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What to Expect When You're Not Expecting

You know you don't want a kid, but everyone and her mother (and likely, *your* mother) is second-guessing your choice. Here's how to stay sane.

By Carrie Anton



First comes love, then comes marriage... Well, you know the rest. The playground rhyme sums up a long-standing social norm: It's only natural for young, coupled-up gals to pop out a baby or two. A large percentage of modern women beg to differ. Nearly one in five females now ends her childbearing years sans kids, versus one in 10 in the 1970s. More often than not, that decision is met with some form of confusion, disbelief, or patronizing indulgence by others, creating a tricky situation for those who are kidless by choice. Learn how to deal, without appearing defensive or succumbing to an emotional fallout.

EXPECT:

Not to be taken seriously

Jessi Lail, 22, in a relationship, graduate student, Lawrenceville, Georgia

"I've known that I don't want children since I was a kid myself. Recently, I shared my choice with an older woman. For the rest of our conversation I was barraged with 'Everyone says that when they're young' and 'Oh, I know you will change your mind one day.'"

What you might want to say: You're not divorced yet? I'm sure you'll change your mind one day.

What you should say: Sure, nothing is ever set in stone, but I know my decision is firm.

What you might wonder: Wait, what if I do change my mind—and it's too late?

"If you have thought long and hard and the prospect of remaining childless feels right for you, it's unlikely you will change your mind," says Laura Scott, author of *Two Is Enough: A Couple's Guide to Living Childless by Choice*. Still, it's normal to revisit big life decisions from time to time. In fact, it may lead to better choices, says Hamilton Beazley, Ph.D., author of *No Regrets: A Ten-Step Program for Living in the Present and Leaving the Past Behind*.

"The more a woman can squarely face the ramifications of not having children and confirm that, for her, the gains would outweigh the losses, the more likely she is to avoid later regret," he says. In other words, use other people's doubt as a springboard to come to terms with any uncertainties you may be feeling. (Regardless of your final decision, living an active, healthy life now helps keep your body in top condition for any eventuality.)

EXPECT:
Guilt trips

Lauren Hefner, 30, married, photographer, Fairfax, Virginia

"My family not so subtly tries to guilt me all the time by reminding me and my husband that since we're both only children, we're the only hope for continuing the family lines."

What you might want to say: If you're that desperate, you can look into adoption!

What you should say: It wouldn't be right to bring a child into the

world if that's only what you want and not what I want.

What you might wonder: Am I letting down my family?

It may feel that way at first, but it's better to disappoint them than half-heartedly have kids—a potentially much more serious letdown. If you feel yourself wavering, Scott suggests asking yourself, *Who is influencing this decision?* If the answer is everyone but you, it's time to ignore familial pressure or ask your kin to once and for all butt out.

EXPECT:
People to think that you hate kids

Melissa Bacelar, 33, married, animal behaviorist, Studio City, California

"When I tell people I don't want children, they immediately assume I don't like children. The truth is that I love kids. But at the end of the day, I want to spend my free time with my husband."

What you might want to say: Not all children. Just yours.

What you should say: It's not about loving or hating kids. It's about wanting to bring one into the world. I just don't.

What you might wonder: Deep down, do I really hate them?

Not everyone was made to be a mom—or to love infants (or toddlers, tweens, or adolescents, for that matter). Not being super-enthusiastic about tots certainly doesn't make you a bad person; neither does being unsure about making such an enormous lifelong commitment, says Fran Walfish, Psy.D., a psychotherapist in Beverly Hills and the author of *The Self-Aware Parent*. That said, you could be dealing with unresolved issues from your own childhood that are subconsciously directing how you feel about having

offspring. If you suspect unfinished emotional business is at play, you might benefit from talking about it with a therapist, says Walfish.

EXPECT:
Everyone to think you're infertile

Susan Lacke, 29, in a relationship, writer, Phoenix

"When I say kids aren't in the cards, I get pitying looks. People think I mean I *can't* have children."

What you might want to say: My uterus is perfect, thanks!

What you should say: We know we are all the family we need.

What you might wonder: Is my body even capable of having kids?

If you're 100 percent sure you don't want rug rats, testing your fertility status isn't imperative. (True, infertility can be a symptom of certain medical conditions such as endometriosis, but it is not, in and of itself, a harmful health condition.) "Remember that unnecessary testing is, well, unnecessary," says preventive medicine expert Yael Varnado, M.D., of Washington, D.C. "Digging for problems can be costly—to your wallet and your physical and mental health." If you think you might one day change your mind about being child-free, talk to your gynecologist.

EXPECT:
"Mr. Right will change your mind."

Sandy Han, 29, single, publicist, New York City

"Some of my friends tell me, 'Of course you wouldn't want children at this point... but when you finally meet the right guy you will.'"

What you might want to say: Then I better start looking for the wrong guy.

What you should say: At this point, the right person for me won't want children either.

What you might wonder: What if I meet The One, but he really wants to start a family?

"The right guy for you is the man who is on the same page as you regarding kids," says Scott. If you're sure of your decision, your ideal mate won't try to sway you; if he seems determined to change your mind, turn and run.

EXPECT:
To be labeled as success-obsessed

Raquel Castillo, 24, married, media director, New York City

"I've gotten used to people confusing the fact that I am career driven and don't want kids with my being shallow and money hungry."

What you might want to say: At least my job won't shove me in a nursing home!

What you should say: My work is what makes me happy. There's nothing wrong with that.

What you might wonder: Am I using my career as a crutch?

First, take a serious look at your weekly schedule and personal goals: Are the vast majority of your waking hours and energy taken up by work? Do you routinely brush off plans with friends and family in favor of more time spent at the office? It's possible that "the ambitious pursuit of a career can stem from running away from—rather than toward—making important life decisions," says Walfish. If that sounds suspiciously familiar, it's time to be brutally honest with yourself. A fulfilling job should be just that—rewarding—not a distraction from having to answer big life questions. ■