

Mind the (age) gap

In an ideal world, I would have had my second baby by the time I turned 30.

My first-born – whom I had at the age of 26 – would be around three years older than her younger sibling.

But that was not meant to be.

I waited, and now my girls are more than six years apart.

The older one is now eight and in Primary 2, while her 18-month-old mei mei (little sister) has not even started potty-training.

Should you wait, like I did, or have another one as soon as possible?

Most experts suggest spacing kids three years apart.

Eveline Gan gets opinions from experts and mums on how best to space kids out

Any pregnancy will pose a strain and stress on the mother, said Dr Chua Yang, a consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist at A Clinic For Women at Mount Alvernia Hospital.

Then, there are the demands of caring for a newborn, making you tired and less fit.

That is why Dr Chua recommends that you wait at least two years before trying for another child.

This gives you time to recuperate

from the pregnancy and delivery, and prime your health and fitness for the next baby.

She said this is especially important for mums who had a complicated pregnancy or delivery – for instance, a caesarean birth.

Back-to-back pregnancies may also compromise a baby's health.

An analysis of studies published in the International Journal Of Obstetrics And Gynaecology last year found that short intervals between

pregnancies – of less than 18 months – increase the risk of pre-term birth.

There might even be a link between autism and close birth spacing, a new study found.

Published in the Journal Of The American Academy Of Child And Adolescent Psychiatry last year, it suggested that children conceived too close together – under a year – had a 50 per cent higher risk of autism, compared with those conceived two to five years after the birth of a sibling.

A wider age gap between kids might also increase their chances of becoming high achievers, according

to a study from the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex last year.

A longer stretch between children allows parents to devote more time to the first kid, said Dr Chong Shang Chee, the head of Child Development Unit at National University Hospital (NUH).

The younger child may even get a boost in her language and emotional development from interacting with a sibling who is at least three to four years older, she added.

DON'T MISS THE BOAT

But do not wait too long to complete your family, especially if you are almost or have passed 35 years old. Having a previous pregnancy does not guarantee another one.

"Fertility is well known to diminish with age," said Dr Chua.

"The older the mum, the higher the risks of pregnancy complications

and birth defects in baby."

She adds that while a second delivery is usually faster and easier, waiting too long cancels out this advantage.

If age is not on your side, be sure to get your health back in tip-top condition after delivery, so you can plan for the next baby.

And when the age gap is too wide, sibling bonding can become a stretch.

Dr Chong said: "Many siblings look for companionship from their brothers and sisters. When the age gap is too big, they cannot play with each other in the same way or at a matched developmental level."

Parenting issues might also crop up. Mr Alfred Tan, executive director of Singapore Children's Society said parents tend to give the younger child a lot of attention, forgetting that the older sibling still needs their attention. The wider the age gap, the

more obvious this is.

When kids do not get the attention they need, that is when problems start.

To get around this problem, Mr Tan advised parents to be sensitive to the older child's needs. Have hubby help out when you are too busy tending to the little one.

"Don't make it seem like kor kor (big brother) has to grow up overnight. Always make sure that either parent is available to give the other kid the time and attention he needs," he said.

However, he feels there is "no right or wrong timing" when it comes to having kids. It is how you parent that matters.

What is important to remember is that children of all ages learn best when mum and dad make them feel secure and loved, said Dr Chong.

"If we are too busy or stressed, then we cannot devote sufficient time to helping our kids achieve their best potential," she said.



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