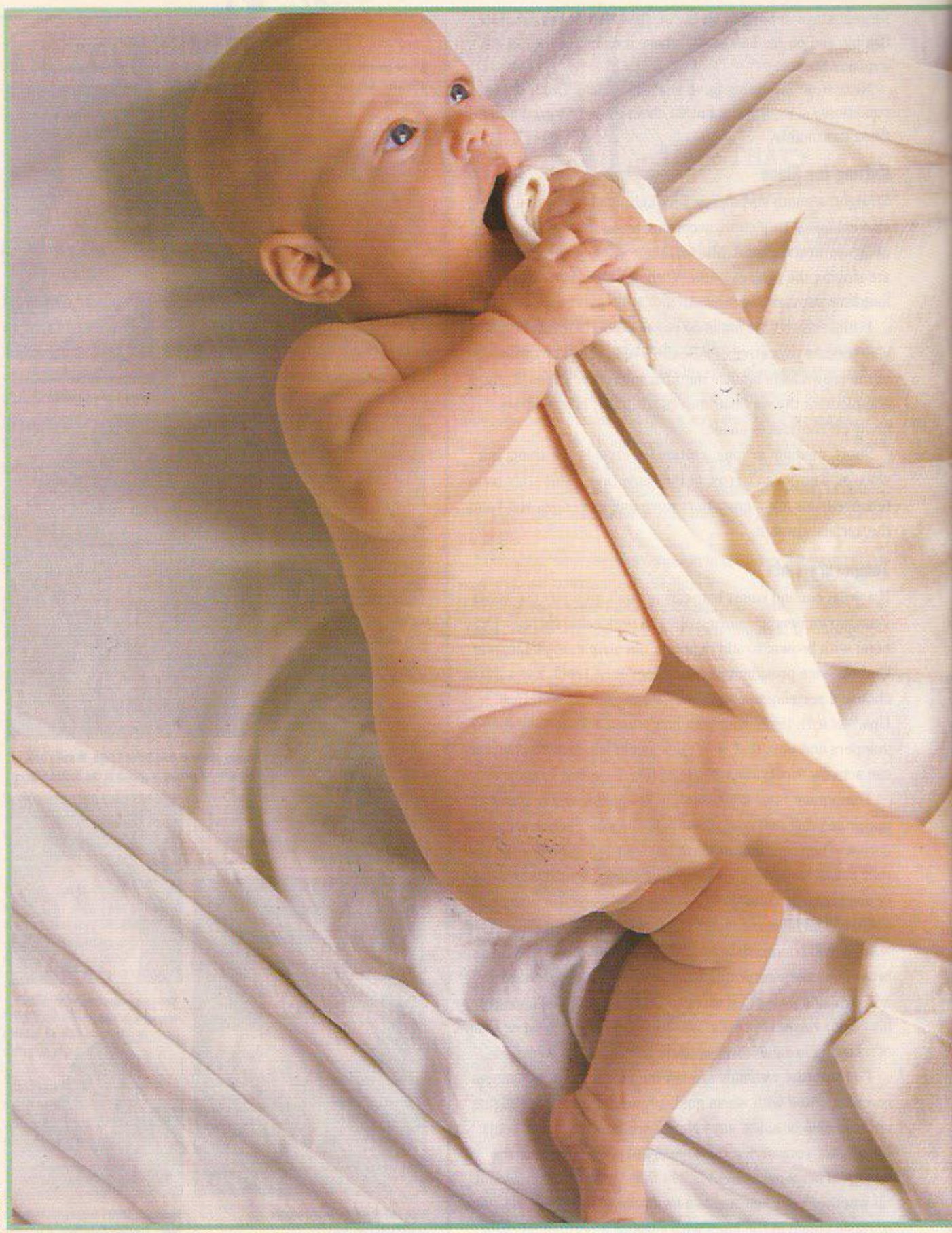
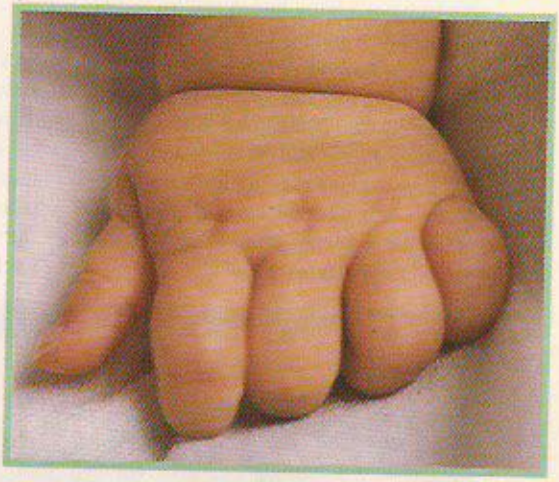


baby LUST

Is it fashion, passion or hormones?



I never cared much for babies. The youngest of three in my family, I was used to *being* babied, not babying others. The few times I picked up an infant (usually one that was thrust into my arms by a friend or relative who insisted, "Don't you want to hold her?"), it spit up on me. By the time I was 25, I was so adamant in my decision not to have a child, that when my husband-to-be told me he wanted 13 kids, I shot back, "So go open a day-care center." He was joking. I wasn't.

I suppose I shocked myself more than anyone when at age 28 I began fantasizing about having a family. I remember sitting alone at the kitchen table after work imagining that my fiancé (who lived 600 miles away at the time) and a sticky-faced toddler in a high chair were sitting right there along with me. ►

by Diana Tonnessen

Over the months that followed, I became obsessed. I was wildly (though secretly) envious of my sister when she announced that she was expecting. I began noticing pregnant women on the street and in the supermarket. Geez, they were everywhere! And when I held my sister's newborn for the first time (no, it didn't spit up on me), I knew I was hooked on becoming a mother myself.

A couple of years later, I confided to a friend that I'd become really careless about using birth control.

"What are you using?" she asked.

"I'm not," I confessed. Two months later I was happily pregnant—and still more than a little bewildered. The desire to have a baby had come incredibly swiftly and was at times overwhelming. I began to wonder if there really was such a thing as "baby lust." And if so, then what was causing it? Was it a biologically based "maternal instinct," or was there some psychological trigger—a need to be needed, or to not miss out on having kids, perhaps—that was driving me to yearn for a child?

We still don't know what to make of childless couples

Actually, researchers in many fields, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, biology and physiology, have been grappling for years with the fundamental question, "Why do we have children?" And the theories run the gamut from pure biological urge to societal brainwashing.

Baby Machines

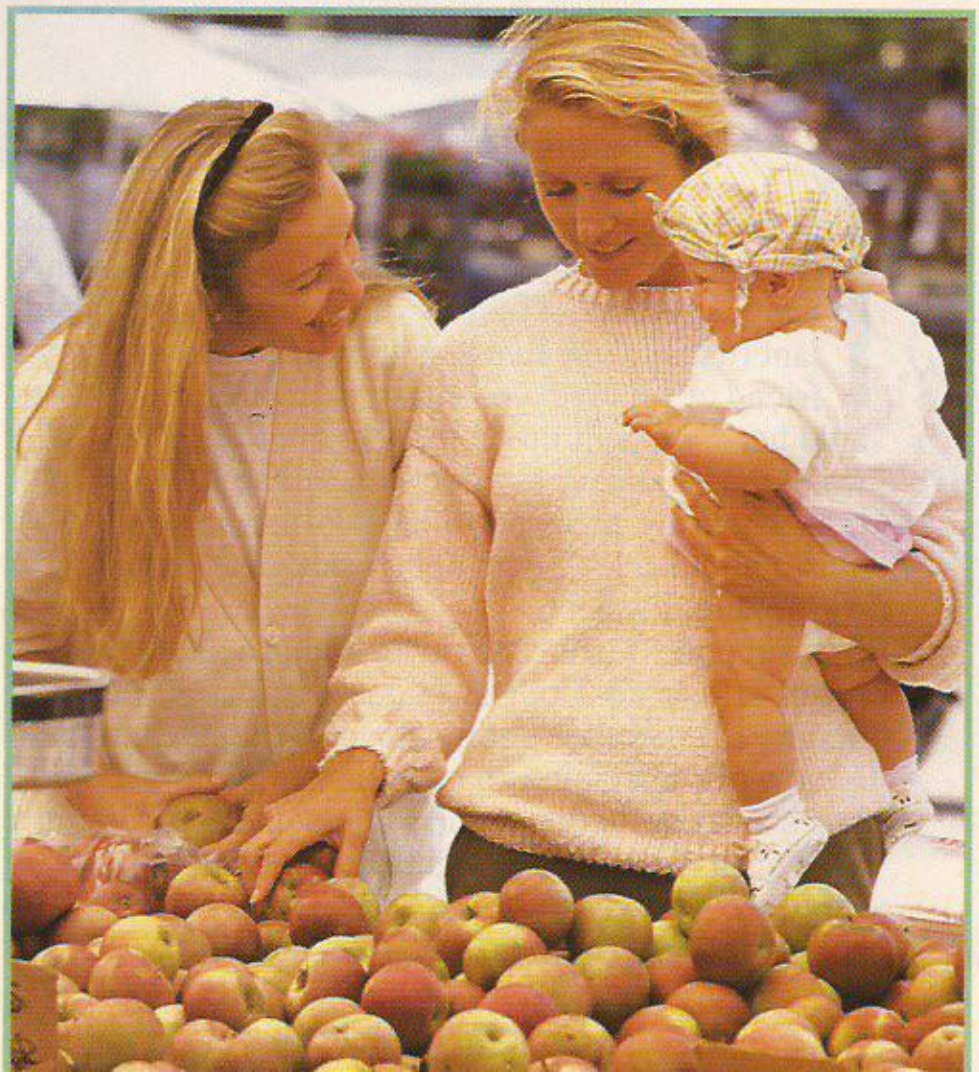
Few women today like to think of themselves as "baby machines." Yet before the feminist movement, it was widely held that a woman's primary role was to reproduce. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, theorized around the turn of the century that the female desire to procreate was a result of penis envy—a woman's wish to incorporate and retain the penis.

Although most psychologists have abandoned such a Freudian interpretation of women's reproductive urge, the idea that the desire is instinctual has persisted. In the late 1940s and 1950s, psychoanalysts Helene Deutsch and Therese Benedek, both of whom extensively studied the psychology of motherhood, believed women had a need to mother that was firmly rooted in biology. What's more, a school of psychologists led by Erik Erikson, who in the 1960s developed a popular model of adult development, held that a woman would somehow suffer psychologically and would be less of a woman if she didn't have children.

Women today still speak of an instinctual attraction to motherhood. Psychotherapist Eva Margolies reports that one in three of the 1,000 women she interviewed for her book *The Motherhood Report* (Macmillan, 1987) said their decision to get pregnant was based on a "biological pull."

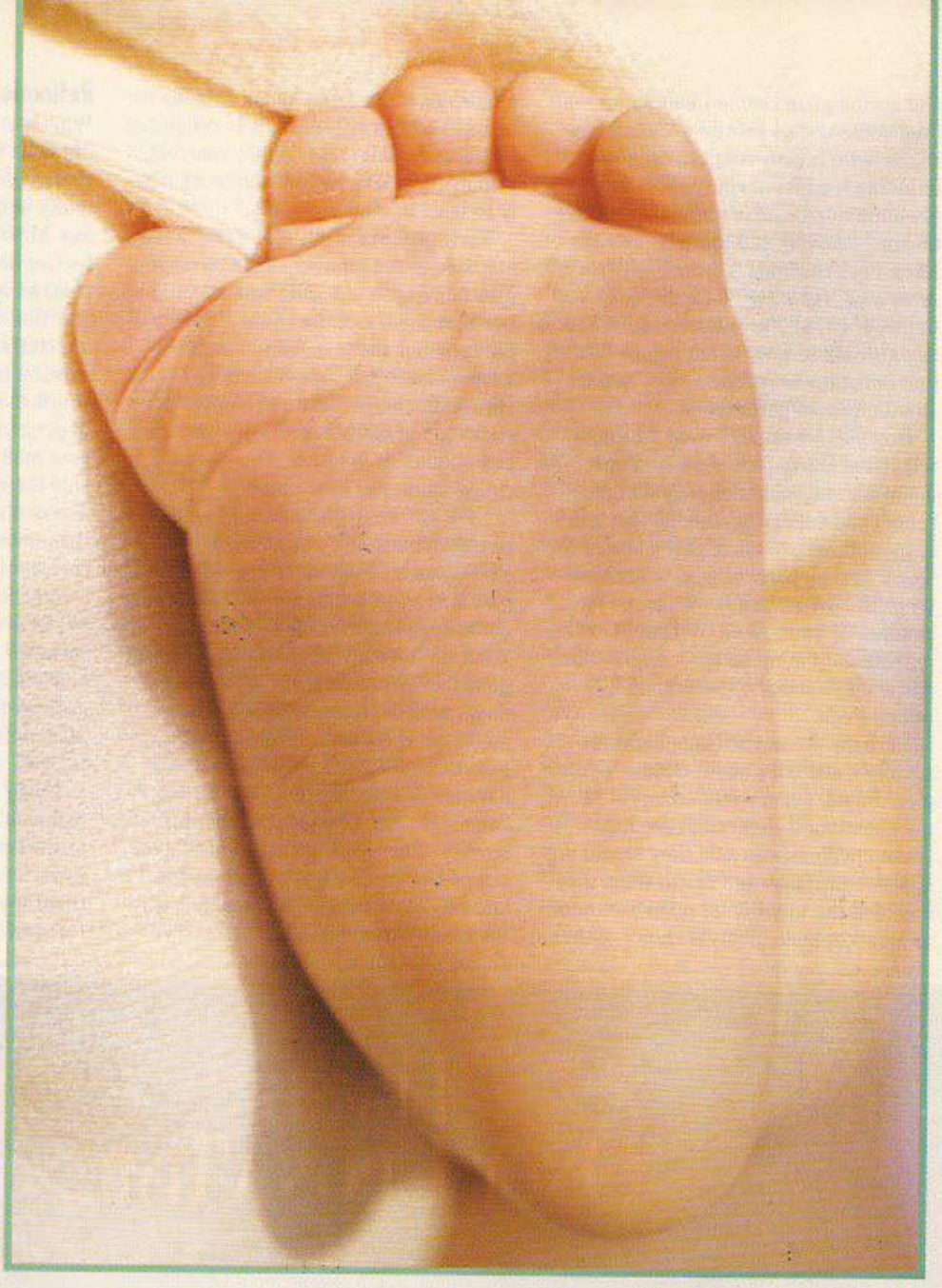
Nurturing Hormones

If there is such a "natural" urge, hormones should be behind it. After all, these powerful substances govern our reproduction—menstruation, pregnancy and menopause—and can wreak havoc with emotions as well. As sociologist Nancy Chodorow writes in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (University of California Press, 1978), "Menstruation is affected by stress, and women have



If you've got the urge to become a mom, you'll notice—and make contact with—infants everywhere.

LIZ NAPLES: STYLED BY MEG GOLDMAN; HAIR AND MAKEUP BY TRACY SONDERN; BABY'S CLOTHES FROM SPACE KADETS; HAT FROM SHOCKY; SWEATER, LEFT, BY JOAN VASS; SWEATER, RIGHT, BY MARGARETTA.



Why do we lose all reason at the sight of those tiny, perfect toes? It seems societal brainwashing isn't entirely to blame.

'false pregnancies.' " Couldn't those same hormones fuel a woman's desire to have kids?

At least some research on animals seems to suggest it's so. Male and virgin female rats injected with female hormones exhibit maternal behavior, such as nest-building. And the psychological literature is full of examples of biologically based maternal behavior in fish, birds and other mammals.

However, studies of people with sex chromosome abnormalities conducted at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore are more equivocal on the hormone theory. John Money and Anke A. Ehrhardt interviewed and observed more than 80 children with sex chromosome abnormalities. They found that boys with androgen insensitivity syndrome (who have female-looking genitals, don't respond to the male hormone androgen and are raised as girls) want children and are just as nurturing toward them as hormonally and chromosomally normal females. Girls with Turner's syndrome (who have malformed ovaries and, at most, only traces of female reproductive hormones) also have a strong desire to have children.

Ehrhardt concludes that although hormones do seem to affect maternal behavior in humans in some cases, "one must be cautious in attributing too much to [them]. We know that gender identity differentiation in human beings, as in other primates, depends on the interaction of several factors in which social environmental experiences play a major, if not the most important, role."

A Maternal Psyche?

Psychologists point to another body of research suggesting that "maternal instinct" in humans is largely a myth. Studies on rhesus monkeys in the 1960s and 1970s conducted by the late Harry F. Harlow at the University of Wisconsin showed that monkeys raised without a mother or siblings didn't know how to care for infants as adults. He concluded that maternal behavior, at least in the higher primates—and probably in humans—is learned.

Still, maternal behavior is different from the desire to reproduce, counters Helen Fisher, an anthropologist at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. "Although nature perhaps hasn't given us many clues as to whether we have a craving to reproduce, she's given us thousands of mechanisms to make us crave sex," she says. "We come from a heritage of females that have a periodic explosion of sexuality." Among higher primates such as chimpanzees, females hunt out partners and copulate with as many as they can find. And sexologists have confirmed that women are capable of multiple orgasms. "So physiologically, women are built for high sexual capabilities," says Fisher. "And the end product of sexual activity is reproduction."

The "Pronatal" Push

In the mid-1970s, however, feminists

and sociologists claimed that subtle (and some not so subtle) societal messages were mainly responsible for conditioning women to reproduce. The phenomenon became known as "pronatalism." "Simply and literally," writes Ellen Peck in *Pronatalism: The Myth of Mom and Apple Pie* (Thomas Y. Crowell, 1974), "pronatalism refers to any attitude or policy that is 'pro-birth,' that encourages reproduction, that exalts the role of parenthood."

How are we conditioned? Through television shows, advertisements, women's magazine fiction and high school and college textbooks that glorify parenthood, to name just a few of the ways. And by parents who tell their little girls, "When you grow up and have children of your own..." "That litany is repeated, creating an early impression of the inevitability of parenthood," writes Peck.

Perhaps the most telling signs are society's attitudes about childless couples. In one survey 69 percent of people questioned about their feelings about childlessness said they would not approve of classroom discussions that included the mention of nonparenthood as an acceptable lifestyle choice. Other studies have found childless couples to be seen as "more selfish, less religious, less responsible, less happily married, less mature, less natural and more likely to have mental problems."

Furthermore, in spite of a predicted increase in the number of childless couples more than a decade ago, the number remains about the same. "Few people consider the possibility of not having children," says Sharon K. Houseknecht, associate professor of sociology at Ohio State University in Columbus. "It is rather a matter of deciding when and how many."

"We talk a big game about being pronatal, but I don't think we are at all," counters Fisher. "What do most parents say to a daughter after she gets out of high school? 'Go to college.' What do they say after college? 'Get a good job.' What do they say about getting married? 'Keep your job. You might get divorced.' What does the government say about day care? 'No national funding for that.' " Still, she concedes, "we're a very schizophrenic society. The word 'spinster' has fallen out of our vocabulary, but when you see childless women, you wonder why they didn't have children."

Reflection Time

Whether or not pronatal messages condition us to want children, social changes in the last 25 years have definitely altered the *timing* of childbearing. Most women have a variety of effective birth-control methods to choose from as well as access to safe, legal abortion. So it's easier to postpone having children. In addition, advances in medical technology over the past 15 years and a reassessment of the risks of pregnancy and childbirth after age 35 now make it easier and more acceptable for women over 35 to give birth. These changes mean that more women than ever are opting to put off starting their families. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the number of first births to women ages 25 to 49 more than doubled between 1970 and 1982. Most dramatic were the increases for women between the ages of 30 and 34, whose first births more than tripled.

Could it be that postponing children makes baby lust, when it finally hits, strike harder than ever? Perhaps so, especially since women are well aware that they can't postpone their decision forever. The majority of couples inter-

viewed by therapist N. Maxine Soloway for a study on delayed childbearing at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, said that the woman's biological clock was a major factor influencing the decision to start a family. Soloway also found that the ticking of the clock seems to set off a psychological alarm in dual-career couples that pushes them to reassess career and personal goals. "It's this pressure that appears to trigger an assessment of 'where I am and who I am now,' " she says.

Studies on adult development confirm that a phase of self-introspection and questioning quite often starts in the 30s. Research by Daniel J. Levinson, a psychologist at Yale University, suggests that adults go through a transition period at around age 30 and again at 40, when they look back at the last decade and try to reevaluate their lives. Levinson's research also suggests that as our own parents enter old age—or die—when we reach our 30s and 40s, many of us are reminded of our own mortality. And most people see children as a way to keep some part of themselves alive.

Women interviewed for *The Motherhood Report* talked of a need to take care of someone and be cared for by someone. "From a very young age, women are taught to nurture, to empathize, as well as to develop close relationships," Margolies says. "Many of those women also reported a desire to mother in order to re-create the early feelings of closeness and merging that they had—or wished they had—with their own mothers. A lot of women told us very directly that the desire to have a child was to re-create their own childhood in a more perfect way."

A Hidden Hunger

When I look back at my own journey into motherhood, I see how many of these factors influenced my decision to have a baby. In my 20s, I was too busy getting an education and establishing my career to think about starting a family. When I began fantasizing about babies, I was working 12 to 14 hours a day, plus weekends. And I came home to an empty house. Under those circumstances, who wouldn't begin to wonder, "Is that all there is?" By then, I had started biological clockwatching. I worried too that the gynecological problems that plagued me in my 20s would keep me from having children if I waited too long.

I like to believe that I was somewhat realistic about motherhood (the baby in my dreams, after all, *did* have a dirty face) and that I wasn't "brainwashed" by society into wanting a child. Still, I'm aware that there's a part of my decision to have a baby that defies explanation. For what sane, rational woman would subject herself to a nine-month "period of confinement" that ultimately makes her look like she swallowed a watermelon, then agonize through hours of indescribable labor pain only to deliver a baby that cries all the time, keeps her awake at night and spits up on her? (And that, I'm told, is only the beginning.)

Obviously, this urge to have children—whatever causes it—is incredibly powerful. It certainly isn't all rational. And quite possibly, it may never be fully explained. But I gave in to it once. And when my four-week-old son finally stopped crying long enough to smile at me for the first time, I knew that I would give in to it again. H

DIANA TONNESSEN *is a freelance health and medical writer in Gainesville, Florida.*