

Leah McLaren: One and done? Why the choice to have a second child isn't always simple ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The news last week that China will discontinue its one-child policy is a major victory for human rights in a totalitarian state, but it's also a pain in the behind for indecisive people everywhere. Just imagine how many of the 90 million eligible Chinese couples are, right at this moment, rolling over to each other in bed and asking with a sigh, "So should we give the little blighter a sibling or just ... leave it at that?"

My husband and I have had many versions of this conversation in the past couple of years since James was born. People always say you "just know" if you want to have another child, but our position on the matter has been one of genuine ambivalence (him) and anguished vacillation (me). The debate in our family, if you can even call it that, goes something like this:

Me (holding a friend's perfect powder-scented newborn at some lunch party): "Oh, wook at de widdle cabbage. Come on, darling, let's have another baby, shall we?"

Husband (raises eyebrow, coughs, turns to host): "Do you have any whisky?"

A few hours later, at home, as James and my stepson Freddy are shrieking and punching each other in the head while sloshing water all over the floor during bath time:

Husband: "So, do you still want another baby then?"

Me: "Hmm. Ermm."

The fact is, once you've actually experienced the reality of new parenthood, it's very hard to justify entering into it again unless one or both of you is driving the agenda with relentless urgency. It's true we could just "let nature take its course," as many people do, but neither of us is particularly fatalistic and willfully recusing yourself from a decision like that just seems a bit daft.

Interestingly, China is not bracing for a massive baby boom as a result of lifting the one-child policy. Less than 2 per cent of Chinese parents say their decision to stop at one was the result of state policy. I say this slightly facetiously, of course, since even the tiniest demographic shift of the needle is seismically colossal if it happens in China. But populationists are predicting that while lots of families will have second babies, many more – in particular, educated, urban members of China's emerging middle class – will choose to be done at one.

And why wouldn't they? Small families are infinitely easier and cheaper for those on decent but not unlimited budgets pursuing a certain quality of life. As the old axiom goes, two kids isn't twice as many as one – it's chaos squared.

Canadians seem to know this. The fertility rate in Canada is one of the lowest in the world, hovering around 1.5 (that's live births on average per fertile woman), well below the population replacement threshold of 2.1. It's even lower than in Europe, where the overall rate is about 1.6 (though it's a much higher 1.94 in France, where increased maternity and child-care benefits have encouraged more working couples to expand their families in recent years).

As these statistics illustrate, the issue of when, if and how many children to have is so complicated and prone to variables that it's really impossible to talk about in general terms.

When I was in my 20s, I asked an older woman I admired when she thought was the best time for a woman to have a baby. She smiled wisely and replied, "Ideally, right after the waters break."

The same logic applies for how many babies to have. Given relatively the same income, relationship circumstance and number of bedrooms, different people will make different choices (and so the right to that choice, whether in China or Canada, is essential).

There is no right answer. And yet we persist in asking the question – of ourselves and everyone else.

One of the more surprising things I've found about becoming a parent is the way it opens you up to bald-faced queries about whether you'll

have another child. Most of us have got the message by now that it isn't polite to ask single and/or childless people when or if they plan to get married or pregnant, but apparently this rule doesn't apply to breeders. Once you've crossed that Rubicon, it seems, you are fair game. When I tell people that my husband and I are ambivalent – that a part of us would love another baby but that we also really don't want to drive a big ugly car or forgo two years of sleep – they look at me as though I'm being horribly unromantic. Perhaps that's true, but it's a foolish person who fails to consider practical realities when it comes to the matter of children.

At least, as a stepmother, I'm spared the annoying question of whether to "give my child a sibling." But I find it strange when people talk about the decision to have a second child as though they are doing it purely for the sake of their first. In truth, most toddlers would much prefer a Nerf Super Soaker to human competition in the form of your biological issue.

I turned 40 this week so I suppose soon nature will make the final decision for my husband and me. That, in a funny way, is something of a relief. I'm aware that there's an invisible totalitarian government ruling over my ovarian follicles and that one of these days it will issue a final decree. I imagine a tiny dictator hollering the official announcement up my fallopian tubes like a bullhorn: "Aged Mitochondria of the Party Faithful: Put down your tools! The shop is now closed!" And that will be that. My own private one-child policy. So be it.

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