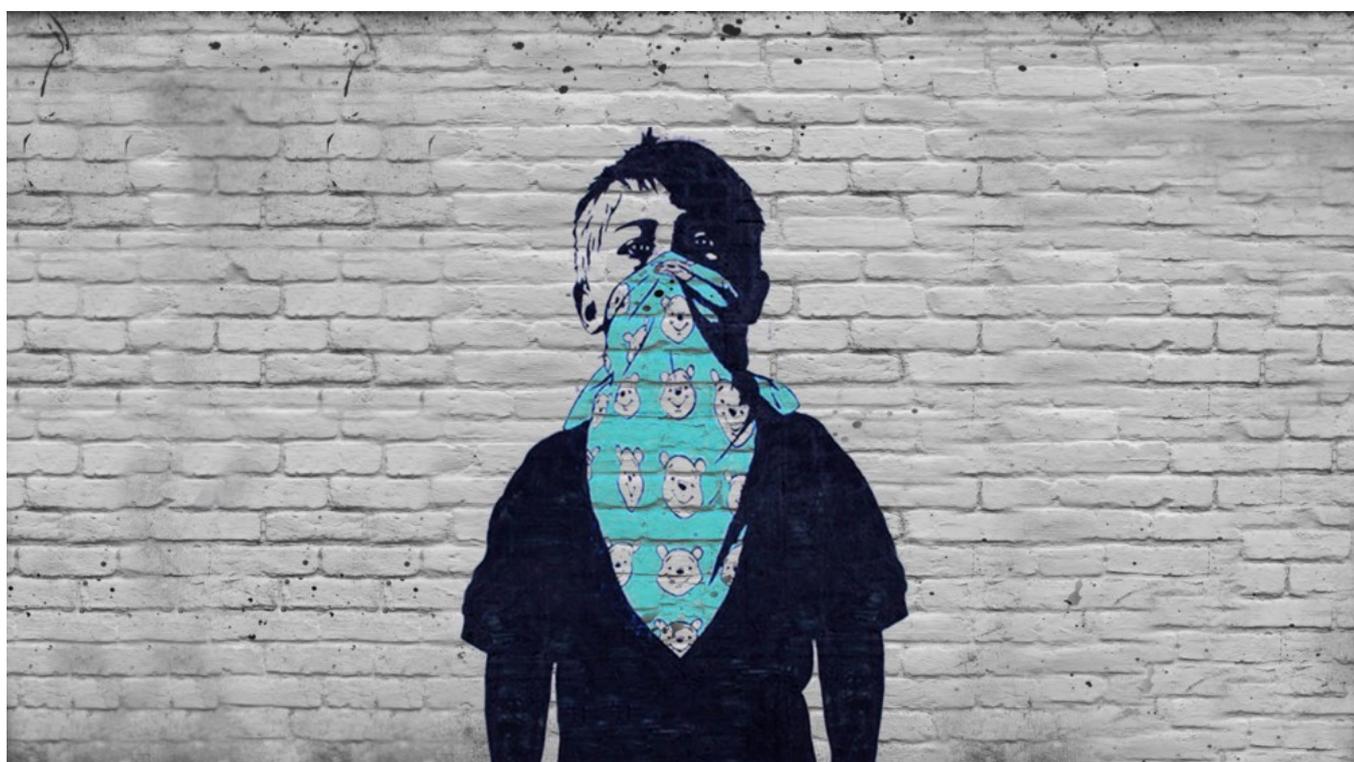


# Read This If You're Not Sure You Want Kids

“I could go either way”

[Kris Gage](#) Apr 1

Motorcyclist, Software Manager, Drink-Slinger of the South 🍺 Shoot me your email @ <http://bit.ly/2CXgcv5>



**“I’m not sure.”**

Yeah, me neither. And we’re not alone.

People are increasingly unsure about kids, and the US and European fertility rate is at an all-time low. According to [Pew Research Center study](#), 1 in 5 people will remain childless. That’s doubled since the 1970s.

**Uncertainty is higher among women than men**

Women are not just *delaying* babies; they're debating them altogether.

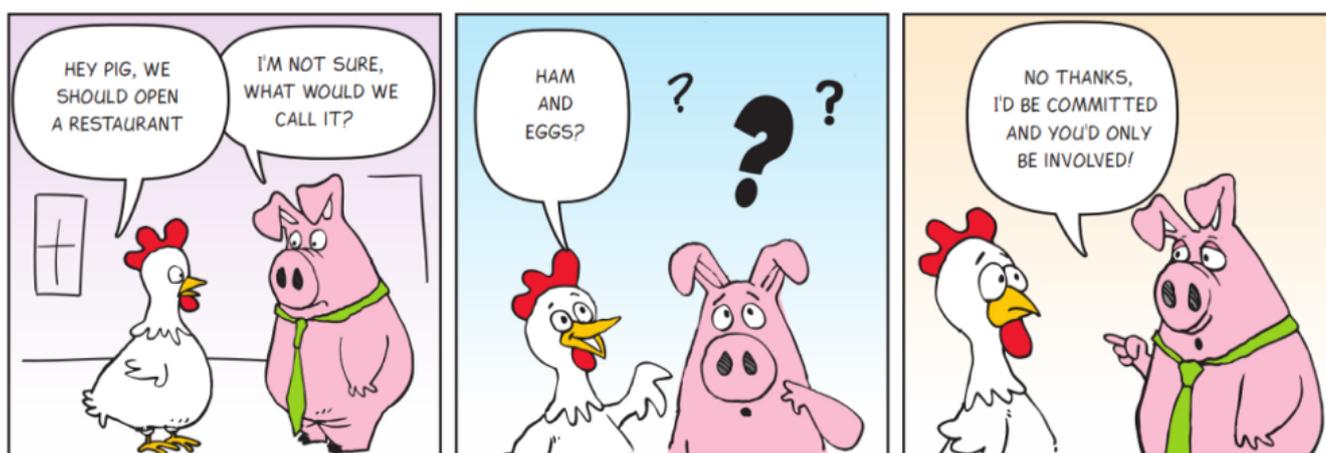
Leigh Weingus [wrote](#),

*“Having kids was once considered a necessity for every woman, but the last few years have shown shifting trends surrounding settling down.”*

As Bryce Covert [wrote](#): men want kids — and women aren't so sure.

*“In a [nationally-representative survey](#) of single, childless people in 2011, more men than women said they wanted kids... [Another poll](#) from 2013 echoed those findings, with more than 80 percent of men saying they'd always wanted to be a father or at least thought they would be someday. Just 70 percent of women felt the same.”*

There's a joke we have in software regarding the inherent standoff between developers and managers, represented by a chicken (managers) and a pig (developers):



There are a number of versions, but this one is Jake Calabrese

As a woman, that's pretty much how "the kid conversation" feels.

When I broke up with an ex-partner, he made a last-ditch effort at staying together by saying: "but I wanna have kids with you!"

To be clear: the only time we'd talked "kids" was when we joked "probably not." I was super busy (and super happy) at work, logging 12-hour days and weekends. I had *zero* interest in a baby. But when I said this, he countered,

*"That's okay — just have the kids and then I'll raise them."*

I heard that and thought, "*say what now??*" Bud, I'm not a broodmare. I'm not going to be a surrogate to my own kids.

And like I said, we broke up.

And yet, bad argument or not, we're all still left with the overarching question: should I have kids?

## **A Word On Religion**

When [I wrote about marriage](#), the biggest pushback I got was "religion." So I'm just going to preemptively clarify:

In order to argue "religion," you have to believe in it, and people who believe in it aren't undecided on kids, so don't need this post. It's for everyone who doesn't use religion, and needs discussions outside of it.

## **Most Common Reasons To Have Kids:**

### **Reason #1: Status in Society**

If you value social norms, you'll probably have kids. Because even as childlessness becomes more common, it still isn't socially accepted.

Psychology professor Leslie Ashburn-Nardo [conducted a study](#) where participants read about a fictional person (described as male or female with either zero or two children) and then shared their feelings on them.

What she found was astonishing. When childless, the fictional people were “perceived to be significantly less psychologically fulfilled,” and not only that, but participants expressed emotional reactions such as disgust, disapproval, annoyance, and anger towards them.

Ashburn-Nardo wrote,

*“People experience moral outrage when they perceive someone has violated a morally prescribed behavior, something we’re ‘supposed to do’ because it’s what we see as right.”*

My ex-partner’s sudden urgency to have kids happened right after his friends started having them. When I asked about his change of heart, he admitted: “everyone else is doing it!”

We may laugh at this, but at least he was honest enough to say it.

But much like “religion,” this argument only works if you value social norms — and some of us don’t.

I don’t owe the world anything. Like, I’m also a talented visual artist but few people know this about me. I don’t owe the world art, and I don’t owe it kids.

## **Reason #2: Fear of Regret**

Many people have kids because they “don’t want to regret not having them” — or because others threaten they will.

But, bro — have you heard of FOMO? Because this is just FOMO — “fear of missing out.”

As Linda and Charlie Bloom [wrote](#),

*“FOMO frequently provokes feelings of anxiety and restlessness, often*

*generated by competitive thoughts that others are experiencing more pleasure, success, or fulfillment in their lives than they are... FOMO behavior will continue to prevail and diminish the overall quality of well-being, and fulfillment in one's relationships and life in general."*

And as Gabriele Moss [wrote](#), if “you’re only doing it because you’re afraid of missing out” or “people say you’ll regret it if you don’t,” then you’re going at it all wrong.

But FOMO exists because:

### **We regret things we didn't do more than the things we do**

As Daniel Gilbert wrote in *Stumbling on Happiness*,

*“In the long run, people of every age and in every walk of life seem to regret not having done things much more than they regret things they did.”*

But that doesn't necessarily mean those regrets are “correct!” It's just how our brains work.

*“The psychological immune system has a more difficult time manufacturing positive and credible views of inactions than actions.”*

In other words: our brain struggles to conceptualize and fill the “white space” of *not* doing something, so we assign it with the biggest negative emotion and then call the thing “regret.”

### **Fear — even fear of regret — is not a healthy motivator**

Because:

*Good decisions are made out of love, not fear*

Move towards the things you want; don't just avoid the things that scare you.

Have kids because you're ready to love — not because you're terrified of regret or other risks.

### **Some people do regret kids**

They just don't talk about it.

In 1975, advice columnist Ann Landers asked her readers, “If you had it to do over again, would you have children?”

Nearly 10,000 parents replied on handwritten postcards, and a few weeks later, Landers shared the survey results in an article headlined “70 PERCENT OF PARENTS SAY KIDS NOT WORTH IT.”

Mother Brooke Lark [wrote](#) about her experience as a parent saying,

*“I am in the smack-dab middle of motherhood and I feel lost. I feel time-sucked and threadworn. I feel like I'm responsible for carrying the world... There is no break. There is no quitting. There is no vacation. There is constant guilt. That reality is sobering and exhausting.”*

Here's more:

### **Reason #3: Fear of Loneliness**

Someone once told me, “*not having kids won't keep you from getting old.*”

And to her (and other people who argue that), I just want to point out:

*“Having kids won't keep you from being lonely when you're old.”*

In her last book, *I Remember Nothing*, accomplished author and mother

Norah Ephron wrote,

*“In time, of course, the kids grew up and it was just me and Nick in the house on Long Island. The sound of geese became a different thing — the first sign that summer was not going to last forever, and soon another year would be over. Then, I’m sorry to say, they became a sign not just that summer would come to an end, but that so would everything else.”*

Children go off and live their own lives. All of us, kids or not, will be left to deal with the sunsetting of our days. I don’t mean to be morbid; I only mean to be honest.

It is our job, not our kids’, to ease existential woes and deal with our death.

## **Reason #4: “I just want to see...”**

...“how they’ll turn out,” “what they’ll look like,” “my partner as a parent,” etc.

Isabelle Kohn [wrote](#),

*“Kids aren’t personal experiments. They’re not mirrors we can admire ourselves in. They’re their own living, breathing people and they’ll look how they look, learn what they learn, and be who they are regardless of us.”*

We often think of kids in the theoretical sense, but kids are their own, separate people — not extensions of ourselves.

## **Reason #5: Happiness**

### **Fact: Kids don’t actually make us happier**

Since the 1980s, at least two-dozen studies have shown that the quality of

marriage decreases once the couple has kids. Studies also show that when kids leave the nest, parents are happier than any other time in their relationship.

University researchers Philip and Carolyn Cowan shared,

*“More than 25 separate studies have established that marital quality drops, often quite steeply, after the transition to parenthood. And forget the “empty nest” syndrome: when the children leave home, couples report an increase in marital happiness.”*

Psychologist Ashburn-Nardo shared,

*“Meta-analyses of hundreds of studies demonstrate that having children negatively affects relationship satisfaction.”*

To be fair, most worthwhile things *don't* make us happier in the moment. But I wish we'd stop confusing the two and lying, using the word “happy” when we really mean something else...

## **Reason #6: Meaning**

Many people cite their kids as the most meaningful part of their lives, but that doesn't mean we *should*. Good parenting means honoring kids as their own people, with their own lives, whose “meaning” is entirely separate from ours — and vice versa.

A new mom once told me, “you either have to make a million dollars, or you have to have kids.”

And an (arguably bad) therapist once threatened: “if you don't have kids, you'll have nothing.”

Both times, I stared back thinking *that's a human being*.

## Kids aren't here to “fill your life”

They are not here to ease our existential anxiety or distract us from it, and even if we ascribe meaning to them, the responsibility still falls on us.

And secondly: **our lives — and days — don't have to be manically “filled.”**

## Nothingness

As Milan Kundera wrote in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*,

*“The heaviest of burdens crushes us, we sink beneath it, it pins us to the ground ... The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become. Conversely, the absolute absence of burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half-real, his movements as free as they are insignificant. What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness?”*

When I think of my life, I see lightness.

Many people are anxious about this, agonizing over the white space of childlessness.

“If not kids, then what?!” They need to know. They need a box, a marker, a label, a reason, and an explanation as to *why* — and “what instead.”

And when you don't offer one, they shovel in their own certainty — “you *will!*” — trying to reassure themselves by pretending to reassure others.

And maybe they're right. I don't have enough emotion loaded into the issue to get defensive or argue otherwise. But I'm still not convinced right now.

And as one woman in her 60's said,

*“That’s just because you think there’s still more time.”*

And sure, that’s true, but I’m also not sure I’d care if this was all there was.

I’m also so happy with my partner I’d never ask anything more of him (except the baby, if we do), and I think I’d be totally happy with a life that continued more or less like this until the day I died. I think we all get to that point, mentally and emotionally. We get “okay.” It’s just that some of us have already had kids by the time we do.

In other words: **this thing others call “nothing” I see as “contentment.”**

## **“I could go either way”**

I tell partners: if you forced me to say yes or no right now, I’d say no. But I could see myself changing my mind.

As Laura Barcella [wrote](#),

*“I believed that if I was ‘in love enough,’ I’d feel that primal push toward motherhood that seemed to grip so many of my friends... even as a child, when I imagined my grown-up future, I didn’t necessarily picture motherhood.”*

Ditto. But I’ve always been open to the possibility of waking up one day and wanting a kid in the way I pulled the trigger on buying a bike, moving to the south or cutting my hair — after years of deliberation, culminating in an instant when I’m so certain there’s no more wondering.

And these decisions, I should note, have always been my happiest. Which is why I’m not only *open* to it happening this way, but am perhaps *hoping* it will.

And I can afford to think this way. Still only in my early 30s, there's still time.

There are a number of things I should my indecision *isn't*. Such as:

- **It's not feminism.** I'm not taking a stand against traditional roles or anything. At least consciously.
- **I didn't have a bad childhood.** I mean, no worse than average. I think.
- **It's not lack of money.** I mean, not directly — though after years of student loans, I'm not exactly ecstatic about continuing to hemorrhage it.
- **But it's not because I want to spend it on travel or cars or whatever.**

In fact, the only real thing my indecision *is* is: I'm not sure I want them!

And yet still...

My mother does this [“needle test”](#) — dangling a needle on a thread over someone's palm and watching its pattern to determine their (current or future) kids' gender(s). Mine always comes out 1 girl, 1 boy (in that order), which is, coincidentally, exactly what I'd want if I could pick. I'd love to chalk the whole thing up as fake (my brother and sister-in-law certainly have) but it'd be a whole lot easier to do so if I hadn't seen those needle test projections come out exactly accurate over the 10+ years she's been doing it.

So I guess what I'm saying is: on top of everything else, I guess I want to be open to whatever the universe has in store for me.

## **LIKING kids — but not LOVING them**

**It's sort of like being a cat or dog person**

I *like* cats. But I *prefer* dogs.

My thing with cats is: all their bullshit isn't "cute" to me. Laying down on my keyboard isn't cute. Knocking shit off surfaces isn't cute. Being little assholes isn't cute.

But the difference between me and "cat people" isn't that they *like* those behaviors, but rather they aren't bothered as much —they like the cat enough that it's worth it.

That's how "kids" feel for "kid people."

And it's not that I would never have a cat — especially since my partner absolutely loves them. (Seriously, he gets more excited about cats than almost anything else; any time we're around one, he becomes this adorable, baby-talking little old lady.) I'd get one if it came down to it.

And that's how I feel about kids.

## **I'd make a good parent**

Tons of people feel this way. Though, of course, most of us are wrong, we all have our own reasons for warranting this belief, and mine is: I don't glorify motherhood.

I wouldn't hang my identity on it, or offload my insecurities into my children. I'd let them be their own people, and I'd love them accordingly. (Just like I am as a partner.)

Bad moms are the ones who try too hard to "mother," putting too much of themselves into it. They'd never admit to this of course — I mean, why would they? — and on the contrary, they will spend a great deal of time and energy arguing the defensive position.

Good moms relinquish their grip. They honor their kids as separate people.

# Work

## **Kids take work. (Never-ending and thankless work.)**

I don't see joy when I see children; I see *work*. I see the day to day realities. And not labors of love even, but work for what it is — years of thankless straining, work that hinges on having huge reserves of intrinsic motivation.

As Kate Spencer [wrote](#),

*“I wasn't aware how much work they are. Work — and joy! But, seriously: WORK. Exhausting, bone-crushing, emotionally draining, you-will-be-touching-human-feces-often work... You can't ignore your kid, because he or she is a living, breathing creature who relies on you to maintain his or her existence. Your needs — rest, intellectual stimulation, a shower, frozen yogurt — cease to matter when your child comes into the picture. And there is nothing wrong with finding the thought of this kind sacrifice utterly appalling.”*

Children are lovely little creatures. Children are also tiny terrors.

## **I like paid work**

Not purely as a matter of *income*, but more importantly: having a bit of space and wherewithal in the economy.

As Betty Friedan wrote in *The Feminine Mystique*,

*“The only way for a woman, as for a man, to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her own.”*

Not just creative work, but *paid* creative work. Everyone should have independent economic means, and much of the angsty malaise of the stay-at-home-mom isn't (just) under-appreciation, but lack of outside work.

# Things I just don't want to deal with:

## 1.) The emotional labor

Parenting takes a lot of work — way more than dressing your kid in a cute outfit and calling it a day. It takes conscious communication, patience, and consistency, and unfortunately not all people who become parents were ever equipped for the most important parts.

## 2.) The sheer amount of stuff

I just don't want my life to be saturated with “kid shit.”

My partner and I recently visited one of his friends and his wife who recently had a baby, and every time they turned around, my eyes would dart around the room in horror at the wall to wall “kid shit.” Toys, play mats, a high chair, a stroller, a playpen, a swing, a whole section of the couch set up for, presumably, nursing. I just could not get over how much shit there was.

## 3.) Loss of sleep

It's not that I sleep until 1 pm or anything — I'm a respectable human being with a normal sleep schedule, and I freaking love the morning hours — but I am very protective of my sleep. I once dated a bad snorer and it was borderline deal-breaker.

## 4.) Cooking

And neither does my partner. The idea of daily meal prep makes me feel bored out of my mind. And I hear most people agree, treating it as a necessary chore, but again — cost:benefit.

## 5.) Being interrupted

I hate being interrupted so much that when my little sister was a toddler

and would bust into other people's conversations mid-sentence with some kid shit, it was one of the few times I actively "mothered" her ("don't do that — it's rude.")

"Interrupting" is still one of my biggest pet peeves, and one of the biggest "bad habits" I am most quick to nip in the bud with a new partner. I'll say it to friends, I'll say it to colleagues. I've stopped hanging out with people over it.

## **6.) I don't want to go to Disneyland**

And I don't want to be the asshole parent for feeling that way.

Frankly, most things "Disney" are weird at best, and a little toxic at worst. And I'm not saying I wouldn't take them — I'm sure I would — but the only thing that makes it worthwhile is if they freaking loved it, and given what I know about kids, there will be at least one Mickey Mouse Meltdown.

## **7.) Intellectual Atrophy**

It takes a special kind of everyday saint to deal with all of the mind-numbing mundanity.

## **8.) Money**

Do you know how much those little shits cost? A lot. Like, \$250K+ a lot.

Which is exactly what I point out to anyone who says they want kids so someone takes care of them in old age. Put that money away and you can hire someone.

## **9.) Porn and/or drugs (the kid's)**

Future kids are going to see porn in kindergarten and I just don't have the emotional wherewithal to fight the internet. And what happens when the kid gets into meth or heroin? What are you going to do with that?

## 10.) Health problems (the kid's)

When considering a potential partner, I always ask myself: “how would he react if our kid had leukemia?” People always think of idealizations, but sometimes shit hits the fan.

## Things I love that I'd be giving up:

The bike. Minimalism. Quiet. Sunday mornings poring over one or three of my many, many books... the bike.

I know people with kids are quick to jump in here like, “but you replace those things with joy!!” And to that I'm just sitting here staring back like, “you either don't understand the deep, visceral joy of a motorcycle, or you're totally immune to the gross chaos that is the back of a minivan, because those two do not even compare.”

## When to have kids

Two evaluators:

*When what you value makes the payoffs worthwhile.*

*When you do so from a place of love, not fear.*

So: *what do you value?*

It differs by person — and it's for you to figure out. Is travel or work most important (forever?) Is doing the right thing?

But as you ask yourself, just make absolutely sure you are answering from a place of love, not fear — from a place of desiring something, not avoiding

the alternative; i.e., “I *want* to” (raise kids, love them) not “I *don't* want to” (regret it, die alone, etc.) And make sure your “want” honors them as people, not extensions of yourself.

But above all else: when the idea of having kids makes you feel more good than bad. When you're ready to put in the work. When you're doing so from a place of love, not fear. When you can offer love on a consistent basis.

### **One clap, two clap, three clap, forty?**

By clapping more or less, you can signal to us which stories really stand out.

Write a response...

Tony Silva