

The mother of invention



When Serena Kirby became a first-time mother at 43, she was amazed to find there were no helpful Australian books on later motherhood. Her solution? To write one herself.

words Serena Kirby photography Nic Duncan

Life is stranger than fiction, there's no doubt about it. If someone had told me I'd be a first-time mother at age 43, I'd have ordered them to put down the vodka and stop talking crazy.

Within days of discovering I was pregnant I went looking for meaningful literature on becoming a mother later in life. But finding anything worthwhile, or anything Australian, proved as elusive to me as pregnancy had previously been.

The gap in information seemed strangely out of step with the fact that the number of Australian women having a baby over age 35 has tripled in the past 30 years, and births to women over 40 have doubled in the past decade. Later-life mothers are also the fastest growing demographic in Britain and the US, and one quarter of Australian women who have a baby later are doing so for the very first time.

Because necessity is often the mother of invention, *Better Late Than Never Baby* was born from a need to explore the experience of first-time later motherhood; to share my story and the things I wish I had known. It was written to provide answers to questions that are important to women just like me: how will my age impact on my pregnancy and my baby? Are all the medical risks relevant to me? Will I find it harder to adjust? What can I expect regarding fatigue and how can I reduce it? Does

my child need a sibling? What about the MAD (Mature Age Dad)?

What I learnt during three years of research and interviews with other midlife mums was eye-opening to say the least. The issue of 'adjustment' was one I certainly wish I'd been aware of, because it significantly fogged up my rose-coloured glasses and muddled my mind. Sure, some older women adjust to first-time motherhood with all the grace and ease of a prima ballerina. But for many of us it's like dancing with two left feet: you trip yourself up and bang into anything that gets in your way.

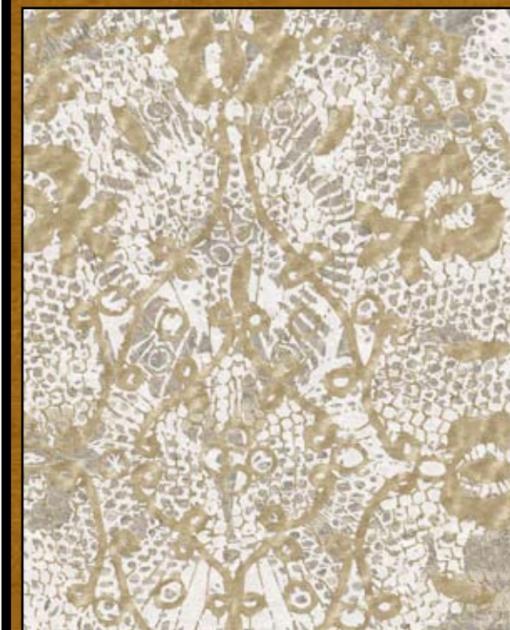
I, like those around me, presumed my greater life experience, knowledge and resources would make it easier to adjust to the life that being a mother creates. I know now that there's research pointing toward the opposite being true. Studies reveal that a number of key factors can hinder adjustment, and yes, you guessed it, one of them is older maternal age.

Because the widely accepted stereotype of older mothers is one of a healthy, well-educated and more financially secure woman, I found it hard to fathom why it is that the older you are, the more difficult adjustment can be. As I discuss in my book, the answer may lie in the fact that becoming a mother requires a woman to make a colossal change. A pivotal aspect of change is loss. Hence the bigger the life you had BC (Before Child) the greater that loss can be.

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Serena and her son, Riley, the inspiration behind her resource book.

Studies of older mothers identify motherhood as bringing a loss of autonomy, time, appearance and sexuality, as well as a loss of financial independence and occupational identity. Women also report that becoming a midlife mother is like undergoing molecular re-arrangement. I echo that sentiment.

I know now that to deny that a period of adjustment exists is as silly as saying the earth is flat, or that high heels are comfy. And making a speedy transition from selfish to selfless when you're older can feel like turning the *Titanic*.

For me, what resulted was a love/hate relationship with early motherhood, where two emotional extremes co-existed. I loved being a mother and having a child, but disliked what it did to my life. I couldn't bear the thought of my days being filled with 'ing': feed-ing, wash-ing, cook-ing and clean-ing.

My research shows that contradictory emotions are a normal part of motherhood. Had I known this in my times of guilt, depression and confusion, I would have

gained comfort from the fact that I was neither maternally flawed nor alone in what I felt.

Another proven part of new motherhood is fatigue. And, as a new, older mother, the combination of decreased sleep and increased age can lead to the Mother of All Fatigue. For me, it meant that my get-up-and-go got up and went.

So important is sleep that experts say the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill off Alaska, the *Challenger* space shuttle disaster, and the Chernobyl nuclear accident have all been attributed to human errors in which sleep-deprivation played a role. (And to think they put new mothers in charge of small children and kitchen appliances... at the same time!)

The strange thing is that while fatigue consistently ranks amongst the top issues for new mums, the majority of pregnancy and parenting books don't dedicate space to the topic. I hope my book starts to correct this imbalance because (as tiresome as it sounds) I've included an entire chapter to dealing with the dreaded 'F' word.

Of course it's important to share all the positive aspects, too. There's growing evidence that age alone does not increase many of the reported medical risks, and that there are benefits in being an older mother, having only one child, and even having a partner who is a MAD.

Other good news comes with the fact that the book has sparked development of a new study into the experiences and issues older women encounter when becoming first-time mothers.

My story also has a happy ending because life has come full circle. It was once impossible to imagine myself with a child, but now it is inconceivable to consider life without one. He was late coming and unexpected but he made me a mother. He is a son that is always shining: my better late than never baby. 

Better Late Than Never Baby is available in paperback and ebook from ThingsIWishIHadKnown.com.



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