



Serena Kirby, now 51, with her eight-year-old son Riley

Picture Nic Duncan

THE INFERTILITY MYTH

More women are rejecting the idea of a ticking biological clock and having babies later in life, conceiving naturally and free of complications

WORDS LIZ WALSH

It's the recurring sound that haunts every potential mother-to-be. "Tick-tock, tick-tock ... you'd better start having your babies before your time runs out. Tick-tock ... and it will." However, there is an increasing groundswell that – while it isn't quite turning its back on the clock – is certainly allowing time to slow down.

Leading the charge against the so-called "infertility myth" of older women is Professor Jean Twenge, a US-based psychology researcher who has shared her personal experiences of conceiving naturally and giving birth to her three children after the age of 35.

Twenge and Co are revolting against the "baby panic" that has swept across the globe, whereby women – particularly in their 30s and 40s – are rattled into anticipating fertility troubles.

Twenge, who came to prominence in this field last year when she published the book *The Impatient Women's Guide to Getting Pregnant*, found herself engulfed by baby panic in 2002 when she was aged early-thirties and newly divorced. She had heard all the warnings time and time again: fertility falls the older you get.

"Every time I read these statistics, my stomach dropped like stone, heavy and foreboding," she wrote in an article in *The Atlantic* in June this year. "Had I already missed my chance to be a mother?"

But after her second wedding, she decided to go in search of the actual evidence and what she found surprised her. "I scoured medical-research databases and quickly learned that the statistics on women's age and fertility – used by many to make decisions about relationships, careers and when to have children – were one of the more spectacular examples of the mainstream

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media's failure to correctly report on and interpret scientific research," she wrote in her article, *How Long Can You Wait to Have a Baby?*

"The widely cited statistic that one in three women aged 35 to 39 will not be pregnant after a year of trying, for instance, is based on an article published in 2004 in the journal *Human Reproduction*. Rarely mentioned is the source of the data: French birth records from 1670 to 1830. The chance of remaining childless – 30 per cent – was also calculated based on historical populations.

"In other words, millions of women are being told when to get pregnant based on statistics from a time before electricity, antibiotics or fertility treatment. Most people assume these numbers are based on large, well-conducted studies of modern women, but they are not."

Twenge certainly proved the doomsdayers wrong: she has three healthy children, all conceived naturally and free from birth defects. All after she turned 35.

"The 'baby panic' – which has by no means abated since it hit me personally – is based largely on questionable data," Twenge wrote in June. "We've rearranged our lives, worried endlessly and forgone countless career opportunities based on a few statistics about women who resided in thatched-roof huts and never saw a lightbulb. Fertility does decrease with age, but the decline is not steep enough to keep the vast majority of women in their late 30s from having a child."

Last month the Australian Bureau of Statistics released figures that show a significant jump in the number of births to mums aged 45 to 49 – a record 736 children in 2012, up from the then record 661 born in 2011.

Mothers over the age of 40 are now more common than teenage mums. Serena Kirby is one of them. The former Adelaide resident now lives in Perth as a

freelance writer. She became a mother for the first time eight years ago; aged 43. Yes, it was unexpected (she had been going through invasive surgery for endometriosis when she naturally conceived), but it was a wonderful, happy surprise.

However, that didn't mean she went into motherhood without reservations: she was about a decade behind most of her friends in the baby-making department – who could she turn to for advice? That's when she noticed a dearth of information aimed at older mothers in the parenting section at bookshops and so now, aged 51, she's released a book aimed at women just like her.

Better Late Than Never Baby is Kirby's personal account of her journey to motherhood, followed with advice and facts and figures on topics like the likelihood of medical complications, fatigue, adjustment, the rise of only-children, and the mature age dad (MAD).

ONE OF THE messages she would like to come from her book is for people to stop presuming anything about older mums: that they will have trouble conceiving; have trouble giving birth; that them and their babies will experience more health problems.

"I don't want older mothers to freak out as much and think that just because they're an older mother they're going to have difficulties, because the research is starting to say that's not necessarily so," she says.

And looking at the list of high-profile older mums could be proof of that. Oscar-winning actress Halle Berry gave birth to her second child, son Maceo, last month; age: 47. Actress Susan Sarandon gave birth to her third child in 1992; age: 45. *The Piano* actress Holly Hunter became a first-time mum in 2006 when she gave birth to twins; age: 47. Former Adelaide resident Kelly Preston had another baby with her husband, *Grease* star John Travolta, after

their son Jett died in 2009; age: 48. Singer Celine Dion gave birth to twins in 2010; age: 42. Australian fashion designer Collette Dinnigan gave birth to son Hunter last year; age: 47. Madonna, Mariah Carey, Meryl Streep, Nicole Kidman, Jane Seymour, Marcia Cross, Uma Thurman and Salma Hayek have all had babies post-40.

However, fertility specialist and surgical gynaecologist with Fertility SA, Dr Bruno Radesic, said the current medical information was that at around age 32, a woman's chances of conceiving start to decrease gradually and this speeds up around age 37. "By age 40, fertility has fallen by half," he says.

But while there has been a growth in the medical world's understanding of the causes of infertility, there is no drop in many of the other risks that come with later motherhood.

"Complications such as gestational diabetes, high blood pressure, placenta praevia increase with age, as does the risk of birth defects and genetic abnormalities, stillbirth and miscarriage and increased interventions in pregnancy, labour and delivery," Dr Radesic says. "The most recent large study from South Australia confirmed risks of interventions in labour for increased maternal age: 8 per cent for every year in advanced maternal age."

But, writing in *The Atlantic*, Twenge maintains that while the risk of chromosomal abnormalities does increase with age, the probability of it happening remains low. "At 45, when most women can no longer get pregnant, 87 per cent of fetuses are still normal," she says.

Dr Radesic said the optimum time for a woman's fertility was in her 20s (depending on the health of her partner too). But that's just the sticking point: who's ready to have children in their 20s? Not everyone. In fact, with the median age of mothers in Australia now hitting 30, the majority, it seems, are not ready for babies in their 20s. Perhaps we have other factors to consider: not having found the right partner, being career-focused.

But Kirby's perspective is that women having babies later in life haven't always made the decision to do so.

"I have yet to find one woman who actually decided to delay parenthood until their late 30s or 40s. It's usually to do with circumstances and/or fertility, because they've had some sort of issue including endometriosis," she says.

Twenge agrees: "There is no single best time to have a child," she writes. "Some women and couples will find that starting – and finishing – their families in their 20s is what's best for them, all things considered. They just shouldn't let alarmist rhetoric push them to become parents before they're ready."

PRE-BABY, Kirby had run boardroom meetings and so she assumed she'd quite easily be able to run a nursery. Of course, as she quickly learned, babies are more unpredictable, fear-inducing, tiring and bossy than any boardroom superior.

"People do presume that because you're older, that the whole process of adjusting to motherhood will be easier and that's a big misconception because every mother knows that motherhood is not easy and it's not easy at any age," she says.

"I certainly found that a lot of people left me alone thinking that I would be able to cope, and there were lots of people saying: 'You'll be fine, you've got lots of experience, you've done everything else, you've managed big budgets and given presentations in boardrooms; you can handle a baby'.

"But the thing is, we need just as much support as a mother of any age. The problem for a lot of older mothers is we don't have the support. When I was interviewing mothers for the book, so many of them had moved away from home and I mean a long way – either the other side of Australia or overseas – and they were separated from their parents and extended family. That makes it very, very difficult. And if you've worked for a number of years, most of your social connections centre around work, so as soon as you're removed from the workplace you lose a lot of that social collectiveness and that's a big gap to fill."

Kirby says for this reason alone, there should be more

support groups and mothers' groups for older mums. Another reason is the greater chance of post-natal depression in older mothers – she, herself, a sufferer.

“There is evidence to suggest that older mothers are more prone to it,” she says. “Factors contributing to that are lack of support, isolation, fatigue – if you're tired, it's very hard to feel good about yourself – and they say if you suffer from fatigue you're most likely to get post-natal depression. Most new mothers are tired, but older mothers feel more tired.”

But, of course, a baby is a baby, no matter the mother's age: a life-changing bundle of joy.

“There's an amazing sense of accomplishment when you have a child when you're older; I've done a lot of things in life and now I can add a baby to the list,” Kirby says. “I love the simple things about motherhood: the fact that he tells me I'm awesome and on my birthday this year, he said he made me the sunset just for me as my birthday present. It was one of the most amazing presents anyone had ever given me – a sunset.”

But for all the older mother role models and all the success stories, still, we women will be haunted. After all, there's no stopping time. Tick tock... tick tock... ●

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Serena Kirby's book, [Better Late Than Never Baby](#), is on sale at bookshops, including Dymocks, for \$22.99, from her website [thingsiwishihadknown.com](#), or join the conversation at [facebook.com/better-late-than-never-baby](#)



A John Travolta with wife Kelly Preston and children Benjamin, born when Preston was 48, and Ella

B Fashion designer Collette Dinnigan gave birth to her son Hunter at the age of 47