

What have we learned from this survey?

If we try to sum up what we have learned from this survey, the first point that strikes us is probably that most women and men have a very positive attitude to a life with children. Most of those who have responded to the questionnaire feel that children are very important and very few say that they do not want to have children sooner or later. Conditions permitting, we can expect women and men to continue to have children in future – often at least two, as we appear still to have something of a two-child ideal. But there are plenty of other things that have to be done first. We have to complete our education, find a place in the labour market, do other things we feel like doing, lead a free life without the responsibility that comes with children, find a partner we want to have children with – and then perhaps the time will be ripe. If all goes well. But there seem to be two things that can put a spoke in the wheel: we fail to find the person we want to share our life with/our relationship breaks up, or we fail to get pregnant when we have finally decided that the time is ripe.

Answers from single respondents without children can be interpreted to mean that there is normally no conscious decision for or against having children of one's own. It is more a matter of the course life happens to have taken. Children are not so central that people think about having children without being in a stable relationship. Nor is being childless a conscious choice – if we are single and without children but then meet someone we want to share our life with we probably expect to have children after all.

Most of those who live in a stable relationship already have children or expect to have children in due course. Not managing to become pregnant seems to be a major problem for a relatively large number of people. This survey in itself does not allow us to draw any conclusions as to how common it actually is, but there are indications that it may have become a growing problem. These days it is easy to avoid pregnancy if one doesn't want to have a child, but it is not so simple to determine when exactly to have children when one has decided to do so. A natural consequence of the postponement of childbirth is that less time is available. When one has finally decided that the time is ripe, one is likely to feel considerable impatience. No doubt it has always been the case that some women and men have had to wait perhaps for several years before the pregnancy they wished for

became a reality. But how much time do people feel they have at their disposal today, when they may not decide they want to have children until after they are thirty? Many respondents say that society provides too little support to those who are childless against their will. They feel that long waits for medical examinations and possible treatment are a problem, as are the high costs involved. And then, all of a sudden, they are too old even to be allowed to adopt a baby. We may well ask how aware women and men are of the risks they run in delaying childbirth to as late an age as has now become common. And what do they actually know about the medical problems involved?

The positive attitude towards children does not mean that women and men feel that life with small children these days is free of problems. Many parents with young children experience economic difficulties and wish parental leave were longer. There also seems to be some reluctance about leaving children at day care centres at as early an age as one year old. The groups of children at day care are large, and working life makes severe demands, so that all in all, the situation for parents and their young children is very difficult.

It is surprising how common it is for respondents to say that the rule that they are entitled to retain the same level of parental insurance if their next child is born within 30 months causes stress. This rule is intended to provide reasonable parental insurance to parents who have children so close together that it can be difficult for them to qualify for an adequate level of parental benefits, but it is apparently sometimes felt to be an attempt on the part of society to control childbirth. The economic loss suffered if one fails to meet the conditions specified in the rule is felt to be substantial.

It is not uncommon for respondents to say that society today makes very heavy demands. There are so many things one is supposed to manage to achieve these days – one is expected to have an education, to have travelled abroad, to have a rich social life and to be successful in one's work.

One question that suggests itself after going over the answers to this survey is how much demands on the labour market have changed in the course of the 1990s. Is the answer different for people in different educational categories, different industries, small or large companies, different parts of the country, etc? As is probably generally the case when we conduct a survey, while we obtain more knowledge about some areas, new questions arise.