

one year, two years,

Is there an ideal age

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IT STARTED JUST BEFORE MY DAUGHTER REACHED the ripe old age of six months.

“So? Are you thinking about number two?”

The first time, I thought, *For sure this is a diaper-related question*. No one could possibly be looking at my squishy little baby, wondering when I was planning to bake her sibling!

But the question kept coming, and I realized that although having a second child wasn’t in my short-term plans, other moms were actively trying to get another one growing.

Every parent has his or her own idea of the optimal number of

years between siblings. There are the “get it over with” supporters, who sacrifice five years of sleep and prefer to have kids close in age. Life gets foggy with a brand new baby, so maybe these folks have the right idea. Chances are they won’t remember the insanity of it all when their kids are seven and eight, happily playing together somewhere other than underfoot.

Alternatively, the “only one kid in diapers” camp believes in getting a year or more of good sleep (and saving money on nappies) before diving in again. There are drawbacks to waiting, of course, like having to store all your baby gear. But, to me, it’s worth the



three or more...

gap between kids?

effort. I've decided I want more time in my pre-motherhood jeans before readopting a wardrobe of elastic waistbands.

For some reason, I have it in my head that three is the ideal number of years between siblings. (Although, of course, there is always the possibility nature will take the decision out of my hands. I could accidentally get pregnant tomorrow, or I could find out after years of trying that my daughter is destined to be a singleton.)

"You have the perfect family," I tell Erin MacDonald, a 37-year-old small business owner in Halifax. Her children – seven-year-old Molly and four-year-old Sam – happen to be three years and three

months apart. "Really?" she replies, laughing the kind of laugh that so many parents know well – the one that says life is insane and far from perfect but....

"Yeah," she concedes with a happy sigh. "It's good."

MacDonald obviously didn't over-think this decision the way I've been. For her, the three-year age difference was simply the best way to manage life at the time.

"With the one-year maternity leave, it didn't make sense to immediately have another baby, because I'd just be back at work when I got pregnant again," she says. ►

Maren Kubik, a 30-year-old mother from Calgary, agrees. Her daughter, Briar, is two. "I always thought that we would kind of go 'bam bam' and just get it over with. But then you get into it, you go back to work and it just changes."

Returning to the office can be a mixed bag for a new mom. On the upside, you get to use your brain for intelligent thought again, but as soon as you go back, co-workers may view you as a ticking time bomb of second-time gestation. (Heaven forbid you eat a burger and fries for lunch – rumours will start to fly.)

"I'm in this weird void at work," Kubik explains. "My career seems so stagnant. I feel like I could do so much more and there are more opportunities, but does anyone want to give them to me right now? Because they know I want to have more kids."

In a way that's an argument for having your kids close together – you take the career hit once, then go back at it full-force when your family is complete. But decisions about how many, and when, are more complicated than that.

"I know friends who had babies really close together and that's what worked for their families. But it just seemed like a big war. Afterwards they're like, 'Whoa,'" MacDonald says. She wanted her first-born to be a little more independent before introducing baby number two. "I just wasn't in a space where I wanted to be all about babies. I wanted to take it slow. This is such a cool period in your kid's life; I didn't want to miss anything."

Kubik worries whether her daughter will miss one-on-one time with mom and dad when a baby brother or sister enters the picture. "When another kid comes along, your time isn't totally devoted to your first child," she says. "So how's Briar going to feel?"

Nina Howe has spent a lot of time thinking about this. She's a professor of early childhood and elementary education at Concordia University in Montreal who researches sibling relationships and their impact on how children learn about the social world.

"In some ways [sibling relationships] are a natural laboratory for learning how to express yourself," says Howe. "How do you learn to play and take turns? How do you care for the feelings of another person, so that, hopefully, they'll do the same for you? It's a very rich relationship."

However, Howe can't tell me whether I'm right about there being an ideal number of years between siblings.

"That's the \$100 million-dollar question," she says. "I don't think there's a very clear answer. One thing I would say is an age gap of between one and three years is probably optimal, in the sense that the older one is not going to have any memories of being an only child." The kids grow up thinking they've always had a sibling

because they can't remember when they didn't. Their concept of family doesn't shift very much when the new baby arrives.

"It doesn't mean there won't be any disruptions," says Howe. "They're going to have temper tantrums and regress. But generally those things fade after a few months."

What about age gaps of more than three years? Howe says that means the children are in such completely different developmental phases that it can be difficult for parents to plan activities everyone can handle.

Linda Violo could write a book about that challenge. In fact, she has: three self-published children's stories (with a fourth due out soon) inspired by her experiences with her widely-spaced kids, who are now five, 12, 16 and 22 years old.

"I didn't plan to space my children the way they are," says Violo. "But it's been brilliant for me. I've heard from parents of siblings who are closer together that the exhaustion just takes you over. It's not that I haven't been an exhausted mom. But there was time and space for each one – and yourself, too."

There's a four-year age difference between David Yiptong's daughters, and the Calgary engineer sees it as largely positive. In practical terms, it was great: No need to buy another crib or infant car seat and no need for the dreaded double stroller that makes it look like you're trying to drive a minivan through Starbucks.

Now that his girls are five and nine, they're starting to interact more. But that doesn't mean they always want to do the same things. Yiptong isn't convinced it's because of the years between them. "For me, it's hard to separate what's the result of age versus what's the result of personality." Even if they were only one or two years apart, his eldest would still want to read and his youngest would still want to play. Since you can't plan what your children's interests will be, his advice on the sibling age gap question is to stick with what feels most manageable to you.

Violo agrees. Ask yourself "what is going to be great for you – because *you* have to navigate it," she says.

My hemming and hawing has already eliminated the possibility of having two kids in diapers (provided potty training goes the way it should). If I don't get my act together soon, I'll eliminate the possibility of hitting my ideal age gap, too. Knowing my penchant for procrastination, our daughter will be in grade school before she gets a sibling, if she gets one at all.

Since I can't turn back time, I don't have a choice – but after talking and talking and talking about the subject of spacing, I'm truly at peace with the idea of more than three years between my children. And, no matter what happens, at least I'll have a few good nights' sleep under my belt, elasticized or not. ■



Kid-spacing across the country

Statistics Canada recently looked at the age gap between biological children in families where there is at least one child younger than 18 still living at home.

Their number crunching suggests about 40 percent of Canadian families are in the "have them close together" camp, spacing their children one to three years apart. On the flip side, it seems about 37 percent of families believe in catching up on sleep before adding another kid to the household; their children were born three to five years apart.

The upshot? Canadians aren't making a strong statistical statement about preferred family dynamics. And, the numbers don't take fate into account. It's entirely possible that many of these families had grand intentions to space kids closer together or further apart, only to learn the most important lesson in parenting: When it comes to having kids, you are no longer in control.