

All over the country, women are having babies later in life. They are redefining the boundaries of age and reshaping the profile of motherhood and family life. Why are women waiting so late in life to have babies? One big reason is careers. Many women are waiting until their careers are established, and they feel more financially secure before having children.



Very, Very Tired

Exhaustion is one of the main complaints of older parents, who simply do not have the resilience of a young person. Linda, 40, a former magazine editor, said, "I do not think women in their forties realize the physical toll. I felt absolutely exhausted." One woman, who had sons at the age of 42 and 45, said, "I can't pretend there haven't been times when I've cried from one end of the weekend to the other out of sheer exhaustion."

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Some recent research has shown that older men and women are less able to cope with sleep deprivation and disruption than younger people. After the age of 40 in particular, the amount of time spent in deep sleep decreases. There are more awakenings at night and sleep itself becomes lighter. As people get older they tend to lose the ability to fall asleep quickly, to sleep during the day or to sleep late to make up for a late or broken night.

As people age, it may be that sleep rhythms get more fixed and it becomes more difficult to adjust the pattern. After years of regularly waking and getting up at six, it may be harder for people to "sleep in." A new baby's pattern of sleeping for short periods may create havoc for the older mother's sleep patterns.

Finding Help



Women who remarry after a divorce or the death of a spouse often long to establish a "new" family. These "new" families are often established when couples are in their late 30s or even 40s.

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Some older mothers, anxious to avoid the double burden of loneliness and exhaustion, use a mother's helper in the early weeks. Some hire a nanny or maternity nurse to help with the baby. This can be a good idea. It can give the mother help and companionship at a difficult time, but not always. Betsy found the maternity nurse undermined her own confidence and wanted to do things her way:

"It was my first baby and about the fiftieth she'd looked after.

I felt helpless in comparison. Also, she didn't understand that I wanted to breast-feed the baby on demand. She kept saying he was feeding too frequently. She kept asking if she could give him a bottle so I could rest. She was obviously frustrated that she couldn't feed him. She fussed around and I couldn't relax. The only helpful thing was when she took the baby for a walk. In the end I let her go and hired a cleaning lady instead; that was much more useful."

Heart of Gold



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