

A New Generation Gap

By Peg Tyre

Dr. Sherman Silber, head of the Infertility Center of St. Louis, has performed vasectomy reversals for 27 years and kept tabs on the offspring. Kids of older dads, he says are often smarter, happier and more socially attuned because their fathers are more involved in their lives. “The dads are older, more mature,” says Silber. “And more ready to focus on parenting.” Although he already has children in their 20s, Steve Toushin, 54, says he’s a different kind of dad this time around: more relaxed and better able to weather the twins’ demands. “I just couldn’t have done that in my 20s,” he says. For Toushin, having midlife children was a chance to get it right. For that, he says, you can never be too old.

Janet Ross-Toushin, 46, of Buffalo Grove, Ill., can listen to friends discuss their fear of the empty nest for only so long. It’s not that she’s unsympathetic, but sooner or later, one of Ross-Toushin’s 2-month-old twin girls breaks up the conversation. These days she finds she’s out of sync with even her oldest friends. When they’re waking up at 3 a.m., straining to hear their teenager’s car in the driveway, Janet and her husband, Steve Toushin, are having their own sleepless nights—courtesy of little Abigail and Rachel. Ross-Toushin has more in common now with other new parents—many of whom are a decade or more younger. Which has thrown her into a quandary. “Do you develop younger friends you can relate to?” asks Ross-Toushin. And what happens to your old friends, whose interests no longer match your own?

Fifteen years ago, older adults at the playground were generally assumed to be grandparents. These days, they’re just as likely to answer to “Daddy.” Life expectancy is rising; couples are postponing marriage and childbirth. Aggressive new fertility treatments are making it possible for those in midlife and even older to have children. The number of moms between the ages of 40 and 44 is the highest it’s been since the 1960s, before the pill. In 2002, more than 5,000 women between 45 and 49 gave birth—a rate that has more than doubled in 10 years—and more than 200 babies were born to women 50 to 54. Although the statistics are sketchy, numbers of midlife and late-life fathers are also rising. In 2002, more than 20,000 children were born to men between the ages of 50 and 54—up from 14,000 in 1992. More than 8,000 men 50 and older became fathers in 2002.

Every stop on the road—from conception to college graduation—brings forth unexpected pleasures and unique challenges to late-life parents. Biologically speaking, humans are designed to procreate in their mid- to late teens. Those who postpone it three or four decades and beyond are part of a vast new social experiment.

Psychiatrists who work with older parents say that maturity can be an asset in child rearing—older parents are more thoughtful, use less physical discipline and spend more time with their children. Dying and leaving young children is probably the older parent’s biggest, and often unspoken, fear. Jack Metcalf, 78, has no illusions about how much time he has left with his 11-year-old daughter, Hannah. For Metcalf, every day is a gift. “I would like the pleasure,” he says, “of seeing her graduate from high school.”

Often, older parents hear the ticking of another kind of biological clock. Announcing his son Harry’s impending birth, comedian David Letterman, 56, quipped, “Not only will I be the children’s father, I’ll be his grandfather.” He continued, “Besides, by the time the kid is out stealing cars, I’ll be dead.”

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