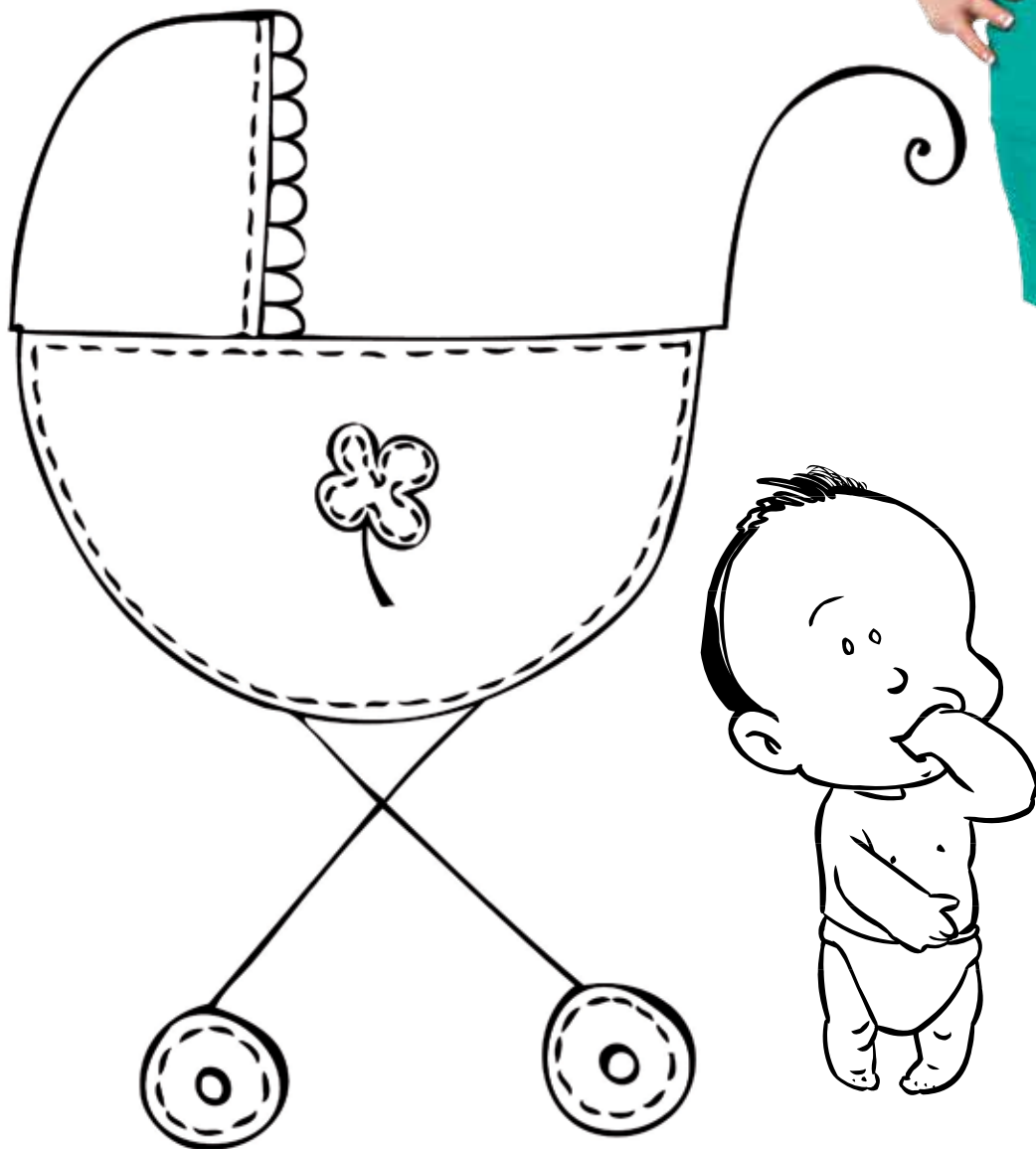


She Says... Baby Mama Drama!

She's surrounded by bulging bellies, baby talk and doting dads, but Aoife Stuart-Madge couldn't give a cluck



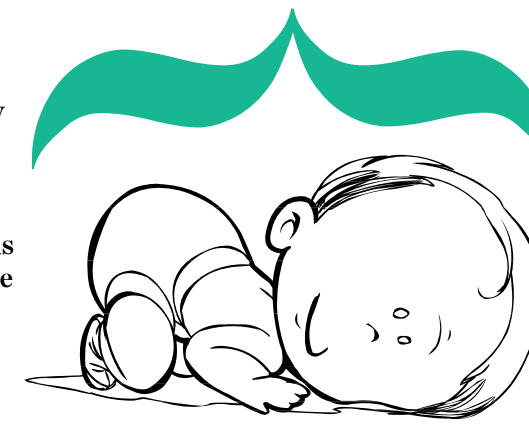
I'm surrounded by pregnant women. Literally. My sister. My best friend. My work friend... They've all got buns in their proverbial ovens. Everywhere I turn I see bumps. Even celebsville is awash with baby talk with everyone from Kourtney Kardashian to Sienna Miller expecting celeb spawn. Poor Jessica Simpson's been pregnant since, well, forever and even Snooki is knocked up. And while I'm delighted that in a matter of months I'm going to be surrounded by little squidgy babies to squeeze (then hand back to their mummies) I can't help feeling the pressure – especially as my ovaries aren't exactly exploding.

As a newlywed, people – even strangers – can't resist mentioning the huge rattle-shaped elephant in the room. "It'll be you next," they chuckle, as I nervously eye the expanding bellies around me. Problem is, I'm still waiting for that broody gene to kick in. It's not that I'm not immune to the cuteness of babies. I coo along with the best of them at those pictures of tots dressed up as flowers on Pinterest, and I'm first in the queue for a cuddle when a colleague brings their newborn into the office for a show and tell, but that doesn't mean I want one in my house – yet.

Baby Bloodbath

My attitude might have a lot to do with my friend Anna, the first in our group to succumb to the beat of the biological clock. Her son came a month early. Aside from the ghastly thought that he took almost two tear-stinging days to come out, getting him home was no picnic either. His early arrival meant Anna was only half-way through her 'Baby Essentials' shopping list when she went into labour, and her husband was still on a work trip. So she was left alone at home with a crying baby trying to figure out how to work her breast pump, waiting for her husband's paternity leave to kick in and her parents to get back from their cruise. She later admitted that in her darkest hour she thought about doing a ring round to warn us that parenting sucks. She's now got an adorable two-year-old and she just gave birth to another bouncing boy, so the experience clearly hasn't put her off, but her words still haunt me when I feel myself going gooey around a bambino.

Then there's my pregnant colleague



"I'm first in the queue for a cuddle when a colleague brings their newborn into the office for a show and tell, but I don't want one in my house – yet"

who's been watching birthing videos and comes in to work every day with a new tale of horror. 'OMG, do you know babies are born purple?' or 'Did you know babies eyes start out at the side of their head?' and the most disturbing factoid to date: the magnitude of downstairs rippage. I won't go into it, but suffice to say you couldn't get more gore if Carrie got her hands on a chainsaw on Friday 13th in Elm Street.

Irrational Fear

Admittedly, I've always been a little hysterical in my fear of motherhood. I remember when I was nine hearing on the news that a girl my age was pregnant in Africa. Panicked, I asked my mum about it and she told me it was because God had chosen this girl to be a mother. After that, I prayed every night that God wouldn't choose the same fate for me. Looking back, my fears were slightly misplaced, given that the closest I'd come to even talking to a boy was when Daniel McCready across the road sold me three *Neighbours* cards for two cola bottles and a sherbet dip, but at the time, the threat seemed real.

As an adult, I'm still as fearful of pregnancy, but for different reasons. As a curvy apple-shape who has spent most of the last decade battling against a not-so-

flat tum, I'm worried that pregnancy might finally give the fat girl inside me licence to break free – and once on the loose, she ain't ever going back inside. Not to mention the fear-mongering my pregnant little sis has been doing. "Enjoy your partying while you can, it all changes," she warned me sagely.

And on a purely mercenary note, it costs about Dhs50,000 to have a baby, so that's the shopping budget zapped. Not that my pregnant friends even care about shopping – at least not for themselves. They'll happily by-pass Topshop en route to Mothercare to scour for the 'It' pram, the cutest cot and the most adorable babygros.

In turbo nesting mode, pregnant women become Martha Stewart on heat: buying up cushions, painting walls and re-carpeting nurseries like their lives depend on it. One friend was painting her front door the day she went into labour, while my sister has become obsessed with reupholstering her sofa. I mean, it's not like the baby is even going to notice your interiors, is it? At least, not until they hit their teens and by then, they are hardwired to hate everything you like anyway...

Dummy Run

Thankfully my husband is not in any rush to get sprogged up, either, so there's no pressure there, though neither of us wants to leave it too late. Having watched friends struggle to conceive, we're acutely aware that when we both do decide it's time, it could be a long, heartbreaking journey.

So we've started taking babysteps (excuse the pun): we've picked out baby names and we've even volunteered to road-test our parenting potential by babysitting. Well, sort of – we agreed to kittensit our friends' cat Peaches for a week. Two days in, we were sitting at the vet's, praying the little fur-ball would pull through after a nasty brush with a vase of lilies (who knew cats were allergic?). After surviving the near-death experience, he decided to celebrate by peeing all over our sofa. Between the clean-up op and nervous hours spent in the vet's waiting room, we totalled three days off work each.

Sitting on my urine-stained sofa, with scratch marks up my arms, I began to reconsider my baby stance. Sure, they pee everywhere too, but at least they sit still long enough for you to dress them up as a flower and take pictures of them (turns out kittens aren't big on Anne Geddes). On reflection, maybe a baby would be easier... ■