

Parenthood: the choice is yours

In the past people's expectations were clearer around the ordinary course of life being about growing up, getting a job, meeting someone, settling down and having children; with husbands as bread-winners and wives as homemakers.

Of course, it didn't always turn out this way. Sometimes people didn't have children. But in those days, if you knew a childless couple you spoke about them in hushed tones – obviously the poor things weren't able to have children.

In such a world, there was not really any such thing as choosing not to have children.

Today the story is completely different. Or is it?

It's a key cultural value to feel we have choices, and today we seem to have more choices than our parents and grandparents ever had.

But there is still an expectation that two healthy heterosexual people in a permanent relationship will eventually have children.

There will always be people who want to have children and who are able to do so, ensuring the continuation of society.

But the fact remains that we have the right to choose the child-free life as freely as others take the marriage-and-kids path.

So why do some of us choose not to have children?

A major difference today from 40 years ago is that in the 1960s, usually only one career – the husband's – was considered important. Today it is likely both partners will have well-defined professional ambitions, and children will dramatically affect not one, but two careers.

Second, we may like and enjoy the company of children, but have no desire for any of our own.

Other things in people's lives are important and of enormous value, and some just don't feel suited to being parents. And that choice should not be seen by others as negative – it is a valid choice and should be respected as such.

Just because the child-free may not be in the majority does not make their decision to not have children something to be criticised or pitied. These people often have wonderful relationships with nieces, nephews, godchildren, and the children of their friends.

And it cuts both ways. While parenthood is a wholesale bond and parents usually say they can't imagine life without their children, the occasional overnight break from the little darlings is a gift from heaven!

Because of our freedom to choose the way we live in this culture, we tend to know ourselves better than we did in the past. Consequently, some of us are more likely to recognise that having children is not the right choice for us, whereas 40 years ago we might have felt pressured into conforming.

So how do you cope with pressure from well-meaning friends and family if you've decided to remain child-free?

Play it straight.

As with any marginalised group, there needs to be a coming out. You have to tell others of your decision and, if they are curious, explain your reasons for making it.

But you don't have to keep justifying yourself. If others constantly put you under pressure, tell them to butt out. It's your life and your decision. If they don't like it, that's their problem.

Only you know what is right for you. As they say in that well-known advertisement – Just Do It. Or not.

Survival tips

- Realise that the decision to have children or remain child-free is yours alone
- Remember that deciding not to have children is a positive thing if you do not want them
- If others around you can't accept your decision to be child-free, tell them to butt out as it is your life, not theirs.