

How the pandemic

When the UK locked down last March, it wasn't just raucous birthday knees-ups or meticulously planned nuptials that were put on ice. For many women in their thirties and beyond, it forced a reckoning with their expectations about parenthood – when they would become mums, how, and even if that was a possibility any more. Here, five women open up

AS TOLD TO MINI SMITH

remoulded motherhood



'I'm focusing on the family I do have'

● **LAURA CAPON, 34, BEAUTY EDITOR FROM CROYDON**

Giving up the cosy flat in Colliers Wood, south-west London, I shared with my best friend – a home that hosted Netflix marathons, raucous laughter and meandering late-night deep chats – to move back in with my parents in Croydon was definitely not part of my five-year plan. But what read like a success-driven millennial's horror story turned out, in June last year, to provide exactly the sort of comfort I'd been craving since Covid hit.

With my sister living close by and pandemic restrictions easing in the summer, I was soon spending my Friday evenings playing *Hungry Hungry Hippos* with my three-year-old nephew, Callum, and my Saturday afternoons leading baking sessions themed around *Paw Patrol* characters. I'd cradle his little sister, Lyra, born in May 2020; soothing her and pushing her pram on endless lockdown walks. I'd watch Callum on the swings and wonder if strangers thought he was mine. I'm 34, so that's not a wild assumption to make.

Like many women my age growing up, I'd expected – and wanted – to have a few of my own children by now. I thought those were the rules: you grow teeth, you get taller, you get married, you have kids. But having been single for 11 years, it hasn't quite happened that way for me. It can get me down on the occasional lonely Sunday, as I'd love to have a partner one day. But, on the whole, I feel happy building a life I love for myself first – if the rest takes a while to follow, that's okay.



I know lockdown life – with its emphasis on households and romantic partnerships – has been hard on lots of single people. But it's made me realise how much I value family; not only the nuclear one I still hope to create, but the one I was born into. And playing an active role in it has enabled me to engage with my maternal side more than ever. I can never understand the full reality of parenthood, but I'm able to see, with a little more clarity, into the world inhabited by my friends with kids.

Being the only single person in the family can sometimes make me feel like a spare part, but becoming a hands-on aunt has given me a sense of purpose so rewarding that, even as the world begins to reopen, I have no plans to leave my parents' house. I want to be here to watch my family grow up.

I'm keen to start dating again, but I won't rush into anything. Because, while part of me still hopes to be a mother one day, this past year has turned down the volume on that desire. It's helped me see that I don't need to be a mum to have a family.

'The pandemic paused my fertility treatment'



● **ESTHER BATCHELOR-FRYER, 37, PARALEGAL FROM LEEDS**

I've always known that I wanted to be a mother. When I married my husband Sam in 2016 – the man who'd once sat next to me at work, who I followed across the country when he got a new job just six months into our relationship and who proposed to me in Norway under the Northern Lights a year later – we were ready to start a family. But the next few years were punctuated by heartbreak.

I was diagnosed with endometriosis – a condition

that meant it would be harder for me to conceive naturally – and after three unsuccessful rounds of IVF, we were beginning to give up hope of having a family. But after analysing our options again, we settled on egg donation.

A friend offered up one of hers – a proposition achingly generous, but which ultimately had a lower chance of success than other options. In the end, we chose to find a donor from Cyprus; donors there tend to be slightly younger and therefore likely to have more eggs. They're also more likely to share my mixed Indian-British skintone. Within weeks, we'd chosen our egg donor and booked our flights. I was walking away from the fertility clinic on 20 March last year when I got the call to say that, with lockdown looming, the trip would no longer be possible.

I'd read the news, of course, but, blinkered by my determination, I'd underestimated the threat. It was crushing. Sam remained kind, comforting and practical, while I scoured Instagram and joined the Peanut app in search of women who might understand my pain. Watching people I knew become pregnant – including my best friend with twins – and give birth at a time when I'd imagined I'd be cradling my own growing bump seemed like a cruel reflection of the loss I felt from our chance being taken away.

We eventually made it to Cyprus last October, and our embryo using the donor's egg was transferred into my womb. But after an



'I saw parents struggling and thought: not for me'

● **NATALIE WILLS, 37, BUSINESS OWNER FROM EXETER**

Looking out across the lawn that extends behind the house my husband, Oli, and I had designed a year earlier, our whippet bounding around, digging up grass, I pictured small children toddling around. My friends said my uncertainty around having babies would wane now the stage was set for nesting. And if this was what I wanted, I'd need to start trying soon. But it wasn't long before the dial that long flickered between child-rearing and a child-free life settled, firmly, on the latter as last summer wound to a close. It's not that I dislike children – I adore my brother's kids and those of my friends. I know the faces to pull to make them laugh and the right tone of voice to comfort. But as restrictions rumbled on, my niggling doubts became hard to ignore. Watching so many parents struggling – between home-schooling and being isolated from their own support systems – made me question whether I wanted the good bits enough to withstand the bad. My husband, who'd always felt he could take or leave having children, was happy to let me decide. I don't remember what I was doing the moment I landed on that decision, but I recall the feelings: a quiet resolution about how I wanted the rest of my life to play out.

Since making up my mind about motherhood, I've sought to accumulate more child-free friends through various Facebook groups. I love my friends who are mums, but our needs and wants are just different right now: I have time, they don't. Their existence must revolve, uncompromisingly, around their young children; mine does not. Just as I respect and support their desire to have children, they support mine not to. As do my family, although they've asked what Oli and I will do when we're old. It's an age-old social contract that children look after their parents, so I can understand the question, but it's mine and Oli's responsibility to ensure our future health and happiness. Not feeling like I have to put my life on hold for children means I can focus on having the experiences I want to right now. Oli and I hope to start a charity to help improve access to buying property, and we're making detailed travel plans. As the world opens up, it feels like the possibilities for adventure are blossoming and I can grab them with both hands. The feeling I get when I picture myself hiking under a lush jungle canopy is one of hope; when I picture myself as a mum, I know I'd regret it. While it may be the best job in the world for some, it's the wrong one for me.

'I'm determined to save a child from the care system'

● **WENDY ANDREW, 45, ANIMAL BEREAVEMENT COUNSELLOR FROM GLASGOW**

Slumped in my chair, I hit close on the Zoom window I'd been blearily staring at for hours on end. My brain felt saturated with questions and more information than it could possibly hold, but this was only the start of the adoption process.

As I'm single and without children in my mid-forties, you might assume that the idea of having kids simply never crossed my mind. But while I'm proud of the counselling business I've created, I've always longed to be a mother – I've just never met the right person. Adoption had been in the back of my mind before last March, but a harrowing news item, days into the first lockdown – where the reporter told of more children than ever being exposed to abuse and neglect, many of whom would end up in the care system – transformed this faint notion into a firm plan.

The process started with a three-day virtual induction about adoption and the kinds of situations each child might have come from. Then came the reading material, piles and piles of which my social worker would hand me after each socially distanced meeting as 'homework'. I should reach the panel interview stage soon – where a group of child protection experts will assess my aptitude for motherhood, after which, if I qualify, my social worker will begin to help me find my future child.

It's odd, needing to sell myself to the panel: the owner of a profitable business centred around empathic listening; the keeper of an orderly, clean home; a natural nurturer with enough love in my heart to compensate for the lack of a second parent. I know I'll be a good mum. I'm hoping to adopt an older child, probably between four and seven. Older children are often overlooked in the system and, because of my job, it would be difficult to look

after a baby. I understand that – given the trauma and dysfunction they will have been exposed to – bonding may be hard. But I've got a strong support network of single parent friends who live nearby, whose advice I'm already heeding, plus friends who have recently adopted, too.

Of course, I've experienced nerves about my decision, but those anxious butterflies that occasionally swarm in my stomach are dwarfed by the weighty, gut-deep sense that I'm doing the right thing. I can just picture myself reading to this small person; sharing my love of languages on trips around the world; just holding and reassuring them that they are so wanted, loved and safe.



● **FARZANA ALI, 38, JOURNALIST FROM LONDON**

I often thought of my girlfriends' assurances – made over plates of golden-yolked eggs and glasses of guava juice – that there *were* good guys left, as kindly platitudes. Those tales of relationships working out for so-and-so, which seemed to imply that I, too, would meet someone great, were well-meant, sweet words that didn't offer much long-lasting reassurance.

It wasn't just a plus-one I was looking for, but lifelong commitment with a partner who wanted children. I've known this since my late twenties, when watching *One Born Every Minute* suddenly went from 'eww' to 'aww'. But my busy work and social schedules, meeting men who didn't know what they wanted, and then a pandemic mean that, a decade on, it hasn't happened.

Being a stickler for the rules, and being in my vulnerable parents' support bubble, I've stayed at home more than most this past year and a bit. Since the first lockdown, I've not been in a restaurant or on public transport, so dating – in the traditional sense – has been impossible. And it's been difficult to create a connection via dating apps. My life has been on hold,

'The pandemic robbed me of a year to find a partner'

and the short-term frustration I feel over this is compounded by the sense I'm going to run out of time.

Pre-Covid, I was a master of distracting myself: as a single, child-free person, I'd book last-minute flights for spontaneous weekends away and relished the opportunity to travel around the South Pacific on a three-month sabbatical. But when the pandemic divided society into families and households, what I lacked in my life – a partner, a unit of my own – was magnified. And this absence was amplified even further earlier this year, when Covid-19 closed my nephew's nursery and I stepped in to help. Spending my days looking after a toddler, it really hit home to me that time was slipping away. As society opens up, I'm focused on what I want; if that means discounting those who want to 'go with the flow', then so be it. I'm actually quite hopeful that the past year of isolation – and aforementioned emphasis it's placed on couples and families – will see more men re-emerge with family-orientated priorities, too.

This optimism about my chances of meeting a partner with whom to have my own child is balanced by a feeling of steadiness about my capacity to cope if that doesn't happen. I have my friends to thank for this – those same friends who were always so quick to tell me that I'd meet the right partner have been on the other end of the phone over the course of the pandemic, simply listening as I vocalise my fears.

The urge to tell loved ones that everything will be okay and that they'll get what they want is natural. But sometimes things don't work out, and I find strength from knowing that, if that's the case, I have people who will be there for me. So, while I hope it'll happen, I'm not going to be devastated if it doesn't. **WH**