
What makes some women sure they want to **MAKE BABIES** while others,
even post-birth, **NEVER KNOW** for sure?*

BY NARINA EXELBY

Kerry Norton* never wanted to be a mother:

She wasn't a "maybe one day" woman and never doubted that she wanted to remain childfree. But that changed when she turned 38 and her life was thrown into an emotional turmoil of longing, mourning and loss.

"At 38 I suddenly started to panic about my age," says Kerry, who until then loved her life of freedom and possibilities. She and her partner Gavin* dreamed of one day leaving the rat race and moving to a foreign country where they'd live an artsy, alternative lifestyle. "A lot of my childless friends kept returning to the subject of ticking biological clocks and I started to panic. There was a nagging voice telling me that it was now or never – and never is a very long time to regret something."

So they took the plunge and stopped using contraceptives, but they weren't entirely committed to the idea of becoming parents: secretly they hoped Kerry's age would hinder conception. Ironically, she fell pregnant within a few weeks.

"I felt shock, horror and disbelief," she says of the moment she took the first pregnancy test. "I felt like my life was over and that I'd made the hugest mistake." As reality set in, Kerry felt totally overwhelmed and for a while contemplated termination. Then, 11 weeks later, just as she'd begun to accept the prospect of motherhood, she miscarried.

"Gavin and I were both left reeling with emotions of a different sort – loss, as well as grief, mixed with some sort of guilty relief that we had our normal life back..."

"Normal life", however, became a vicious cycle of opposing thoughts and emotions and, while she was convinced she had a happy and fulfilling future ahead of her without children, the "now or never" ultimatum continued to play on Kerry's mind.

"I decided that even though I was 50/50 for and against it, I might end up ignoring

that 50 percent at my peril," she says – and within a month the woman who had been adamant that she didn't want a baby was pregnant again.

"This time I felt differently about the pregnancy. I was glad, but helluva scared. My main concern was miscarrying again, or finding some abnormality with the foetus due to my age." She needn't have worried: one week before her fortieth birthday, Kerry gave birth to a healthy little girl.

Nature or nurture?

What triggered Kerry's switch from being so sure she didn't want to have a child to trying to get pregnant? Was it social pressure gnawing at the back of her consciousness, or did something spark her genetic instinct and shift her body and mind into mommy-mode to ensure the continuation of our species? The answer is complicated.

"What makes someone become a mother – or even a good mother – is a complex quantitative characteristic that's influenced by the interaction of numerous genes, as well as the environment in which a woman grows up," says Dr Carolyn Hancock, a geneticist from KwaZulu-Natal. "Environmental influences could be the manner in which you were raised, if you had a happy childhood shared with many siblings, whether you have a serious career, whether you have a partner and so on."

These environmental influences are very apparent in Naomi Mitchel's journey to motherhood. The oldest of eight siblings, Naomi (34) is now a mother of five. "I was 16 when my youngest sister was born," she says. "I had to help out of necessity, but I remember loving it very much. I think circumstance was certainly part of my desire to have lots of children, but mothering is definitely in my nature too."

Mikateko Maluleke, a 28-year-old technical sales trainee who has

a three-year-old daughter, played mom to her dolls when she was little and always wanted to have children. She says that her desire to be a mother was influenced by her upbringing. "In my culture it's natural to have children," she says, "but it's the way my mother loves her children that inspired me to want to have my own."

Environmental factors like looking after siblings and having an inspirational mother can definitely influence the appearance of the mothering characteristic, says Hancock. In scientific terms, there is an equation to explain this: phenotype = genotype + environmental influences. In other words, the desire to be a mother (the phenotype) is the result of the genetic basis of a characteristic (the genotype) combined with environmental influences.

"In terms of the desire to be a mother, there are a number of genes involved," Hancock says. "These may include genes that affect the level of hormones like oestrogen, testosterone and oxytocin."

Great expectations

While scientists acknowledge that the desire to become a mother is the result of a complex mix of biological and environmental factors, psychologist Dr Tracy Morison, a research specialist at the Human Sciences Research Council in Joburg, maintains it's also about rational decision-making. If there is any biological drive to have a baby, we're able to override it if we choose to do so. "Humans are able to master and overcome their instincts in almost every facet of their lives,

including eating, sex and sleeping," says Morison. "There's no reason to believe that reproduction would be any different."

However, Morison believes that the behaviour we learn – nurture – could strongly influence our desires. Depending on what having children means to different groups of people, culture may also be a factor. "Having children may be socially necessary for particular reasons," she explains. "For black Africans, for example, having children has traditionally been linked to virility and wealth." But regardless of the cultural nuances, choosing not to have children is generally seen as strange and, according to research Morison has conducted, most heterosexual people don't even question whether they can or will have children; it's simply assumed that they will.

Natalie Swart* knows these assumptions well. The 31-year-old chartered accountant from Durban now lives in London with her husband, where she's swiftly working her way up the corporate ladder. Most of her friends in South Africa have started to have children and Natalie says she dreads the probing questions on her annual trips home. "I feel under pressure to be a mom and to have it all," she says, "but I just don't feel ready to have children yet – or know if I want to." Natalie is afraid that she'll leave it too late and miss the opportunity to become a mom, but there's so much she wants to achieve before she starts changing nappies. "The pressure comes from society and the way I was brought up," she says. "I know that I should be

Are we all raised to be mothers? Or does the mom "instinct" originate in our DNA?

able to ignore what the world expects of me and do what I believe is right for me, but in reality that's very hard to achieve."

What Natalie is struggling with is "pronatalism" – the idea that parenthood and raising children should be the central focus of every person's adult life. She isn't sure whether she really wants to have children, or only thinks she does because of the ingrained assumption that she will, because she's a woman.

It's a topic that psychologist Laura Carroll is passionate about and her book *The Baby Matrix* challenges and gives alternatives to pronatalism. "This assumption dictates how we're supposed to follow the 'normal path' to adulthood," she says. What Carroll highlights is that people shouldn't mindlessly enter parenthood. And society shouldn't simply expect women to be mothers. "Just because we humans have the biological ability to conceive and bear children does not mean that we have an instinctive desire to become parents, or even the *ability* to parent."

That ability to parent is something biologist Dr Ana Ribeiro has been studying for the past four years. She's been conducting research into mothering behaviour in mice and has found that genes play a major role in the females' abilities to raise their young. Her research has shown that there are genes associated with good mothering behaviour, such as nursing and protecting the young, and that when these are absent the mothers don't care for their offspring.

But Ribeiro agrees with Hancock that the impetus is not simply biological: there are other ways to influence maternal behaviour. "The expression of these genes depends on the pup's upbringing. For instance, if a pup is raised by a good mother, their DNA will be modified to turn certain genes on or off," explains Ribeiro. "On the contrary, a sibling of that mouse (with the same DNA) can be raised by a poor mother and their maternal behaviour will also be poor."

Are humans affected in the same way? It's hard to say, because for an animal the evolutionary pressure to reproduce is not compounded by socio-economic and other influences. "The bottom line is that there are many genes that collectively contribute to maternal capacities and the loss of many of them severely impairs the ability to be a good mother," says Ribeiro. "But the human maternal drive is very different from

The picture of pronatalism: the idea that parenthood is not just a gift, but a given.



that of a mouse. If I were to speculate, I'd guess that there are many more non-genetic factors affecting humans, but the genetic component is still a significant one."

It's important to note, says Carroll, that negative experiences in childhood – having a "bad" mother – do not necessarily result in women *not* wanting to have children. "Many people who've had negative experiences grow up to want children because they have the desire to be the parent they never had," she says. "Whether it's conscious or not, parenthood can serve as a way to heal one's past."

A breed apart

So what happens when you feel broody? Is that your mothering instinct kicking in; your body telling you that it's time to reproduce? And what happens if you've never felt that urge – does it mean you aren't destined to be a mom?

According to neuropsychiatrist Dr Louann Brizendine, certain smells,

like that of an infant's head, carry pheromones that stimulate a woman's brain to produce oxytocin. That triggers a chemical reaction that induces "baby lust" (her term for broodiness) which, she says, is nature's sneaky strategy to trigger the desire to have a baby. But, argues Carroll, if that's the way our bodies work, then all women should feel this way – and we don't.

"As far back as the Seventies, researcher and psychoanalyst Dr Frederick Wyatt said that when a woman says she's craving a baby, she is actually putting biological language to what is psychological," says Carroll. "The woman realises that her reproductive years are coming to an end and that she might miss out on what a pronatalist society tells her is the most fulfilling experience in life. Believing she might not get to have this experience can create quite a yearning for it."

Cindy Andrews* has never felt this urge. The 47-year-old lecturer from Cape Town says that, while she loves to spend time with children, she has simply never considered having a baby. While she and her husband are very happy with their childfree life, other people are fascinated and sometimes even embarrassed by it.

"I think the fact that we're a mixed-race couple [Cindy is Indian, her husband is white], and that we've been married for more than 20 years, makes things more intriguing for people," she says. "But also, it seems as if the concept of not having kids is one that never crossed their minds."

The idea and the process of choosing to remain childfree can be quite complicated, and international research suggests that rather than a definite decision, child-freeedom is often related to an evolving series of decisions – it's more of a process than an event. People don't always actively choose to remain childfree, explains Morison, but may postpone having children and end up childless by circumstance. They may also be unsure and wait until it's too late to conceive.

That concern was the trigger for Kerry and it's something that worries Natalie too. Joburg-based clinical psychologist Dr Colinda Linde has noticed two trends among women who've been focused on their careers and deferred the decision to the distant future. The first trend is the biological, or in some cases societal, clock: "I'm almost 40, I'd better have a baby now." The other, less-prevalent trend, is where career women reach a stage where they're no longer fulfilled by their job, or

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Turning your back on nature? It's harder than you think.

chapped nipples. "I've learnt that it's a case of 'adapt or die'; that I need to embrace this experience, not fight it," she says. "I have infinite patience with Alexa; I'm a softer, more gentle, kind, innocent person in her company – so much so that I barely recognise myself. That stuff *has* to be pre-programmed; I have no idea where it comes from! It certainly was never there before!"

Her daughter is now eight months old and Kerry says she's started to understand the magic of motherhood. "Because I love her so much, I really can't say having a baby was the wrong decision," but I also know that I could have found fulfilment and excitement – albeit of a different kind – without a child," she admits.

"You need to look at what you've gained – your life's added depth and richness, the privilege of introducing this pure being into the world – rather than focusing on the freedoms you feel you've lost, which is something I did in those first few difficult months. My life isn't better or worse," she says, contemplating what could have been. "It's just completely and utterly different." ■

*Names have been changed.

Baby Mamas

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE DECISION IS EASY, BUT THE PATH IS COMPLICATED?

Writer and editor Susan Newham-Blake knew from a very early age that she wanted to be a mother. "It's one of the few things I've always been sure I wanted," she says. "So when I got involved in a serious relationship with a woman, my biggest concern was how the two of us were going to make babies."

After a lot of research, Susan and her partner decided to use a sperm donor from the US, so that their two sons (each woman carried a child, two years apart) will be able to find out their father's identity, if they choose to do so, when they turn 18. In South Africa, the donor's identity is protected.

"I have never questioned my decision to become a mother. Thinking about watching my sons go through life is very exciting," says Susan. "I feel like my life has been enriched and there are more layers to it than before. Some of the benefits of becoming a parent are difficult to articulate – they're experiences that are about love and soul."



Susan Newham-Blake has written a book about her journey to motherhood. *Making Finn* is published by Penguin and available from most bookstores.

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