


# DO I WANT TO BE A MOM?



*A Woman's Guide to the Decision of a Lifetime*

Do I want kids now? Later? Never?



Will I regret it if I never have kids?



What would motherhood mean  
to my finances, career, and relationships?

**DIANA L. DELL, M.D., FACOG, AND SUZAN EREM**

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***Contemporary Books***

Chicago New York San Francisco Lisbon London Madrid Mexico City  
Milan New Delhi San Juan Seoul Singapore Sydney Toronto

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Dell, Diana L.

Do I want to be a mom? : a woman's guide to the decision of a lifetime / Diana Dell  
and Suzan Erem.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-07-140074-5

1. Motherhood. 2. Mother and child. 3. Working mothers. I. Erem, Suzan.  
II. Title.

HQ759.D438 2003

306.874'3—dc21

2003043981

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 DOC/DOC 2 1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

ISBN 0-07-140074-5

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the Director of Special Sales, Professional Publishing, McGraw-Hill, Two Penn Plaza, New York,  
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*To my amazing daugher, Ayshe. May every woman who takes the leap into  
motherhood be so lucky to end up with a daughter like you.*

*—Suzan Erem*

*To my own mother; may she rest in peace.*

*—Diana Dell*



# Preface

Momentous decisions in most women's lives are made (sometimes quite literally) in the dark. We can't always see all the choices available. We don't always know what's right for us. We can't always predict how things will turn out. This book will cast a small glow on the one decision that stays with a woman for her entire lifetime: the decision whether or not to have children.

That illumination comes from the voices of women who have told us their stories. They responded to questions that many women have about motherhood but are afraid to ask: What will it do to my career? What will it do to my body and my health? How will it affect my marriage? Can I afford to raise and educate a child? How much time does it take? Could a child really love me? How can I find the courage to say I don't want children? How long can I wait before I really have to decide? What if I decide not to have kids?

The World Health Organization estimates there are 200 to 225 million pregnancies around the world every year. A full one-third of the pregnancies—seventy-five million—are unwanted, according to Family Care International and the Safe Motherhood Inter-Agency Group. A separate study by the highly respected Alan Guttmacher Institute concluded that 38 percent of pregnancies are unintentional, and that annually, 22 percent of these end in abortion. That study also estimates that in Eastern Europe, 63 percent of pregnancies are unintentional; in Latin America, 52 percent; and in North America, New Zealand, Australia, and Japan, around 45 percent.

In the United States, women will give birth to more than four million babies this year—for a few hundred thousand different reasons. Most of those babies will be brought into this world with intent. Others will not

be. At the time of conception, half of all pregnancies are unplanned. Most of these unplanned pregnancies are simply mistimed, but 15 to 18 percent will result in children who are unwanted—also for a few hundred thousand different reasons. And another important statistic has been emerging over the past twenty-five years: the number of U.S. women not having children at all has nearly doubled.

But if you are wondering about whether or not to become a mother, then only one question begins your journey: will I be happier with children or without them?

## SUZAN'S STORY

My mother was a bipolar alcoholic whose untreated illnesses created a lot of misery in my childhood. In 1986, when I was twenty-two, I became pregnant. Fearing I would turn out like my mother, I ended the pregnancy and never once regretted it.

Within a year after my marriage to the man with whom I first became pregnant, birth control failed again. I told my husband I still didn't want to have children because I was convinced I would never be a good mother. I offered him an amicable divorce so he could find someone who wanted children. He turned me down. I was still young, he said. There was plenty of time. I had my second abortion and continued to build my career.

During our years together, the question of whether or not we would have children turned very subtly into *when* we would have children. When we had been together seven years, I was twenty-nine years old and between jobs. We were in a new city. My father was terminally ill. My husband was gainfully employed. I decided this time made the most sense.

When I admitted to my gynecologist that I was afraid of motherhood, the only book she could recommend was *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. It just didn't fit the bill.

After six months of trying, I got pregnant, and nine months later gave birth to a beautiful, bright little girl with a strong personality and a caring nature. I worried every day that I'd fail at motherhood.

I had not been able to foresee the pressures of work and home, of no family support, of a new city, and of a husband whose job pulled him

away from home frequently. Eventually, driven by depression, a lack of role models, and a deteriorating marriage, I faced the most desperate of choices. I decided I could be a better mother from a distance and moved out of the house.

As my daughter grows, I stay very involved in her life and have become much more confident as a mom. We fall in love over and over again, having “ticklefests” and “dirty-sock fights,” cuddling on the sofa, or talking quietly about God, schoolwork, and girlfriends. Many moms report the same experience, that every day their children provide an endless source of joy and laughter, personal challenge, and growth. The only difference is that I don’t see my daughter every day, and there are times that makes us both very sad.

My story isn’t all that uncommon, but it is unspoken. More than two million families in this country are headed by single men, a sign that many people no longer assume that only mothers can raise children well. Talk-show host Oprah Winfrey said her solicitation to viewers for a 2002 show on mothers who were surprised by the challenges of motherhood received the biggest response she had ever received in eighteen years of doing her show.

## DIANA’S STORY

As I look back over my life, I cannot recall ever thinking, “When I have children of my own . . .,” as I planned what I would do with my life. I never made an active, conscious decision not to have children. But as I moved through adulthood, career joys and obligations were far ahead of any imagined family or children joys. My career remains my most cherished endeavor.

But as a professional woman moving into and through my forties, I came to believe that women like me often feel driven to be creative in other ways—as though women with children have already created a living memorial to their lives that I did not have.

I am a nurturing person who loves puppies and children and finds herself drawn to both in social encounters. I fondly recall how happy it made me to interact with the babies I brought into this world as moms came back to my obstetrical clinic over time. But I have to chuckle as I recall that it made me equally happy to hand them back to their parents. Over

my long professional career, I have cared for thousands of childbearing women. I have shared their joys and sorrows, with no real contemplation that this was a journey I needed to make myself in order to be fulfilled. I have no regrets.

In my work as both an obstetrician-gynecologist and a psychiatrist, I am increasingly aware that modern life has moved having children from an automatic, biologically driven process to a highly complex psychological and social issue. And making the “wrong” decision in either direction can profoundly affect the physical and mental health of a woman and her loved ones. That is why we wrote this book.

## **THIS BOOK**

We interviewed, surveyed, and talked with women from all walks of life, a range of ethnic backgrounds, and every region of the country. You’ll hear comments from pregnant women, new moms, veteran moms, and empty nesters. You’ll also hear from women who never had the desire for children, and those who wanted children but couldn’t have them. While we’ve changed the names of the women we spoke with, we haven’t changed their stories.

We raise the questions and give you the information you need to consider—the cost, the network of people available to help you raise children, and the effects on your relationship, career, and spirit. We let the women who’ve been there tell their stories, while providing you the framework within which to examine your motivations and make your choice.

The book is organized so that you can turn directly to the section that addresses your issues, bounce around to different sections, or read it from beginning to end. But mostly we hope that as you read this book, however you read it, it will light your path toward the most momentous decision you’ll ever make.





# Acknowledgments

We jointly thank first the hundreds of women we interviewed, surveyed, and talked with, who told their stories with such candor and generosity. Without you, this book would not exist. We also thank our agent, Caroline Carney, for her tireless proposal editing; our editor, Judith McCarthy, for grace under pressure; and our production editor, Ellen Vinz, for getting the job done.

Diana thanks Khris Sherlock, Carolyn Haynes, and Phyllis Dye, each of whom helps in her own way to make projects like this possible—both when Diana is at Duke and when she is away. She also thanks the hundreds of women who have shared their stories and their wisdom over the past thirty years in her nursing and medical practices.

Suzan ([suzan@lastdraft.com](mailto:suzan@lastdraft.com)) thanks the early supporters of the project, including Sally Faith Dorfman, Karen Kubby, Pat Ernenwein, Nancy Burgoyne, Jill Vibhakar, Lori Erickson, Paul Ingram, Gail Messenger, Susan Johnson, Caroline Downs, Katharine Assante, Effie Mihopoulos, Karen Ford, Pat Badtke, Kay Irelan, Jeanne Stokes, and Lucia Valenska. Thanks to fellow National Writers Union member Jeannette Cézanne for her diligent fact checking. Thanks to the staff of the Java House at Prairie Lights for letting her overstay her welcome and to the Iowa City *Press-Citizen* for understanding why she had to leave so soon. Thanks always to her partner and best friend, Paul Durrenberger. Finally, thank you to the woman who was there from the start, who always provided invaluable feedback and support every step of the way—Kate Gleeson, an exceptional writer and even more exceptional friend.



# Introduction

Beginning early in our lives, most women have a running dialogue with ourselves about having children. We don't all recognize it for what it is, but this dialogue—in our minds and among our friends—stays with us, emerging throughout our youth, getting louder in late adolescence, becoming a steady hum often shared with our lovers during our twenties and thirties, and ending as either a comfortable chat over coffee or a resentful bickering with ourselves in our later years.

Do I want to be a mother? Would I be a good mother? Will I regret it if I don't have children? Which choice will make me the happiest? These are the questions that some of us answer easily and others agonize over. For those who haven't found easy answers, we have written this book. It may appear we are trying to oversimplify your motherhood decision. We aren't. This is the most personal of decisions and will, of course, remain so. What we hope to do is to share the voices of women who have given us their honest, unvarnished thoughts on the issue. We'll address the concerns and fears that many women have raised, as well as the reasons women consider motherhood—the love, fun, and fulfillment that many women gain as mothers.

For many of us, simply having a real choice about motherhood is revolutionary. Our mothers' generation, for the most part, was the first generation with access to birth control throughout its reproductive years. Because of that newness, our moms may not have perceived many other life options. There are, of course, exceptions, but it's the newness of having the power to decide that makes the decision even tougher, as does the pull of career opportunity, economic necessity, or both.

To begin writing, we explored the sources of women's desires to have children or not have children. We asked women why they felt the way

they did about motherhood and when they first felt that way. This will help us understand where each of us begins to have this dialogue about children.

## **I ALWAYS ASSUMED I'D HAVE CHILDREN.**

Many women operate all their lives under the basic assumption that they will have children. Part of this attitude stems from what some call our “pro-motherhood society,” one in which every woman assumes she’ll have children because “it’s the thing to do.”

*I don't think I ever sat down and said, "Oh, I want to be a mom." I just knew that at some point in my life, I'd be a mother. I always envisioned myself with kids.*

—PORTIA

*I always assumed I would have kids, because that's what women did. Every woman in our family had kids—my aunts, my mom. I never thought of not having them until after I had them. I never thought it was an option not to.*

—JILLIAN

In most cases, women with these assumptions went ahead and had children. There was still a trade-off there, because there are times when a woman looks back and wonders what the other life might have been like. Making a conscious decision helps reduce the appeal of that other path.

## **I NEVER WANTED CHILDREN.**

Some women who never saw themselves as mothers had children anyway, for any number of reasons. Some are pleasantly surprised to discover they’ve grown into a desire for children, whether by an unplanned pregnancy, falling in love, or simply growing older and gaining a new perspective. Others became resigned to the notion that children were an inevitable part of their future, by unplanned pregnancy or simply because it seemed less complicated than the option not to have children. Finally,

of course, there are women who knew they never wanted children and didn't have them.

*I didn't really think I wanted children. I was afraid of childbirth. Family lore was that my mother broke some of her lower vertebrae when she gave birth. So childbirth was terrifying to me. In retrospect, after having my daughter, I wouldn't have wanted to go through life without this experience. It forces you to grow and deal with your own childhood. It expands you.*

—ELLA

*I never knew that I wanted children. They never entered my head until I had them. I'm Catholic. This was over thirty years ago. We had to get married to have sex, you know. I got married, and we weren't allowed to do anything to prevent pregnancy. Raising them was the happiest time of my life.*

—BERNICE

*My plans now are to have my children grow up and move out, and to enjoy what I have left of myself and my life. I'll work till I am forced to retire.*

—JEAN

Among women who choose not to have children are those who, later in their lives, examine their childhoods and point to a particular dynamic that turned them off to motherhood. Others had fine childhoods but are comfortable with the notion that children just aren't for them and that they have other things they want to do with their lives.

*At thirty-eight, I still get comments, mostly from extended family and teenagers. "Isn't it about time you have some kids of your own?" "You'd make a great mom." I probably would make a great mom in some ways, but at the same time I didn't want to make the compromises necessary to be a great mom. I would've had to change my job. I was running a program for*

*homeless teenagers—getting out of bed in the middle of the night, working late hours, dealing with some pretty rotten behavior—and I'd come home stressed out.*

—ELIZABETH

*I graduated high school in 1974, post-Vietnam War. I wondered about the condition of the world I would bring this baby into. And I've always been very interested in animals. I always found it ironic that people focused so carefully about breeding programs for animals but just anyone could go out and have kids.*

—JOSIE

The women who know from the start *why* they didn't want children tend to be at peace when they attend family gatherings without children of their own or watch their friends play with their grandchildren.

## **I DIDN'T THINK SERIOUSLY ABOUT IT UNTIL I WAS OLDER.**

Many women are highly ambivalent about the motherhood decision. That ambivalence may keep you from “thinking about it” while you attend to more immediate issues such as your higher education and early career choices. That same ambivalence may also delay serious love interests until you're in your late twenties or early thirties. If you marry, the question “When are you going to have a baby?” may begin to confront you on a daily basis.

In general, women who aren't thinking about motherhood have lives where the primary focus is separate from children. “Thinking about it” would, in fact, mean deciding to alter the direction of that life.

*I don't think I really wanted kids a lot until I was thirty-five. My ob/gyn prompted me some on that. At thirty-five the “clock is ticking” as they say, and there just isn't that much time left. When I was growing up, the emphasis was much more on getting an education. I was told, “Don't get married until you*

*have a college degree. Get your education so you can take care of yourself no matter what."*

—SARA

*Somehow, in the twenty-two years I've been a lawyer, I got tied to waking up in the morning, putting on a suit, and coming to work. Now that I have a child, I go home early on Wednesdays. The six hours I spend with my little girl are very uncomfortable. Until recently, I'd find myself telling the UPS guy, "I'm really a lawyer, I'm just home because . . .," and he'd be backing away from me.*

—TAMARA

By their midthirties, some women who haven't found a life partner consider single motherhood—an even more radical departure from the lives their mothers led.

*My parents didn't take my choice to be a single mother too well, I think because I'm an only child. Personally, I was most concerned about how I'd support a child on my own. I couldn't really look forward to early retirement or that kind of thing. I've enjoyed traveling in my life and figured that certainly was going to change, which it has.*

—SHAWN

Each decision—whether it be about what job to take, what person to date, or where to live—creates its own trajectory. Assessing your decisions along the way helps you change direction more easily, as you weigh each choice before you.

## **I WAS AMBIVALENT UNTIL WE TRIED AND COULDN'T HAVE THEM.**

For many women, infertility tends to sharpen the desire for children. So a woman who discovers that she can't conceive loses her ambivalence, and having a baby becomes the most important goal in her life. She feels

a loss of control in a life she thought she had under control. She feels robbed of the one thing she always assumed she could do. Others faced with the same challenge come to realize that the life they have without children is OK and probably the life they've wanted all along.

*At twenty-eight, some kind of bizarre hormonal thing went into effect, and I went into this baby frenzy. After two years, I miscarried. About a year later, I lost a baby. Then after another couple of years—doing the whole thing with the temperature and the charts, my husband got shots to boost his sperm—still nothing worked. All of this was taking a toll on us . . . We decided it was time to find something else to do with our lives. Then at age thirty-five, that light switch went off again, and all that baby lust was gone.*

—BONNIE

*It was a traumatic period. I had to finally give up on having a baby. Everything I had ever wanted along the way was possible through hard work, and I was able to achieve it. I just refused to believe I would not have this, that it had nothing to do with hard work. I had to let go of it. I wasn't ready to talk about adoption, but my husband thought I should.*

—JACQUELINE

## **I NEVER WANTED KIDS UNTIL I WANTED OUR CHILD.**

Finally, the great mystery of life is that we never know what's coming around the corner. We can plan. We can make decisions based on those plans. We can set a course. Then suddenly we fall in love and realize for the first time that for us, children will be the ultimate expression of that love. Or we get the job opportunity to travel the world and consciously decide that isn't the life for children.

Many women who are ambivalent or indifferent about children most of their lives express awe and amazement at the fact that once they met the love of their lives, they suddenly wanted a child. Having a child can be the most intimate, exciting time for a couple, an event that nurtures and breathes even more life into the love they feel for each other. Some

couples feel a renewed sense of passion and desire for one another in the realization that their lovemaking will create an entirely new and different human being who carries some of both of them, and whom they see as a manifestation of their eternal love.

*When I was a kid, I didn't think about having children, but when I started dating Bob and then married him, I started thinking about it more seriously. That's when it became real. I wanted to have a baby with him.*

—MONA

## MOVING FORWARD FROM OUR PAST

No one can ever fully predict what the motherhood experience will be like for any woman, but these shared voices can help you see how having or not having children affected other women. With some of the possibilities in mind, you can make as informed a choice as possible and head down the path that's best for you.

Finally, let that quiet dialogue you've been having all your life come to the surface. Express it to people you trust. Talk to yourself out loud. Talk to other women who wavered, and ask them how they feel about their ultimate decision. Weigh the pros and cons, and look critically at your motivations about children. Be sure those motivations are yours, those of the person you have become, before making your decision. Appreciate that you may change your mind as circumstances change and as you grow older, but carefully think through all aspects of this momentous, life-changing decision. In the end, you're likely to be happier with the choice you make.





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