

Growing up as they grow old: my life with older parents



For my mum's 50th birthday we had lots of celebrations, cake and presents. Or I assume we did, because, in reality I don't remember. What I do remember is her embarrassment when I was telling my friends and teachers at school how old she was. I was seven, excited about a birthday without any knowledge of the implications of the number, that age was something to be embarrassed about at all, or that my parents were in any way different to those of my friends.

[The Office for National Statistics](#) recently released figures showing that half of 30-year-old women in 2020 were childless, and that in the UK the number of children women have by the time they turn 30 is at an all-time low (0.96). These figures prompted discourse about the implications of women having children older, or not having children at all.

My mum was 43 years old when I was born, and my dad was 53. I am the youngest of four siblings, with my two oldest brothers being

from my dad's previous marriage. There are parts of our family life that, as an adult, I have used for the punchline of jokes; my dad has grandchildren older than me, I have been an auntie since the day I was born, when I was aged 17 my dad was 70. It seems that more children are going to grow up like me, with parents who are, let's face it, old.

For the increasing number of babies born to parents of thirty or, shock horror, even older, there are some benefits. Primarily financial stability, cited by the ONS as one of the main reasons women and couples are waiting longer to have children. By the time I was born my parents both had established careers. They sent me and my brother Josh to fee paying schools, something which I feel conflicted about but nonetheless grateful for.

My dad started winding down his work as a documentary film editor when I was 10, which meant that we had a much closer relationship than in my earlier life, when he would spend weeks locked away in an editing suite. The day before my A Level results were released he insisted we go for a long walk, when all I wanted to do was huddle in a ball of stress. It was only later that I realised he knew me and the intricacies of my anxiety so well, that he knew what I needed better than I did: some time in nature, the freedom to talk or to be silent with someone who would listen, and the nourishment only a pub lunch could give.

Lucy Bell, whose parents were 41 and 47 when she was born, had a similar experience: "My Dad took early retirement, so he was retired before I even got to secondary school," she said. "This meant that there was almost always someone around in the house. I didn't even have my own set of house keys for a long time, because there was always someone in when I came home from school."

I'm not going to pretend there aren't implications to couples having children at an older age, whether that is out of choice or life circumstance. My dad had cancer in 2021 and a bout of severe sepsis following treatment meant we had to call an ambulance. When the paramedics arrived, they asked me what my relationship was to him. I knew they'd assumed I was his granddaughter. People can get cancer at any age of course, but visiting him on the geriatric ward surrounded by some extremely elderly people, it felt like a glimpse into my not-so-distant future.

Our family feels a lot smaller in some ways because of my parents' age, something which Bell related to. "My friends have grandparents and even great-grandparents still around, whereas my family only stretches back a single generation for me," she said. "I would have liked to have known my grandparents, and for them to have got to know me as an adult." Naturally, this is a concern some older parents share.

Sharon Luca-Chatha, in her late 30s when her son was born, worries about the limited time she might have with future grandchildren. "I don't know what my health will be like or how old I will be when my grandchildren are born, or how old they'll be when I pass," she said. "They might not remember me. They might not know anything much about me."

I'm sure there are a multitude reasons why women are having children at an older age, or having fewer children, and choice is only a small element of that. But you cannot choose the circumstances you are born in to or who your parents are. There are things I worry about: will my twenties and thirties be dominated by concern about my parent's health, if I get married will my dad be there to walk me down the aisle, if I have children will they know their grandparents? Ultimately these are all things outside my control. My parents may not get TikTok references and they may be the same age as other people's grandparents. But they are my parents, and I wouldn't have it any other way.