

# Mind the gap

IS THERE REALLY AN IDEAL AGE DIFFERENCE FOR YOUR CHILDREN, AND HOW DO YOU KEEP THEM CLOSE IF THEY ARE YEARS APART? Rhiane Kirkby FINDS OUT

**I** always had a plan of when things were going to happen in life – not a concrete plan, but a rough timetable of events. Of course, my schedule was hit with a large dose of reality when I hadn't met my husband at 29 or had a child by the age of 31.

As most parents know, conception and fertility aren't really things you can timetable. You can try, but nature tends to want to play a part in mapping out these areas of your life. Some couples find it impossible to conceive the first time around, but get a shock when it happens almost instantaneously with baby number two. And then there are people who, for many different reasons, end up having a much bigger gap between their offspring.

"Mine are 12 and four," says Gabriela. "It was our choice, but it's hard as they want to do such different things. The younger one idolises his older brother, but the older one finds it annoying to have a 'baby' following him around."

Friends Stephanie and Wenting both have a 20-month gap between their children. "My husband and I didn't plan it that way," says Stephanie. "In fact, it was quite a shock, but it's worked out as they enjoy the same things."

"I can see the benefits of having them close together," adds Wenting. "Logistically it's easier and the baby gear gets reused very quickly."

The Journal of the American Medical Association analysed data from over 11 million pregnancies worldwide and concluded that, from a biological point of view, the perfect gap is 18 to 59 months between pregnancies, while the latest medical research says the risk of premature birth is at its lowest when there's

a gap of between 18 and 23 months. The study by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists found that women who conceive less than 11 months after giving birth, or conversely wait three years or more, are more likely to go into labour early.

Gynaecologists and midwives agree a gap of around two years between pregnancies is also ideal when it comes to the mother's physical and mental health, giving the body time to replenish the nutrients lost during the previous pregnancy and breastfeeding, and the mind time to prepare for a new addition. Mothers also experience a better recovery at this time, because their bodies are best placed to deal with pregnancy and labour.

## A TWO-YEAR GAP BETWEEN PREGNANCIES GIVES YOUR BODY TIME TO REPLENISH

Of course, there's more to this than just science. Professor Sybil Hart, who studies sibling rivalry, believes that, in most cases, an age gap of two to three years is ideal.

"Families are more cohesive if everyone can participate in the same activities," she explains. "Children can go to the same school, watch the same films and holiday at the same time. Siblings are more likely to be companions and parents can compress the number of years they devote to childrearing."

Authors Simone Cave and Dr Caroline Furtleman agree, adding, "Even though your children will be close enough in age to want to play with each other, you'll still have had the chance to enjoy the early milestones with your

eldest child, before your second is born."

It's also fair to say that, given a two-year age gap is most common, it's likely the friends you made the first time around will also be having more children. You'll therefore be able to share the experience with people you're close to, rather than having to make a new group of friends. This is something which can be hugely beneficial to parents trying to simultaneously juggle the demands of a newborn with those of a tantruming toddler!

But, as with anything, there are downsides of having such a small gap between children. Firstly, there's the sleep deprivation, as it's common for the older child to drop naps or regress with their sleeping when a new

sibling comes along. And no matter how well-behaved, a newborn and a toddler are both exceptionally demanding. It's also easy to underestimate the physical and mental impact of being pregnant, breastfeeding

and going through multiple labours in a short space of time. Despite this, evidence suggests that in London, many parents are choosing to have around an 18- to 20-month gap, partly because mums are generally older.

While the sociological and medical facts speak for themselves, experts agree that the concept of an ideal gap between children is highly subjective. They stress that a family's unique set of circumstances must be taken into consideration, and adding that pressure can make parents less likely to achieve their 'perfect gap'. So whatever you end up with, just be thankful you've got healthy children, and provided you share your attention equally, you'll have a happy family regardless. **11**

## HOW TO KEEP SIBLINGS CLOSE

Plan family outings that are suitable for all ages – think trips to the beach or a park, rather than a toddler-friendly soft play centre.

**Give them their space and one-on-one time with each parent.**

Involve older children in caring for their younger siblings – make them feel grown up and responsible.

**Don't allow teenagers to be 'too cool' to spend time with their brothers and sisters.**

Make sure each child socialises with children their own age, too.



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