



'I WAS HAPPIER BEFORE I HAD CHILDREN'

Baby groups. Lack of sleep. No social life. Is motherhood *really* all it's cracked up to be? As one third of 30-something women admit they're not sure if they want kids, new mum Maria Lally (above) wonders whether they might be on to something...

Photographs: Rebecca Miller

'STOOD AT A WEDDING recently, I couldn't help but feel envious. Surrounded by my friends, I watched as they sipped champagne and chatted on the lawn. The first of my friends to have a baby, all I wanted to be doing was getting merry with them – but instead, I was perched on a bench with my husband Dan and one-year-old daughter Sophia, trying to feed her without getting mushed-up food on my Whistles dress. As I took a hurried sip of champagne while wondering when I could get her down for a nap, an elderly guest walked past and told us how lovely Sophia was and how lucky we were. Lucky? Was I missing something? As much as I love Sophia, I don't – and I can't believe I'm about to say this out loud, let alone say it in print – love motherhood.

'I used to think I was alone in thinking

this way, but clearly I'm not if a glut of recent studies is anything to go by. A recent *Grazia* survey found that a third of women – put off by watching the hard grind of working mothers juggling their lives – have admitted that they don't want children at all. Then there's the Harvard University research that found our happiness levels plummet when we have kids. "Children do seem to increase happiness while you're expecting them," says Professor Gilbert, who led the study. "But as soon as you have them, trouble sets in. Your happiness goes down."

'Study after study says the same thing. I could list them all, but the gist of most is that our "life satisfaction", "marital satisfaction" and "mental wellbeing" declines sharply after having children. So why is nobody speaking out about it? Why, when it's acceptable to openly moan about our boyfriends, best friends and jobs, are we not allowed to say that, actually, motherhood is a bit crap at times? Why, if you profess anything less than utter joy at being a mother, are you seen as a bad one?

'It's not that I don't love Sophia. I love her very much. There are some incredibly happy moments, like her first smiles, first steps and lots of other lovely times in-between. But I'd say 80 per cent of the daily business of being a mum is tough, boring, repetitive, knackered, and it forces you to make endless compromises.

'Part of the problem lies, I think, with the idea that motherhood is seen as a "blessing". You're told you're "lucky" to have children, because some women can't. One of my closest friends has struggled through four failed attempts at IVF, and it breaks my heart watching her go through it. So yes, I realise I am very lucky to have Sophia – but does that mean I can't be honest about the fact I was happier before?

'Of course, not every mother is harbouring a nagging feeling that their life was better before they had children. Lots of them love motherhood. Facebook is full of mothers gushing about their baby's first tooth. For these women, it seems motherhood really is all it's cracked up to be – although I can't help but think that behind at least *some* of those posts are a few new mums desperately trying to show the world they're enjoying it, when secretly they're not. But still, I know there are some mothers who love every moment of it all. I'm just not one of them...

I can't stand baby groups, where you sit on a dusty floor in a dreary church hall, singing *The Wheels On The Bus*. It makes



Clockwise from above: Maria with baby Sophia; Maria socialising with husband Dan before parenthood; Maria in the park with friends; Maria again pre-Sophia



me cringe inside. I found the initial sleep deprivation torturous and I hate waking up at 7am every day, even at weekends. I hate my never-ending list of tedious chores that have to be fitted around Sophia's constant demands and my job as a freelance writer. I hate the fact Dan and I, who used to enjoy spontaneous meals and drinks out, rarely go out as a couple any more. Either he goes out or I do, because the hassle and cost of getting a babysitter isn't worth it. Like a lot of parents living in London, we don't live close enough to our families to get help. So instead we talk endlessly about Sophia ("Did she eat much today?", "Has she pooped yet?") or compete over who's more tired or who does more around the house.

'In the early days, I hated the way it fell to me to do most of the housework. I felt like I'd been transported back to the 1950s as Dan went off to work and I was left with Sophia and a pile of washing. It wasn't what I'd signed up for when I spent my twenties carving out a career I loved.

'Friends would visit, coo over Sophia, then dash back to their normal lives, and I envied them for it. I'd meet friends for lunch with Sophia in tow, then, when they went back to their desks, I wandered back

home in the middle of the afternoon. I missed the structure of my old life. Childless friends felt jealous of my new life, but I envied them their freedom and free time, and I still do. Now I'm back to work, I'm flat out juggling the demands of work and Sophia. Every single day. Like all working mums, I'm either working or mothering. There's no break.

'Dan feels the same way and we often reminisce about how lovely life was before we had Sophia. Our holidays, weekends, finances, social life, even our relationships were better before she came along. Our weekends now revolve around baby-friendly places – they used to revolve around boozy lunches and seeing friends.

'I don't regret having Sophia and I know I'll look back on all this when Sophia is getting married or spending Christmas with us and her own family, and I'll know it was worth it. But for now, when Dan and I look at childless couples with shiny new engagement rings, we think, "Put the kids for as long as possible!" If you don't want children, have them and you may love it. Or you may – like me – love your children but find motherhood itself tough and relentless. And to those readers who don't want children but worry they'll regret it – you probably won't. Life is full of great things that don't involve children.

'My big fear when writing this feature was, "What if Sophia ever reads this?" While, in reality, it's unlikely she'll ever see it, something struck me: maybe I will actually tell her all of this, one day. Maybe Sophia will have children, and maybe she'll feel like I did – in which case I'll tell her it's OK and that she's not a bad person if she doesn't enjoy every single moment of motherhood. Because I don't – and it's time that some of us started saying so.' *What do you think of Maria's mission? Tell us at feedback@graziemagazine.co.uk*