

Mothers in 50s 'risk harming children'

Kat Lay Health Correspondent

Women in their fifties who have babies risk traumatising their children, experts have said.

Fertility doctors said that high-profile cases had made it seem acceptable and safe to wait to start a family until later life. Janet Jackson, the singer, had a baby two years ago when she was 50. The experts warned, however, that children may not cope with caring for frail, elderly parents or be able to deal with their early death.

"Surveys show the drive to be a mother is so strong they don't think about the problems their child will face until after the child is born," Julianne Zweifel, a clinical psychologist at University of Wisconsin, Madison, told the American Society for Reproductive Medicine conference in Denver.

She suggested that celebrity cases could create a "slippery slope" with eventually women in their sixties having babies. "Increasingly we are seeing women in their sixties approaching clinics to have a child," Dr Zweifel said.

"It is traumatic for a child to lose a parent at a young age. Additionally the emotional impact of being a caregiver

Case study

Sarah Crowley from London was 50 when she had a baby with her husband, Esteban, who was 37 (Kat Lay writes).

On her fifth round of IVF treatment at a clinic in Spain she became pregnant with twins. One child died in utero at five months; her son Andres was born two months prematurely but is now a healthy six-year-old.

The former sales director feels frustrated there is so much negativity about older mothers. "The richness it has brought to my life at a time when I thought it would not happen is incredible," she said. "I would never have had this experience at 25. I was not even ready at 35.

"My husband is 13 years younger and that was a big part of me wanting to have a child with him.

Was I more tired than the younger mothers? I don't think so. The mothers at the school gates are also older, so it does not feel like a huge difference.

"I am very open with my son. We talk about my age and I am open that he was born using donor eggs.

"I think that clinics should definitely have ethical guidelines in place about the age of the women they treat, and

they do explain the risks to you. But saying that a child cannot go on a gap year because they are looking after a parent having a hip replacement ... I mean, really? We do need to have a conversation about mothers and mental health, but this is for age groups across the board. We should be starting a conversation about older motherhood and not scaremongering."

to an ageing adult can be devastating. If you are a teenager you are not developmentally prepared to deal with that anguish or responsibility."

There has been a steady increase in the number of babies born to older mothers in the UK in the past 15 years. According to the Office for National Statistics, women aged 45-49 had 705 babies in 2001 and 2,048 in 2016. Those

aged 50-54 had 53 babies 2001 and 218 in 2016. Two babies were born to mothers aged 55 or over in 2001 and 20 in 2016. There is no legal age limit for fertility care but most clinics will not treat women over 44 with their own eggs or women over 54 with donor eggs because of the low chance of success.

Julia Woodward, director of psychological services at Duke Fertility Center

in North Carolina, was co-chairwoman of a training session at the conference with Dr Zweifel for 100 doctors. She said that older couples were the group that kept her awake at night with worry.

"I am worried about the woman during the pregnancy, her risks of post-partum depression," she said. "And what is it like going through menopause with a preschooler?" She said that studies

backed up her concerns, showing that children of older parents worried about them dying and finding their bodies, as well as being embarrassed by their age or upset by the prospect of having fewer years with their parents than their peers. Parents reported being exhausted looking after newborns, having trouble fitting in with younger mothers and getting upset when they were mistaken for a grandparent.

The oldest woman to have a baby in the UK is Elizabeth Adeney from Suffolk, who gave birth to a son, Jolyon, at the age of 66 in 2009. At the time she said it was not her age that mattered but how she felt inside.

Professor Geeta Nargund, medical director of Create Fertility in the UK, said: "Women are leaving it late to have children in Britain too and reproductive tourism for older women to go abroad for donor eggs is increasing. I think the number of women in their fifties doing this will rise even further and it can cost the NHS hundreds of thousands of pounds to deal with pregnancy and neonatal complications.

"Children and teenagers need their parents to look after them, not the other way around."