

## The Real Glass Ceiling

**Question:** So when does fertility really start to falter? And what age should you start thinking about having a baby?

**Answer:** Sooner rather than later.

Our society makes us believe women can have it all. We deserve it all. We are entitled to it all. Women rarely attended college a century ago. Fifty years ago, few worked outside the home. We’ve had the vote for less than half this country’s history. Today there are female CEOs, astronauts, and senators. We have proven we can work as hard, nit not harder, than the guys. This we have earned, no one can take that away.

However, we not only think we can have it all, but also feel we should have it all — that we are entitled to everything because we’ve worked so hard (or have always gotten what we’ve wanted). This is fine if you are talking about a college degree, a better paying job, or a flashy new car. The big shocker for some of us (and we include ourselves in this category) is that we never expected we might not be entitled to birth a baby — because of our other time-wasting choices (but relevant at the time) we made along the way. But this is the truth. Some of us might not be able to birth a baby.

Our pal Edie, a forty-six-year-old Californian with four kids ages three to sixteen, wonders out loud if perhaps, just perhaps, we women aren’t responsible for some of our own problems.

“I think we as women have this huge sense of entitlement surrounding the entire issue of sexuality and reproduction,” says the stay-at-home mom. “That sense permeates our culture and sets us up for quite a few personal moments of truth. Sleeping with whomever strikes our fancy, loading up your body with hormone-altering devices, aborting what you aren’t prepared to host, getting sexually transmitted diseases that screw up our fertility quotient . . . these have all left real and phantom scar tissue. Then we wonder why we have to take Herculean steps to get the families we have always wanted.

“I mean, it strikes me that we are a generation of women who slept around from our teen years onward,” she adds. “Look, we availed ourselves of all kinds of birth control and then amped our hormones up through the roof by having at it with every compelling guy we tripped across. Finally we settle on Mr. Right, calm down, and think, ‘Now I’m ready. Let the babies commence!’ Then nothing happens . . . for a long time. So then we freak!”

Edie knows from whence she speaks. She did it all in her early years — multiple sex partners, birth control, a bout with chlamydia. When she finally settled down, it took Edie almost two years to get pregnant with her oldest son, Peter. She was thirty at the time.

“I was just twenty-eight when I redirected my energies away from recreational to procreational sex,” she remembers. “When I didn’t get pregnant right away, I blamed

Dan's boss. I told everyone he must know my ovulation schedule better than me because he kept sending Daniel out of town at just the moment in my cycle we should have been hitting the sheets.

"Then, I started to get worried. Once a guy I had such a crush on from high school asked why Dan and I didn't have any kids yet. I didn't want to share my sense of desperation and possible failure, so I came back with 'Is that a rude question or an offer to remedy my childless state?' Finally, finally I got pregnant with Peter. Until then, though, I kept worrying — is this my past catching up with me?"

Yes we've definitely come a long way, baby, but there are some things that we cannot control with our wits, our savvy, our education and our Palm Pilots. While times have changed, our body's basic biology has not. Women need to make having children a priority and stop thinking we can have everything we want when we want it.

Listen to the wise words of our friend Rachel, who had her children at thirty-six and thirty-nine. "I'm one of the fortunate ones," she says, a reporter for a major Northeast newspaper. "It is easy to live life in the United States without contact with either children or the old, so you can forget where you came from and where you are going. Somehow through that fog of self-centeredness, I heard the voices of two women, an old lady I met at a press conference in D.C. and a midwife who lived across the street from me in Guinea Bissau, a West African country I visited when I was twenty-six.

"The old lady was a fellow reporter. She spoke to me firmly, 'Don't forget to have children,' she said. The midwife, whose roof leaked, felt sorry for me, the daughter of a rich American. She touched my breasts and stomach, telling me they looked all wrong for my age. I was too thin. That soft lumpy tissue that we are in horror of here is the mark of motherhood. It took me a while to hear their words. I had come frighteningly close to waiting too long."

While everyone is different, it's really true that younger women have an easier time getting pregnant and sustaining pregnancies than older women.

The change of a successfully pregnancy plummets in women older than thirty-five years, regardless of their reproductive past. A Danish study researched the combined effects of age and reproductive history and determined that more than 20 percent of all pregnancies in thirty-five-year-old women are unsuccessful due to miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy, or stillbirth. The number increased to 50 percent of pregnancies in forty-two-year-old women. Another study in the February 2000 issue of *Obstetrics and Gynecology* indicated that pregnant women over the age of forty are at a higher risk of experiencing the sudden death of their fetuses than younger women.

But what about all those over-forty celebs we read about and older moms we see at the doctor's office? They're pregnant, right? Well, yes. But while we read about all the older celebrity baby success stories, we rarely read about our favorite actress or singer losing their unborn child to a sudden death. Or the other complications pregnant women over forty face, like gestational diabetes, high blood pressure, bleeding, or an increased change of having babies born with chromosomal abnormalities like Down syndrome. Only in 2004 did a few actresses finally even admit to having fertility issues and miscarriages.

Of course, there is variability in fertility. Some women do actually conceive easily at forty. Others, however, have a hard time conceiving at twenty-eight.