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## Child-free by choice

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Erin Vandenberg, 29, sometimes doesn't want to deal with the question of whether she will have children. Because answering it is never a simple no.

"If they say, 'Why not?' I say, 'Well, we just don't want to.' Then, there's the whole, 'You don't know. You might change your mind,' 'Well, I didn't want kids til I was "X" age and then I had to have them,' " Vandenberg said.

That's both doubtful and insulting, said Vandenberg's husband, Jason Kositarut, 30. "It's almost like saying, 'You really don't know yourself. You don't understand anything about who you are and what you want.' I just kind of want to say, 'Shut up!'"

The Forest Park couple have been married for six years and choose to be child-free at a time when so much attention is focused on big families, thanks to Nadya "Octomom" Suleman and Jon and Kate Gosselin of "Jon & Kate Plus 8," who recently announced they are divorcing.

For Vandenberg and Kositarut, not having children is a decision they made long ago. Kositarut, who says he has "parental issues," doesn't want anyone to look at him the way he looks at his father; Vandenberg says she doesn't possess any sort of maternal instinct or urge to have kids.

They like their diaper duty-free life the way it is, even if others may think it's selfish, they say. "Kids are a lot of money and a lot of time and both of those are valuable to me because I want to do the things I want to do, not the things I'm responsible to do because I have to take care of the kids," said Kositarut, an IT consultant.

But getting others to understand this life choice is not always easy. Child-free couples and singles who spoke to RedEye said they face constant questions, unsolicited comments and harsh judgments about their decisions.

While it's difficult to gauge how many people are currently childless by choice, the number of members registered in the Chicago chapter of No Kidding!, a non-profit social club for child-free couples and singles, has stayed steady at more than 300 over the past few years. Nationwide, membership has grown slightly with new chapters formed particularly in smaller Midwestern cities, said spokeswoman Laura Ciaccio, 31, who runs the New York chapter.

A number of organizations, services and Web sites have popped up within the past year catering to the child-free. There's childfreetravel.net, which books trips to age-restricted hotels and resorts; idonotwantkids.com dating site; child-free Facebook groups, and the West Suburban Chicago Childfree Meetup Group, which now has 90 Chicago-area members.

Kathleen Leszczynski, who joined the Child-free by Choice Facebook group, said her decision not to have kids has led to yelling matches and a strain on her relationship with her mother, who wants grandchildren.

"She's like, 'I don't understand.' And, 'It's just not normal. Everyone who's healthy should want to have children,'" said Leszczynski, 33, a graphic artist living in Andersonville.

Leszczynski says she chooses to be child-free not because she's too focused on her career or material

things--she just has no plans to have children. And neither does her boyfriend of eight years. The couple have even discussed considering permanent sterilization options, she said.

"I don't think my life would be more complete with a child necessarily," Leszczynski said. "I feel like I've got a pretty good life as it is right now."

Both Leszczynski and Kositarut dispel the major misconception that those who are child-free also are not kid-friendly. "People think we hate kids," Kositarut said. "'Oh, do you not like kids?' Oh no, they're great in small doses. It's great to spoil them and hand them back," he said.

Contrary to what some may think, a lot of thought goes into the decision to be child-free, said Ciaccio, of No Kidding!

"I've met people who put more thought into that than people who made the decision to become parents did," Ciaccio said.

Serious couples should discuss whether they want children, said Thomas Hammerman, a therapist at the Family Institute at Northwestern University.

When couples do decide to broach the subject, both should be direct and honest about their choice and reasons behind it, he said.

Both parties need to know if they're on the same page because conflict can arise when one partner wants a child and the other doesn't, or if one partner changes his or her mind after marrying, he said.

"Couples should not fear having this conversation. ... Avoidance of it isn't going to make it better," Hammerman said. Christopher Puzzele, 37, prefers to get the kid talk out of the way early when dating. "That should be one of the first questions--do you want kids?--because that's a deal-breaker issue," said Puzzele, who does not want kids.

Last Labor Day he launched a free dating Web site for child-free singles with 1,800 users. "I just don't have the heart to waste somebody's time," said Puzzele, an attorney who lives in New Jersey and spoke to RedEye by phone.

For those who have children, some don't judge or pester those who don't.

West Loop resident Matthew Straub, who's married and has a 1-month-old daughter, says he's conscious not to probe those he meets about their plans to have children.

"It's not really my business," said Straub, 34. "If they choose not to or circumstances don't allow them to, it wouldn't change my opinion of them."