

The Success Rates and Limits of Reproductive Medicine

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*Wanting Children
and Planning Your Life*

By

Wilfried Feichtinger and Eva Stanzl

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Translation from German:

Barbara Stanzl, Brett Fitzpatrick

www.spiralcat-translations.com

barbara.stanzl@spiralcat-translations.com

Tel. +43 660 5080099

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FOREWORD

A DISCUSSION

In Europe, there has been a significant increase in the number of people who don't want to have a child of their own. It finally seems to have been accepted that being a biological mother or father to a child is only one (often perhaps overvalued in the past) of the many facets of what we call family. The spectrum of ever more accepted aspects of family includes adoption, homosexual relationships, friends and relatives who – despite being childless and single – take an interest in the children of others, patchwork families and many more. And yet, for many people, having a child of their own is still enormously important.

Whether the number of couples who are unable to naturally have children has been growing or not: reproductive medicine, with its goal of helping people to have children, has become ever more important since the first steps were taken four decades ago. It is absolutely right that the couples who do make use of modern reproductive medicine are accorded the same respect and acceptance as any other type of “family” or other way of living together or being in a relationship. However, although the public health systems of many countries now reflect equality, with a large portion of the costs for services associated with reproductive medicine assumed by these services, there is unfortunately still some way to go in a wider eradication of prejudice and discrimination.

Too many people, even though their numbers are falling, are suspicious of reproductive medicine and even suspicious of those who make use of it. The reason for this could well be connected with specific fears that many have about current and future scientific and medical advances in modern reproductive medicine. Many of them are without foundation but others may have a real basis in fact.

Most citizens of Western nations, and many others besides, are convinced of the advantages of democracy. Despite this, we also know that democracy is no iron guarantee that the most ethical option will be the outcome, because the majority does not always make the right decision. However, I am absolutely convinced that increased acceptance of modern reproductive medicine can only come if we keep democratic discourse up to date with current scientific advances. Not everything that can be done, should be done. Restrictions are necessary for progress. On the other hand, patients must always be given state-of-the-art treatment.

To enable us to weigh these considerations, there has to be a wide-ranging public discourse about pros and cons. The results of such wide-ranging, informed, constructive discourse must become law, to create a framework within which reproductive medicine, along with all other medical specialisations, is to operate.

Among the most important tools for initiating such a discussion are books such as this one by Eva Stanzl and Wilfried Feichtinger. This book is the result of a collaboration that, although it is absolutely essential, unfortunately takes place all too infrequently. In this book, two experts – a journalist and a physician/scientist, one with medical expertise, the other with expertise in presenting complex subjects, work together to create something that is approachable to non-experts. The theme of their interaction is reproductive medicine, in all its aspects, relating to the natural sciences, human medicine, psychology and society. Read it, enjoy it, and become part of the discussion.

Markus Hengstschläger, October 2018

CHAPTER 1

WANTING CHILDREN AND PLANNING YOUR LIFE

Putting it off might mean never getting around to it

It's a miracle, says the heart.
It is a great responsibility, says the head.
It is a lot of worry, says fear.
It is a huge challenge, says experience.
It is the deepest happiness, says love.

Sarah could not have written this poem in the same way just a year ago, even though having children had been on her mind every day. It was only after her wish had come true, only after she had finally given birth, that she found these warm words to send to the medical team that had treated her. But what do women and men feel when they want children, if the children don't come?

During the first few years, they rarely speak about it in front of others. The subject is too personal to just chat about. You might hurt your partner's feelings, especially if they are the one who is infertile. Even among people who know something about the subject, talking about not being able to have a kid might be met with snide comments and stupid jokes. It has always been this way, even back in our grandmother's day. People chatted in hushed voices about this woman or that woman "having trouble". The idea that the problem could lie with the man never occurred to anyone. His ability to father children was taken for granted, unimpeded by any medical complications.

The delicacy of the subject has its roots in obsolete attitudes, which are still to be found today, even if in much diluted form. Even today, we can

see the original power of these ideas when we look at more conservative communities, where women who do not have children are cast out and the man, mistakenly considered to be impotent, is looked upon with contempt.

The current ubiquity of the subject in the media stands in stark contrast to the way it used to be swept under the carpet. However, it is important to take some of the more sensational headlines with a pinch of salt, because unlike news about politics or economy, news from the world of medicine have to be good news if they are going to make the front page. Medicine, in the popular imagination, is about progress.

Here are just a few examples:

“Cancer Patient Cured!” is more interesting than “Still No Cure for Cancer,” even though the later headline does hint at a terrible drama with a tragic end.

“HIV Vaccine Discovered,” would be breaking news while, “No Progress in the Search for HIV Vaccine,” gets tucked away, buried in the middle of the newspaper.

“Princess Expecting a Baby,” chases the boredom away at the hairdresser, while “Princess Not Expecting,” would be the most tedious thing you read all week.

So, if the news from the world of medicine are filtered in a way that only “good news” get through, it is hardly surprising that childless couples are tempted to believe in miracles. If they haven’t managed to start planning for a family, they are tempted to believe that medicine could help them to do so.

“You can really take your time these days,” people say to women in their late 30s, who don’t yet have children but can hear the biological clock ticking, when they talk about their worries of ending up childless. And they probably often tell themselves the same thing. Instead of facing the facts, taking them seriously and addressing the problem, they decide to wait and maybe talk to a doctor about it later. What can be overlooked, or purposely forgotten, is that even the gods in white coats cannot turn back the biological clock.

This book is intended both for young people, to underline the importance of starting to plan a family in time, as well as for those who are currently still childless, to outline the options available thanks to modern medicine.

The issue of wanting children and planning your life was the subject of an online survey by the German internet magazine “beQueen”. The site’s motto was “The Reader is Queen” and to that end, the entire content was suggested by its readers. The concept might not have worked as a business model, because the publishing group shut it down a few years later. But the crucial point is that “beQueen” obviously reflected the mind of the public. And the public showed it was interested in family planning.

The readers of the online magazine were interested, among other things, particularly in the ability to have children, especially about when they themselves might be able to have children.

The survey was taken by 465 people, who were 93 percent female and 7 percent male. Of these people, 76,5 percent didn’t have children, but wanted at least one at a later date, while 9,5 percent already had a child and wanted more. Almost 29 percent said they would leave their partner of many years if they didn’t want to have a child. And 46 percent of the people surveyed thought the best time to seek a partner to start a family with was between 26 and 30.

Of the women surveyed, 57 percent wanted at least two to five years of work before planning for a family because they thought this would allow them to more easily return to work. Also, 47 percent thought that taking parental leave would have a negative impact on their career because 68 percent would want to raise their children themselves until the age of two. So much for the results of the survey.

From our own experience we would like to add:

As a science journalist specializing in the subject and collaborating with a doctor who is confronted daily with cases of people wanting to have children but being unable to, we know that women in particular are inadvertently running the risk of missing out on having children because they don’t start planning in time.

We realise that this is not a problem for everyone – take Ulrike Stelzl, for example, a general practitioner in the Austrian city of Graz, who

humorously describes her situation in one of her weekly columns in the Austrian weekly *Medical Tribune*:

“You’re 40,” an acquaintance recently told me, “so you have to finally get around to getting pregnant. You’ll end up neurotic otherwise and start to moan about how your life has no meaning. Then you’ll get a couple of cats and start to really go nuts.”

Certainly, I was shocked, because I have a wonderful partner, a career that I love and lots of wonderful people in my life. So, I figured that one cat will do me fine!

(Medical Tribune, 25 March, 2009)

However, we also know that many others really desperately want children.

It is usually around the age of 35 that the biological clock starts to tick for most women, and from the age of 50 for men. This is exactly when most people are at the top of their careers, and no longer have many years left to make their dreams of having children a reality. They feel forced to make a decision: Do I want to have children or not? Does it even fit in with my life? Should I really interrupt my career – or should I wait a little longer? Many become conflicted between what they want for their personal life and their plans for their career.

When they realise what is medically possible, some worry, while some find hope, but few childless women and men fully realise just how much of an impact their age has on their ability to have children. Abha Maheshwari and her team from Aberdeen University questioned 724 women, who were either already pregnant or were visiting reproductive physicians because they were unable to become pregnant. Most of them were aware that fertility gradually declines with age, but a surprising number did not know at what a young age the risk of not being able to become pregnant increases. High levels of confidence in the latest medical advancements in the field of in vitro fertilisation (IVF) were widespread.

“Women’s fertility in particular reduces at an earlier age than men, and they should make themselves fully aware of the risks involved in postponing pregnancy”, Maheshwari says in *Fertility & Sterility*. “Our study, along with others, shows that women urgently need comprehensive information about the possible consequences of such a decision.”

The results of the survey of 362 pregnant women and 362 women undergoing fertility treatment show that 85 percent of the women with fertility problems and 76 of those who were already pregnant were aware that fertility reduces between the ages of 30 and 40. A large proportion, you might think, but the scientists see things differently. Maheshwari pointed out that “there is so little awareness of the date when fertility comes to an end, it’s almost as surprising as if the remaining 15 and 24 percent think that babies are brought by the stork”. In our more enlightened times, she believes that everyone should have all the information they need.

There is also the issue of the ethical implications of reproductive medicine. Proponents wonder if medical methodology that separates sexuality from reproduction is in keeping with Christian values. The focus of this discussion is the question of when life begins, and that it should be allowed to take its course without interference. Those concerned with such ethical considerations do not, however, talk about how painful it can be to want to have children and be unable to. Virtually nobody talks publicly about “yearning for a baby”.

What wanting a baby can really mean is illustrated by emotions and views expressed in medical consulting rooms, interviews and conversations among friends and acquaintances on subjects such as “living with children”, “living without children” and “wanting to have children”. They show the motivations behind various ways of planning for life and the circumstances that can result in people having children – or not.

The conversations start with general considerations and move on to wanting a child but being unable to have one, and then on to having children and family life. Names have been changed at the request of the women and men interviewed, everyone was asked for permission.

“... Father and Mother and Child”

Virginia (36), PhD Student

“When I was a teenager, I thought I would be married and have my first child by the age of 28. I might have gotten the idea from my mother, because that’s how old she was when she had me. When I think about it, I then got married way too early at 20. We were in love, but we also got married so my husband could stay in Austria. I thought it was just a piece of paper and, if it helped him, I was happy to do it because I loved him.

We soon started talking about having children. I had been on the pill since I was 16. My father took me to the family planning clinic because I kissed a man and he was frightened I would immediately get pregnant. My husband was dead set on having children and I thought: okay, why not. I came off the pill, but I didn’t get pregnant. We started to have arguments, but I felt that having children was a responsibility and that the circumstances would just have to fit around that. But then I started to realize that my husband was a jealous man. He also started to take drugs. I wasn’t sure anymore if there was a future for us. We separated a year later.

I didn’t think any more about children after that, and instead wondered what I was going to do with my life. I moved from Salzburg to Vienna, applied to the Academy of Fine Arts, got in and started my studies.

At college I started a relationship with a very nice man who, at the start, was very giving. We dreamed about having children one day, after I graduated, and we thought that I would work and that he would look after the kids. But it was just talk, and we never did anything about it. My period was often late during these years – although our sex life wasn’t great.

Today I’m married to a man with whom I have a very good sexual connection and my period is regular. When I now think about whether I would like to have children, paradoxically I feel less mature the older I get. At 20 you always think things will somehow work out. That’s been my motto for the past 15 years: It will somehow work out. But experience has shown me all the things that can happen, and it has made me wonder. I hope that, if I do become pregnant, I will feel more confident about becoming a mother. I don’t want to have a child just because it is expected. I also want to avoid being a single mother. If I’m going to do it, I need a good old-fashioned family – father, mother and child, who are all there for each other. A husband and wife should get along well enough to be able to say: We would love to have a child and pass something on.”

“... think about what comes to an end.”

Karin (44), dental technician and Michael (46), dental technician

Karin: “There was always so much going on that there was no time for children. You see, both of us had parents who were very ill in old age. It becomes part of your life, going from doctor’s appointment to doctor’s appointment, waiting for the next ambulance to turn up.”

Michael: “Minutes go by and turn into hours. Hours turn into weeks, and then years. My father had pretty much every illness going, he had been sick since I was a child. I always had to keep quiet, they used to tell me not to make too much noise because dad was sick.”

Karin: “We’ve been together for 25 years - we even did our homework together at school. Then we both trained as dental technicians. We got together after passing the final tests. I was 19 and he was 21. We became dancers after that. We were competitive dancers for six years. Not a day went by when we weren’t dancing. We weren’t thinking about children back then, I bought an apartment and learned to drive.”

Michael: “At the time, I was going to night school.”

Karin: “We didn’t move in together for a long time because we – both – had our mothers with us and were looking after them. They always told us to be careful not to have any children. I never understood why they were so against having children.”

Michael: “You have to be careful when there is as much illness as in our families.”

Karin: “My mother’s illness was terrible. She had a tumour the size of a child’s head, and I bandaged it and did everything for her, it took five hours a day. We didn’t have sex during that time, not for a year and a half.”

Michael: “When you’re doing work like that, it cools things off. You don’t come home and say: ‘Here I am, honey,’ with a rose in your teeth.”

Karin: “I wasn’t in the mental state to enjoy anything, with my mother being so ill. She passed away and right after that I got a slipped disk.”

Michael: “Yes, that was awful. But there was a lot of other stuff going on, too.”

Karin: “Do you remember when we bought the adjoining plot of land? My parents had a little plot, but there was never space for us. So, we bought our own little plot, where we thought we would build a little house, just for us. That was crazy! (she laughs) We worked our fingers to the bone on it, and then it turned out that the foundations were uneven and the drains backed up – but, you know, we thought it was a good idea. But when it was finished – between 1995 and 2000, we should have done it then: we should have had a

kid then. After 2000, my mother fell ill, so it would have been good to do it before.”

Michael: “We also went on a trip round the world at that time. And we looked for a bigger place to live. But we didn’t find one, at least not one that was just how we wanted it, and that we could afford.”

Karin: “We didn’t have as much money back then, and I never wanted to have a kid like I had been. My childhood had to work itself out. My mother got divorced when I was three, and then brought me up on her own. I never had my own room, and nobody looked after me. She broke off all contact with my father and I never heard from him again. She most likely always told me never to have children because she had had things so rough. Anyway, I never had much of my mother when I was a kid. I was with my grandmother to start with and then I was a day pupil at a boarding school. So if I am going to have a child, I want to have time for it.”

Michael: “It was quite similar for me – and on top of that my mother decided everything for us. My father was very ill, and we were just managing to get by. Because everything was so tight, they always said: ‘You have to pull your socks up, Michael.’ I wanted to learn the guitar and they asked me if I had gone crazy.”

Karin: “There are people who act like grown-ups all their lives. We are not like that. I never thought, as a young person, of wanting two children. Now I’m afraid of missing my chance. A child is the only thing that lasts, it is the only way to say you were good for something, it’s our purpose and the reason we’re here. But I’ve only now begun to realize it. Also, without a child, I don’t feel complete as a woman.”

Michael: “Career, education, that’s all well and good, but a child is what is really important. Although: My mother didn’t have me until she was 40.”

Karin: “When I was 40, at last we had found somewhere to live, a place you could raise a family, just how we had imagined it. Then we decided to finally get married, and it was a church service.”

Michael: “We were a little long in the tooth, but it was beautiful.”

Karin: “Then we moved into our new place and sold the old one. Now I just hope we can have our baby.”

Michael: “Now we have the time and a place. A desk, a lamp, a chair – some space of his own is what kid needs.”

Karin: “We both paid too much attention to what our families needed.”

Michael: “The problem is we didn’t think enough about ourselves. If I could be 20 again, I would worry more about time running out, and not let myself get talked into so much.”

Karin: “And I wouldn’t want a child so much if I didn’t have such a great partner, if I didn’t have him. People always say that you shouldn’t pin all your hopes on one person, but I feel that way about him.”

“... I’m fine on my own”

Doris (41) head of marketing

“Why not children? Because it would be super stressful if part of me was always worrying about them. I wouldn’t be able to take it if I got home from work and wasn’t able to relax. In that sense, I’m fine on my own. I would really miss having less time for myself. I love being around people, but I love it just as much when I’m alone. I’ve felt this way ever since my brother was born. I was an only child for ten years before that. Then suddenly all my friends wanted to push him around in his buggy, and I thought that was just stupid. I didn’t want that. When you’re used to getting all the attention, and suddenly you get less than half, it hurts. And I thought: I can’t imagine giving all my attention to a child – I don’t want one. I don’t want anyone to depend on my decisions, especially if my partner isn’t completely on board. But there’s more to it: I’ve been pregnant twice and I felt like what was growing inside me was something separate – like an alien, something that didn’t belong to me. I was also in a lot of pain, too much for such an early stage, and I was happy when it went away. It was a relief, I thought: “Thank God!” I have never regretted it.

Of course, it means that nobody is going to visit me in old age. When there’s nobody to help you, the children could automatically step in to look after you. That’s not going to be the case with me. But it wouldn’t be right to want children just because of that. When you fall deeply in love and trust the other person, when you take things on together and help each other solve problems, and when wanting a child comes from this love, that’s a good reason and that’s my fantasy. Yet I still have the feeling that what is growing within me, the embryo, is an alien: It’s not my liver, not my stomach, it’s something separate. I imagine the pain of childbirth as horrible, and I think me not wanting children is as natural as other people wanting them.

My mother had me when she was 18, my father was 19. Nobody can tell me my parents were glad when they found out my mother was pregnant. Maybe the thought of an invader came from my mother.”

“... the worst pain”

Elizabeth (40), head of department

“I’m healthy, but I don’t have any family or children, I live alone. And now here I am, separated from my most recent partner, having to start again. I had always imagined I would grow old surrounded by my family. I didn’t know exactly what that would look like, but I never doubted it would somehow happen. And I thought it would happen quite naturally – family and children would just come along. But I have never had either one or the other happen to me. Even though I was pregnant once, ten years ago. My partner at the time, who I had only been with for three weeks, didn’t want children. I waited two or three weeks before having the abortion, and while I wanted the baby more and more, he wanted it less and less every day – he told me so.

To my constant regret I didn’t at that time feel brave enough to do it all alone, I didn’t even know how. I was working freelance and I earned just enough to pay the bills. He was an artist and didn’t have a job and had just gotten over a bout of depression. In the naive hope that our relationship first needed space to allow us to grow together, and that we could then really plan for a family, I decided to have an abortion, feeling like the carpet was being pulled out from under me. We went to see the doctor. On the way, everything in me screamed ‘No!’ and I said, ‘I don’t want to do this.’ He turned to look at me and coolly said ‘Then we’ll drive home, right now. It’s your decision.’ He didn’t embrace me, he simply withdrew. I carried on toward the appointment with the doctor, as if on automatic pilot, but not a hint of love came from him.

When I think back, it all seems like a blur, as if there is a veil over the memory of having my only child taken away. I never fell pregnant again.

I’m 40 now, and I’m not in a relationship. Otherwise things are good, I have had success in my career, which took a long time and a lot of struggle, but now things are going well. Success feels good. But I never imagined my life would revolve around work. I’m not the career woman type, and climbing the corporate ladder was never something I was interested in. Of course, it’s great to have achieved something in my work – very exciting. But to be honest, I would prefer to be in the garden, planting flowers or cooking a meal for everyone. And what am I supposed to do in the evening? Keep on going out with my girlfriends, like 20 years ago – but 20 years ago I had the feeling that anything was possible. Now I feel like some of the doors have closed.

Of course, I always have the hope that what I so deeply yearn for will happen. Energy goes where your focus is, I tell myself. So, I pay attention to wanting children, so that the universe can make it happen more easily, even

if I have left it quite late. But the more months pass, the less the universe seems to care about what I want.

The way you feel about not having children changes from month to month, but essentially, it's the most terrible pain – or should you call it a phantom pain? How do you miss something you love but which you have never had? You can have lots of friends, lots of brothers and sisters, but you still realize that nobody really needs you – I mean not as deeply and completely as a child needs its mother to survive. So, you are forced to ask yourself if it makes a difference if you even exist. I don't mean I'm thinking about killing myself, just that I don't have a direction and that it is difficult to find a new one that makes as much sense as giving life. It's not fair.

Many people say I should have planned things in time and committed to the right man. But other people, who have planned just as little, do have children and a family – even without really wanting to. It's unfair. Perhaps, if you want to have children you have to do what isn't possible in normal life – you have to make plans for the things that you can't make plans for. But who can control what presents they are given or not given? And the presents that come unexpectedly are the most beautiful of all.”

“You miss the child you don't have”

Margit (51), cafe owner

“I have long had the feeling that it was men's fault that I don't have children – either they didn't want to commit or didn't want to have children. But now I ask myself why I was together with men who didn't want the same thing as I did. I always knew that I wanted a family and a stable, loving relationship. But I never found anyone who told me that he really wanted the same thing. All my relationships have been interesting and with good people but none of my partners ever said, ‘You are the love of my life, live with me, marry me, be the mother of my children, I want to start a family with you.’ I could examine my own motives for getting myself into these situations – craving romance, craving freedom but still needing security, not trusting enough in my own abilities, and too little courage and decisiveness. But that won't change the fact that I don't have children. And that is painful – for me, for my parents, for all of us. Still I think that now I'm happy. I'm in a relationship with a wonderful man, and I get on well with my family – I would have never thought that! I also have

a lot of good friends, the cafe is doing well, and I must admit that I've always been very busy – first with waitressing, then with starting my own business. I always wanted to stand on my own two feet, and I made it happen. But I think a child is an even greater joy – and you miss not having a child. In the end, most people manage to have both. I regret that I didn't put as much effort into starting a family as I did into other areas of my life.”

“... I'm just not attracted to women.”

Gabor (34), receptionist

“I would really like to have a family, children – I have a big enough house. The thing is -, I'm not attracted to women. I'm into men, but for having children, women are essential. I would need a woman to help me. For me, the only way is sperm donation and artificial insemination. How would we live together? One option would be to share a house and look after the child together – share the costs, raise the child, give it an education, everything – just without having sex together. We would have other sexual partners. Another option would be that the mother and I live apart and we organize things to do with the child together. It isn't so much about where exactly the mother lives, but how good our friendship is – the relationship. A relationship like this would mean that neither person came with fixed expectations, both would need to be open to trying something new, something where there are few tried and tested examples of success. So you have to have the determination to get on together and be ready to face any changes or conflicts together and talk about them. It would require a lot of flexibility – and the basis of the relationship would be love for the child.

This special type of patchwork situation might seem unusual to many, but if it went well, it could be like a wonderful network. The child would have parents as usual, but more people to choose from to form a relationship with and depend on, like in an extended family. It could be a lot better than normal families. For my idea to work, you have to be ready to compromise – after all, a child isn't a property, it is the shared fruit of a relationship and should be loved. It has to be possible, and I want to do it.”

“... I’m definitely a rare case”

Herta (50), private person

“I’m probably a pretty rare case. I’m 50 years old, I have a 25-year-old daughter and a 19-year-old son. I have been married to a man who is ten years younger than me for three and a half years ... My second husband’s greatest wish is to have a child with me. I was 44 when we met, and I talked about it with my gynaecologist. He didn’t think there would be a problem, but we would have to hurry. Our chances without medical help were slim, but he didn’t tell me that. Unfortunately, I didn’t fall pregnant naturally. My husband kept mentioning that he wanted children so I went to another doctor, who ordered a blood test to determine my fertility, and he said that there was still a lot that could be done, but probably only abroad. I think he was talking about using somebody else’s eggs. My period was now coming every other month, and what I want to know is: Is there still a chance to have a child with my own eggs?”

“... some call it God”

Daniela (47), travel agent

“I got married young, when I was just 22. But I didn’t want to have children back then. I didn’t think that the relationship was strong enough to stand the responsibility. But instead of growing together, we drifted apart. We divorced when I was in my mid-20s. After that I lived alone for 20 years.

Of course, people say why not stay on my own and become a single mother using donor sperm. But I was frightened of that. I work with women who have brought up children alone and I have seen how hard they had to struggle. They had to chase alimony payments - a child is expensive. I wanted security for a child and a good basis to build on, and that’s why I took my time, worked and saved. And so I was torn between two things – on the one hand I didn’t have a partner that I could imagine enjoying having children with, while on the other hand I had created my strong financial basis through my own work, which has also gone through a lot of changes.

Today I live in France, where I met my present husband. Now, at last, I have found the right partner and I want to have a baby like nothing else on earth. Everything fits perfectly in this relationship, everything I have always imagined has happened. But I’ve aged a little in the meantime, I’m 47 and so

are my eggs. My husband is 65, but his semen results are like those of a young man. As far as he is concerned, things should work. In France, fertility treatment is only available until the age of 43, which I feel is discriminatory. So, we came to Austria to get treatment.

While you are going through fertility treatment, you can't think about anything else. Every pill that I take, every examination I attend – my entire life is organised right now around the treatments. And the periods between are the worst, to relax, to find a balance between great hope and slim chances. To dream that my wish comes true, even though I know very well that the chances of it coming true aren't even 15 percent. Everyone is doing everything they can, but nature will decide – some people call it God.”

“... and now I have fallen in love”

Tony (65), businessman

“We met on the flight from London to Tunisia – you could call us flying acquaintances. But it was more than that, I fell head over heels in love with her – pretty much at first sight, yes, that's what happened. A few weeks later we moved in together. When you are a little more mature, some questions and conversations don't come up and you become more direct, straightforward in a relationship. I have been working since 1968 in private finance, over the last twelve years as part owner of a company. I have a daughter who is 43 years old.

I have been married once, then we got divorced, and since then I have never felt the urge to have any more children. I have had other relationships, but children were out of the question. And now I've fallen in love with Daniela. She's 47. To put it more precisely: We fell in love with each other and we have decided that we would like to have children. Daniela really wants children and I would like nothing better than to support her. Fertility treatment is a difficult process, emotionally hard. And then there are all these injections and pills. I mean, I think the procedure is okay, I hardly have to do anything, according to the doctor my semen is still good for my age, but Daniela is stressed about it and I'm obviously stressed too about looking after her through all the stress, it isn't easy.”

“... an experience I want to have”

Phillip (37), landscape planner

“I absolutely want children. I’m good with kids and I would really enjoy it, but I want to do it with a partner. Children were also an issue in my last relationship, but the longer that relationship lasted, the less I could imagine it happening with my partner at the time. I want to give the child a family, not just have a child for the sake of it, or as a fix for a relationship. I had been alone for long periods and I longed for love and companionship. I longed to work together with somebody to create a family and build something. Unfortunately, none of my previous relationships ever developed to this point. If I was in a relationship where there was this loving trust, closeness and compatibility, I wouldn’t want to wait, I don’t want to be an ancient dad – which would be the case now anyway. I think about this every day, but I don’t have the feeling that I can force it, plan it or work on it. I think you can learn a lot from a child, for example to live more slowly and consciously and be humble, and that is an experience I would like to have. If it doesn’t work out, life will go on anyway – nobody is owed the right to have a child.”

“... wanting a child from a very young age”

Andrea (29), medical technician

“In the countryside, it is common to have children young. When the mother and the grandmother look after the child it works quite well, because the grandmothers are still young. I made the choice not to go to university and decided to become a medical technician, because I wanted to have kids from an early age. My husband is also happy that we have organized things this way – he is a university graduate. We have two children and my mother-in-law looks after them when they’re sick, or when we want to go to the cinema.

But two small children are a lot of work, I must say. No matter how much joy they bring, compared to them my part-time job feels like a nice little rest. I also didn’t know how much I would miss the job when I was on maternity leave, now I’m pleased to be working again. Some of my friends do and some don’t, depending on what their job is. I can

imagine that if all my friends had studied, I might have done that too and I would also perhaps have waited to have children.”

“... never planned, but always welcome”

Michael (56), lawyer

“My first son just happened, and I married my first wife very young, because the baby was on the way, not for any other reason. It started to go wrong very quickly – maybe for that very reason. After my first child and my first marriage, I thought a few years later it might be time to have children with my second wife, that it might work out better with her – it wasn’t until my third that it really worked out though. Anyway, none of my other children were really planned either – but always wanted. They didn’t come as a surprise, because we said: If you get pregnant, that’s good, and if not, not. Only one of my daughters was planned for, after my wife had a miscarriage that we wanted to make up for, but otherwise we just let things happen. Obviously, a lot of things were difficult. My first son, for example, lost me at a young age, my second wife didn’t want me to see him. Of course, we saw each other anyway, but it wasn’t always easy, and some of it left scars.”

“... let go of stress”

Sarah (36), architect

“I didn’t even want a child when I fell pregnant – my boyfriend and I were both very surprised. Children have never been in the foreground for me – for many years I just worked, 80 hours a week, we had founded an architecture firm and wanted to make it a success. Then I stopped working and made some important changes – and a year later my son arrived. I think he came because I had let go of my career. It wasn’t about never working again, but to let go of something, and in that way to end the stress that fell on my shoulders in the office. When you are as involved in something as I was in my office, there is no space for anything else, and no way for a child to come along.

Having my son was the most amazing thing. From that moment I stopped questioning my life. I had never thought that having a child was the

purpose of existence but that's how it really is: I'm not just responsible for myself anymore, but for him too. It is a huge responsibility, an incredibly strong, clear feeling. When I'm feeling exhausted and tired, I pull myself together and tell myself: There is somebody who is totally emotionally dependant on you. When children say 'Mama' it is an unbelievable connection: 'Mama' is irreplaceable. That's why they can sometimes wrap you round their little finger.

A lot of people say that giving birth gives a woman self-confidence, but for me that wasn't the case, I couldn't sleep for 48 hours afterwards, I was just wide awake. What gives me confidence is what comes next and that I have a different direction in life. You have to change your rhythm and if you accept this, then you can also work at the same time. It's easier for me, of course, as a freelancer, but I have a child, so I get up at six and go to sleep at ten. When my child has a nap in the middle of the day, I take one too, because I can work when he is at kindergarten.

“... guardian angel for parents too”

Christina (65), businesswoman

“In the past, having children and bringing them up was natural, you didn't think very much about it. People just brought their children up, taught them what was what and that usually worked out quite well. No fuss, nothing scientific about it. On the other hand, when I was a child, in the country with my grandmother, things were very different. Children were very respectful. None of the children were out of hand. The parents sat in the marketplace in the evening, along with the children. We were happy when the adults got together and we children could play hopscotch or other games or just listen to them. Later, shortly after 1968, there was a trend of anti-authoritarian parenting – God, but that was chaos! Some of my friends' children became more and more insufferable while their mothers explained all the advantages at length. What did I do? I don't know. I myself did want children, but not as early as they came. Though it wasn't so early – 26 wasn't so early in those days – but I thought it was more fun to be with my husband without responsibilities, and to travel if possible. We always went to Yugoslavia. Then I took over a business in the main street of the city – and I fell pregnant. I said, 'Already?' I would have wanted to wait two more years.

My first daughter was very sweet and was world-class in snuggling, giving in and agreeing, so it was all very easy. Also, the child's aunty was still alive, and she lovingly looked after the child. Then my younger child came along. The aunty had passed away and I had to look after her along with my business. That caused chaos and that may have contributed to my younger child being very different to the older one. 'Impossible to raise,' was my conclusion after three years and at some stage I thought, 'Maybe a special kindergarten could help.' But from the first day she fought with the child of a teacher there, so much that after a few days the teacher begged me not to bring her back. Now there was only my husband to look after the young child. But he was a travelling salesman and had to drive around visiting customers and, because this was all happening in the winter, my daughter would get very cold while she was waiting in the car. Then my husband saw an American motor home being sold by a movie team. He swiftly decided to leave his car behind and go on long sales tours with my daughter in the heated motor home, and she enjoyed it a lot. I just want to say that there is always a solution, and things are never as bad as they seem. I always say, every child has a guardian angel, and he will look after the parents too when the going gets tough ..."

"... then you just get rid of it!"

Ilse (62), estate agent

"I took the pill for three years because I didn't want to get pregnant before I got married. I didn't want to do that to my girl guides – I was a troop leader. I got married at 22 and then fell pregnant and then we wanted a second child fairly soon after, so Brigitte arrived 14 months after Alex. Then I went back on the pill, I couldn't have endured having another baby, the two of them meant I didn't get any sleep for two long years. Then I gradually got to know my own body so well that I knew when it was okay and when not, so that I didn't have to take precautions anymore. I was shocked when my husband, who didn't want any more children, one day said, 'If you get pregnant again, just get rid of it.' I would never have thought him capable of saying such a thing, not to mention the fact that I would never have done such a thing! I don't want to think about women these days, how they feel when their husbands don't want the child, since abortion has been available."

“... the future screwed up”

Patrick (42), sound technician

“I satisfied my urge to reproduce when I was a very young man with a woman who was just as young. In our marriage, I stayed at home with the kids and my wife went out to work. After the marriage fell apart, my ex-wife kept the children and moved on to form a patchwork family with her new partner and his kids. I was a single man again. Our separation had been terrible. I fell apart back then, because I lost everything.

Because of this experience, I was against having children for years after. I didn't see why I should have a child with my new girlfriend, who was then in her mid-30s, just because she had not had her children yet, while at the same time my own children were soon going to be old enough to make me a grandfather. I was aware that I was screwing up my girlfriend's future by thinking this way, but I was also afraid that starting a family with her would screw up my own since I was not convinced our relationship was going to last. I suppose it was hardly surprising that it didn't.

Now, there is a new woman in my life and the relationship is real. If children came along now, then there would simply be children. This would mean changes for my plans for my life, but that's just how it would have to be. I don't particularly want it to happen, therefore fertility treatment is out of the question. But we neither take precautions nor count the days. I would just accept this gift – and be happy about it.”

“... a large family would be nice”

Vera (17), schoolgirl

“I definitely want to have children. But I don't know when that's going to be. I have five brothers and sisters, and they all have children. I love them – a large family would be great, where somebody is there when you have problems and you can be there when other people have problems. It seems natural to me, because of the home I grew up in.

We have often talked in school about what we would do if we got pregnant. I would like to finish school, but if I got pregnant first, my parents would help me. But I don't know if I'm confident enough in myself to be able to go to school with a big belly, and how would it even work? Anyway, if it happened – I wouldn't feel I needed to get married. I would move in with

my boyfriend, the way my parents did, and eat healthy, and encourage my children to exercise. But if my boyfriend didn't want to live with me ... hmm. One of my parents' friends brought up three children on her own – I wouldn't want that for myself.

I would carry on my education until I couldn't continue anymore, then I would stay home with the child for two years, at least. My boyfriend would have to make the money then. Could it be the other way around? I don't know. I think that depends on how much I enjoy my job, and if he approves. There are a lot of men who are not keen on staying at home. Whether working or not – for me, having a child would be the most important thing. I would take care of it and love it, and just be there for it. If I never had children, I would be sad. The feeling of being pregnant, to give birth, and to hold the baby afterwards, to see it take its first steps – I think I would miss that the whole rest of my life.”

“... step by step”

Sebastian (21), lawyer in training

“I'm the youngest in my family and my father was in his late 50s, my mother in her mid-30s, when I was born. Now my father is almost 80. All in all, it has been enormously advantageous to me that my parents are older. They have passed on a lot of knowledge and experience to me that I otherwise would never have had and given me a solid basis for life. They had time for me. My father was no longer working when I went to school, and he was there for me a lot because of that. My mother was still working, she had a business for a long while and enjoyed being independent very much. All in all, my parents – I'm told – were more relaxed with me than with my brothers and sisters and I was allowed to stay out much longer in the evening. Obviously, my father couldn't spend hours playing football with me anymore or climb or build tree houses, and those kinds of things. But I had my friends for that, and their parents organized sporty family excursions.

I would like to have kids one day, but I'm going to take my time a little and proceed step by step. I'm studying and I'm enjoying it – alongside my studies, I'm an assistant at the university and work with a lawyer – I'm learning a huge amount. I always tell myself, everything in its own time. My next goal is to open my own small practice – and then get married and finally have children, why not?”

“... as if all it depended on what we wanted”

Irina (40), business consultant

“Stress? We don’t talk enough about it. Life really has become more stressful: a lot of us don’t really commit to a relationship after the age of 20 because there are certain things you have to achieve in your career by the time you are 30. But what we don’t know is that after 30 we don’t have any time anymore to have children, because the career we have carved out for ourselves takes over everything. People also don’t much talk about how to plan for starting a family. We think it is as easy to have children as it is to prevent having them. But that isn’t true. Our generation is, I think, too convinced we can do anything. Having children, we think, is like having a career: if we work hard, we will achieve it. As if all having a child depended on was that we wanted it. If your body isn’t cooperating, you can’t do a thing. You can be healthy, fit, have exemplary blood test results, but that doesn’t mean by a long way that your reproductive system is working just as well. My husband and I first tried to have a child the natural way, and when that didn’t work, we started with fertility treatments, and that didn’t work either. But we keep trying, I still have hopes.”

(Just a few days later, at the author's institute, Irina was found to be pregnant).

