

Mind the gap

Is there such a thing as the perfect age gap between siblings? We speak to four moms to find out what they think

BY CAMILLA RANKIN

So many parents who want more than one child try to riddle out this big question: what is the perfect age gap? Psychologist, Warren Cann says that waiting 18 to 23 months after the birth of your last child before conceiving is ideal, as there can be health complications for both mother and baby where the interval between birth and conception is very short, and also when it is very long – five years or more. Other medical studies claim a gap of 24 to 35 months between babies as ideal. From a psychological perspective, Warren suggests an age gap of between two and four years often produces the worst sibling rivalry, while there seems to be less jealousy if the gap is more than five years (they have already had a lot of attention from their parents and are more independent) or less than 18 months (when they are too young to understand their position in the family and are thus not threatened). Sound confusing? We chatted to mothers who have chosen different age gaps and found out what they felt and how they coped.



12-month gap

Astrid Corubolo's first child Giorgia (3½) was just 3 months old when she fell pregnant with her second baby. "I wanted pregnancy and babyhood over and done with. I would have had an even smaller

gap if I had been able to; I thought having another so soon would just be double the pleasure!" she explains, "I really took strain in the second pregnancy though. I don't think the human body is equipped to have back-to-back pregnancies and I suffered from divarification of stomach muscles, a massive abdominal hernia and thinning out of membranes. I had so little to give to Giorgia at that point. Thankfully she was obsessed with her dad and she was oblivious to the fact that I was pregnant.

"Jethro was in an incubator for two months after birth. My husband, Greg, brought Giorgia in but she showed very little interest in the baby – she took one look at Jethro and asked to explore the hospital.

"The first year was hell; the sleep deprivation was horrific. But as they have grown up, they have developed such a close bond. There were never any issues of jealousy, they share with each other, really care about the other's emotional state, play well together and the gap is close enough that learning happened easily from the younger to the elder. A word of warning though: two kids in such close succession definitely wreaks havoc on your relationship with your husband. I feel like Greg and I don't spend enough time connecting with each other.

"There are days that I think I was mad to have done this to myself. But they are each other's best friends and constant companions. It was the best move I could have made."



20-month gap

"I don't know that there is a perfect age gap. We wanted to have children close together so that they would be able to play with each other," says Louise Strydom, mother to Jessie (5) and Sadie (3 ½).

"We found out I was pregnant about ten days before Jessie's first birthday. The pregnancy was pretty exhausting. Jessie only learnt to walk at 15 months, so for those first few months of morning sickness she was still very much a baby. The pregnancy, together with carrying a toddler eventually put such strain on my back that my lower back went into chronic spasms and I landed up on crutches for several weeks.

"Jessie understood that there was a 'baby in Mummy's tummy', especially once the baby could kick and she could feel it moving. She loved helping us get the baby's room ready, putting all of the clothes away and arranging the baby's toys. So when she met her sister, Sadie, the day after she was born, Jessie was so excited. She was always very gentle with her sister and never showed any signs of jealousy. She would sometimes want to sit on my lap when Sadie was being fed but we tried to avoid this by always having a book to read or something to do, and sitting on the couch where she could sit next to me.

"The first few months were exhausting but I figured that the best way to cope >



was to try to get the girls to sleep at the same time during the day, which gave me a break in the day. By the time the baby was 4 months old it was much easier and when Sadie turned 2 the girls started to play together properly.

“Having small kids with a small gap definitely requires a lot of work. It is hard making sure they both get enough attention but there are many wonderful moments.”



3-year gap

Caroline Low’s oldest child, Olivia (6) met her first brother, Henry (3), when he was a few hours old

– she was about to turn 3. “Olivia was gently affectionate, curious and excited”, tells Caroline, “We had told her that we were having a baby when I was 12 weeks pregnant and she took the scan photos in to nursery school to tell everybody. Olivia was quite independent for her age, so was able to play independently. She also spoke very well and could follow instructions, which made it easier to explain what was going on. She was fine leading up to the birth and for the first couple of months.

“The hardest bit was at 3 to 4 months – Olivia’s jealousy and Henry’s appetite both kicked in simultaneously! I spent a lot of time breastfeeding him, which impacted on what I could do with Olivia, and she became very jealous. I had particular problems when trying to settle Henry – Olivia would bang loudly on the door and once she deliberately soiled her pants even though she was fully potty trained by 2½. She was showing me that she could be a baby too.”

“For me, a three-year gap works better than a two-year one, and I would have chosen a three-year age gap again if our contraception had worked! A three-year gap makes it easier to respond to both

children’s needs. When Adam was born, Henry was only 2 and it was really tough. Henry felt he was still my baby when Adam was born and felt very threatened. He wasn’t able to understand (in the way

“It is hard making sure they both get enough attention.”

Olivia was) that there would be a new baby and that Adam needed my attention too. Henry dealt with this by regressing so that it felt that there was a one-year gap between them rather than a two-year gap. Also, on a practical level it is harder work with two children in nappies who are less independent. However, on the plus side, I think Henry and Adam will be closer growing up, which is a bonus.”



5-year gap

“A female work mentor with four children once told me that she had given herself four years to ‘recover’

mentally, emotionally and physically from each pregnancy and this had allowed her to capably connect with each child,” tells Clare Gomes, mother to Rebecca (9) and Jack (4). “As it so happened, it was only when Rebecca was about 3 that I felt ‘ready’ to become a mother again. I don’t think that there is such a thing as a perfect age gap at all – my mom had four children in six years and she coped because she had help, a husband and a sense of humour!”

“As a 4-year-old, Becs was fascinated by my pregnancy and so excited! She was interested in my changing body and loved feeling Jack kick. When he was born she was completely in love with him. Becs was involved with the new baby in a caring and mature way. However, she battled with me not being able to give her the same amount of attention. I realise I expected her to grow up in a hurry and she

had to take responsibility for things I had helped her with in the past overnight, like getting dressed and brushing her teeth. I underestimated what a profound impact Jack’s arrival had on Rebecca – she felt it as a loss of me. If I could do it again, I would proactively set aside time for just her and me to do some of the things we did before Jack arrived.

“Becs is moving into a ‘friend-orientated’ time of her life and sometimes that does not include Jack, which is difficult for him to understand. Becs is such a hands-on big sister and feels special because she has a role to play in guiding Jack, teaching him and emotionally supporting him – which she does in a beautiful, motherly way.”

There are also many variables when it comes to choosing the age gap between your children – some of which don’t become apparent until you’ve had your children and they’re well on their way to growing up and forging bonds. And of course, temperament will always play a key role in how your children relate to each other regardless of the age gap.

To this end, when it comes to choosing the gap it’s probably wise to think in practical terms. You may need to move to a bigger home, but not be in a position to afford it. It might be more practical to wait for your first child to have outgrown his cot, high chair and potty so you don’t have to go out and buy duplicates. On the other hand, you might be in the life stage where having your babies close together is perfect for you. There will be a period of adjustment for everyone in the house regardless of each child’s age but in the end it is likely that factors such as personality, gender, and individual interests – rather than age alone – will have more to do with how well your older children (and you!) cope with a new sibling. The best advice, says Warren, if you have a choice, is to wait until you feel you can cope with the family you have now before you start planning to increase the demands of being a parent. ●