

Baby tALK

You've met him, you like him, but you're in your 30s and you want a baby. Should you keep schtum or broach the subject?

It's the great injustice when you hit your 30s. While men have all the time in the world, suddenly your biological clock is ticking frighteningly quickly.

In your 20s, the age 30 seemed like this magic distant number where suddenly all the boxes for marriage, mortgages and babies would be ticked off. But in reality more and more of us are finding ourselves single in our 30s - with the added pressure of statements about fertility going 'rapidly downhill after 35' now staring us in the face.

So if you do want to have children and you find yourself dating a potential partner - a man with whom, in the future, you might consider marriage and a baby with - it is only natural that you should wonder about their intentions. But how on earth do you broach this very tricky subject without sending your lovely new beau running for the hills?

It was panic that time was running out that almost ended Sophia's relationship when she forced the subject. Sophia, now 34, had been with her partner for almost two years when an abnormal smear result resulted in her needing treatment.

"Suddenly I was aware of an almighty alarm practically screaming 'get married and have babies immediately! You're not getting any younger!'"

"My boyfriend and I had loosely referred to a vague and distant future where we might get married and have a go at starting a family but only ever in passing and never as an actual plan," she says. "But my reaction to the treatment was extreme and

I issued an ultimatum. I wanted to be married and trying for a baby before I was 35 or we'd have to split.

"Needless to say this was not the way to handle it and it nearly finished us. Luckily, I calmed down and remembered that I believe, 'What will be, will be,' and that I shouldn't force things before we are ready.

"We are getting back to normal now and I hope that it won't be too long now before we can take that next step."

So what is the right way to bring up this tricky subject, either at the start of a new romance or in an established relationship?

It's all about the 'softly softly' approach says relationship counsellor Elly Taylor, author of *Becoming Us, Loving, Learning and Growing Together, the Essential Relationship Guide for Parents*.

"You could begin with an open-ended question such as 'where do you see yourself in two or three years?'" she advises. "Try asking, 'What's important to you? What's in your future?'" and see how he answers. If he says, 'I'd like to have a family at some stage' then you know that you are on the same page."

But what if your man is less forthcoming? Elly suggests observing him around children.

"What is he like with friends' kids?" she says. "Does he talk about nieces or nephews? Concentrate on picking up those signals and being sensitive to the vibes he's giving out. Does he take an interest when you mention other people's children? If you tell him that your best friend is pregnant does he shudder? What vibes is he giving off?"



Keep it casual

Emily, 31, reveals she has been gradually coaxing her boyfriend round to the idea with a drip feed process.

"I started off by joking about it loosely for the first year but then when I turned 30 I pointed out that I would need to have children soon," she says.

"My boyfriend laughed it off at first but in the last year he has started to be a bit more baby-oriented (or perhaps my conversations have sunk in). He doesn't just make jokes when I mention babies now, he sort of looks a bit worried and listens and has started talking about his career and where marriage and babies might fit into that. I'm hoping this time next year we will have moved forward."

If you think babies are firmly in your future then it's important to address this openly, adds Elly. "Be brave enough to ask. It doesn't necessarily mean you are suggesting something, you are just drawing out his opinion on the subject."

The classic mistake many women make is to be too demanding about marriage and babies which causes their partner to recoil.

"Even if he is open to the idea, if you are too forceful and keep bringing it up he might react negatively to the intensity," Elly warns. "If you put yourself in his shoes and your partner was insistent about something you weren't sure you wanted, you'd react to the intensity rather than what they were saying."

"So watch the tone of your voice. It needs to be brought up very casually initially. You need to invest in a relationship to create trust and if you push too hard you could be undermining that trust."

It isn't just men who can feel hesitant. Anita, 33, had been seeing her 42 year-old boyfriend for three months when he mentioned he'd like to get married and start a family as soon as possible.

"I have never really wanted children and made an assumption that being the age he was, he wasn't fussed either," she says.

"But one morning he dropped the bombshell that he'd like to get married and have kids. He explained that given his age he didn't want to leave it too long as he wanted to have the energy to run around after a child. It was a shock but for the first time in my life it didn't seem like such a horrific thought."

Give it time

"I tried to deal with it in a practical way saying that although I am crazy about him

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there was a lot more we needed to discover about each other before even considering a wedding and children.

"I left it by telling him that we would discuss it in six months. He said it was ages, but I pointed out it was only September.

"In truth I know that I won't be ready for at least a year or so but I felt that six months would buy me some time. In my mind I feel that come September, if we are still together I will have made a decision about whether or not I want marriage.

"If I decide I don't, but it is vital to him, then it would only be fair that I end it and let him find somebody who wants kids too.

"The funny thing is that one of my resolutions this year was to try and decide if I wanted children. I just didn't realise that somebody would push me to decide."

When you constantly see photos of friends getting married and having children, it is easy to feel like you are being left behind but it is also important to consider your motives.

Is the person you are considering marrying and having babies with definitely the right one for you? Or is the real issue that you desperately feel that you need to start a family?

"It is essential to look at what stage the relationship is at," concludes Elly. "All relationships go through stages. At first there is that really romantic, coming together stage. However, this inevitably wears off and we become more of who we are. "We relax and express when we are frustrated or annoyed and that is the side you need to know before you even consider having a baby together.

"The fact is that parenthood can leave you exhausted, fatigued, distracted and stressed. Can you cope with each other in those situations? It is important to get to know your partner well and to accept who they are in their entirety. Not just the good bits.

Having a baby will change a lot for you - so before you pursue it with your partner, be sure it's what you want too.

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