

Is there a right

We ask Carli, 17, Suky, 27, whether they timed their

'Being a mum is great fun'

Carli Knowles, 17, is mum to 18-month-old Montana.

'I'd been with my boyfriend Dominic for a year and a half when I found out I was pregnant and I was overwhelmed. When Mum found out I hid in the bathroom crying, and when I told her I was going to keep the baby she was shocked – she wanted me to have a termination. But Dominic and I wanted the baby from the start – I was happy about being pregnant it was everyone else who made it a big deal.

'During pregnancy I felt very healthy and although labour lasted almost 24 hours, I had a natural birth with just gas and air. After the birth the sleepless nights weren't too hard – maybe I have more energy because I'm young – and I didn't miss going out. I went to a mother and baby school and did my GCSEs and I now have a place of my own and I'm trying to find a job – Dominic and I will probably move in together when I'm working.

'Being a mum is great fun – Montana is like a little friend who chats and laughs with me. Even friends who stopped talking to me when I fell pregnant always come round now – they love Montana too. I'd like to have another baby but I'll wait a few years.'

Young mums: pros

- ✓ You have a lower risk of pregnancy complications and having a baby with a fetal abnormalities.
- ✓ You should have more energy and stamina.
- ✓ You'll have plenty of time to plan more babies.
- ✓ You'll find it easier to take a career break and it might not be as difficult to return to work.

Young mums: cons

- ✗ If you're the first of your friends to have a baby you may feel you are missing out on the social life you used to enjoy.
- ✗ If you haven't been in your job for long or just started a job you won't be entitled to as much maternity leave. Or you might be studying and not earning at all.
- ✗ You might not be financially secure.



The best thing about being pregnant... 'The kindness of other people, especially at work, carrying things for me, making me drinks and generally looking after me.'

age for a baby?

Helen 34 and Cori, 45
babies just right

Facts and stats

How old is the average mother?

The average age to have a baby in the UK has risen from 27.5 in 1990 to 29.1 in 2000 (for births within marriage, the average age has risen from 28.6 to 30.8).

Who has the most babies?

For the year 2000 the figures are:

Teenagers 7.6 per cent	Thirties 43.9 per cent
Twenties 46 per cent	Forty-plus 2.5 per cent

'As a mum you need youth and energy on your side'

Suky Grant, 27, is mum to six-month-old Estella.

'Kevin and I had been married a couple of years when we decided to start a family and I became pregnant after four months. I was really broody and we didn't want to leave it too late in case we wanted more than one. Also I think you need youth and energy on your side. I had morning sickness – in the evening! – until 14 weeks, but apart from that I had no problems. I loved being pregnant and loved my bump.

'The labour lasted about eight hours and I managed without pain relief. But taking Estella home was a shock. After the exhaustion of labour I wasn't ready to look after a newborn. In fact even now, six months later, I'm still slightly shocked. I breastfed for only a month – it was painful and much harder than I expected. Once Estella was on formula I was happier – breastfeeding was such a tie and I'd been very active before she was born and wanted to get up and go.

'I definitely had the baby blues. Estella is a very sweet little girl but the responsibility is immense. But although I was the first of my friends to have a baby, I don't think I was too young. I'd had the holidays and the nights out – it's just that now women have so much freedom it's shocking when you have a baby and everything changes. I'm going back to work soon – I'm a PA – and I'm really looking forward to it.'



X...and the worst 'Growing out of my jeans – although my maternity jeans have given everyone a good laugh!'

Heather Clarke, Oxfordshire



Older mums: pros

- ✓ You're more likely to be in a stable relationship and the baby will have been planned.
- ✓ You'll probably be more established in your career.
- ✓ Older mums are usually more relaxed about things.
- ✓ According to studies, children do better at school and parents have more financial security and experience.

Older mums: cons

- ✗ The risk of miscarriage increases with age. A Danish study found the risk was 8.9 per cent in women aged 20-24 and 74.7 per cent in women over 45.
- ✗ The older you get the higher the risk of having a baby with an abnormality. The risk of a Down's baby is 1 in 1500 for under 25s and 1 in 110 for a 40-year-old mum.
- ✗ Older mums are up to four times more likely to have a Caesarean delivery.

'It's odd being described as someone's mum'

Helen Sartori, 34, is mum to 19-month-old Alexander and 24 weeks pregnant.

'Neil and I met, got engaged six months later, sold our flats, bought a house and got married. We'd just got back from honeymoon when I found out I was pregnant. It was after our first month of trying and it knocked me for six – to be honest I was more shocked than pleased. I'd had polycystic ovary syndrome [where the hormones which help the egg develop and ovulate are missing] and had been told it would be hard to conceive. So when I became pregnant, I thought, "Oh no, what terrible timing!" I didn't feel we were in a financial position to have a baby and it was early in our relationship. But I knew that if we'd left it any later it might have been difficult to conceive.

'As part of my antenatal care I had a nuchal scan and the results were good – I had a 1 in 1500 chance of having a baby with an abnormality. I didn't feel the need to have any more tests, just a 20-week scan.

'Alexander arrived after a 15-hour labour. I went home next day in a state of euphoria, thinking, "We've done it!" But I also felt we shouldn't be let out with such a young baby! For the first week it took both of us to change a nappy. Luckily Alexander was an easy baby – he slept through at 10 weeks. I breastfed for six months but it was more painful than I expected.

'Motherhood doesn't feel natural. I still find it hard to say "my son" and it's odd to be described as someone's mum. Maybe if I'd had Alexander earlier it would have felt more normal. Once you're an independent woman with a career, it's hard to adjust – I think it's easier to adapt to change when you're younger. I'm now pregnant with my second baby. I wanted to have them close together, as once you move away from babyhood, it's hard to go back. I've decided to hold my nose and jump!

'At this age you're more used to being your own boss'

Cori Wachman, 45, is mum to Casey, two. She also has a son, Peter, who's nearly five.

'I was 40 when I had Peter and 43 when I gave birth to Casey. I'd been working as a singer and having children simply hadn't entered my head before. Also, I didn't meet my husband until I was 36.

'For both pregnancies I was worried about the increased risk of abnormalities. With the first pregnancy I had a nuchal scan to check my chance of having a Down's baby. The risk factor was 1 in 365, which reassured me. With the second pregnancy, a blood screening test gave me just a one in 80 chance of having a baby with Down's so I had chorionic villus sampling [where a small amount of placental tissue is taken from the uterus to provide information about the baby's genes and chromosomes]. Thankfully, the result was fine.

'During my first pregnancy I was fit, swimming several times a week and eating healthily. But the labour was hard. I had 66 hours of contractions then needed an emergency Caesarean as I still hadn't dilated. With the second delivery I opted for an elective Caesarean.

'Both times, having a newborn to look after was exhausting – but any mother is tired, whatever her age. It was a shock, though. I discovered that your life is absolutely no longer your own. At this age you are more used to being your own boss, which makes it harder. But you're also more settled and comfortable in yourself, which is positive.

'My social world is now built around the children, and one of the hardest things has been that most of the people I associate with are younger than me. Your life experience at 45 is very different from that at 35 or younger and sometimes I want to speak to people on the same wavelength. But I haven't had any negative reactions because of my age. In fact, people who haven't had children yet find it encouraging that I got married and had children in my forties.'



DAVID LIU,
consultant
obstetrician
and P&B
expert

What our P&B expert says

Medically, yes, there is a "right" age to have a baby, but it is a wide range (from age 18 until the early thirties). Women over 35 need to be aware that there's an increased risk of chromosomal problems such as Down's syndrome, and a higher chance of obstetric complications because the pelvis is less flexible. But as long as the mother-to-be seeks care and advice early and attends regular antenatal appointments so that potential problems are pre-empted, difficulties should be minimised. At the other end of the spectrum, pregnancy at 15 or under is not advisable. But from the age of 16 to 18 mums can do well, depending on the girl's mental and physical maturity. Of key importance is the amount of support she has.