

PARENTHOOD

There is very little glamour in parenthood. In fact, when your clothes are spotted with regurgitated milk and you cannot remember the last time you had a shower, you will probably feel decidedly unglamorous. When you choose to become a parent, you have to accept this as your new “normal”. You have signed up for a lot of sleepless nights, and you have agreed to allow your house to look like children live there. You have agreed to give up control over many aspects of your life. What used to be predictable – your schedule, your free time, your personal hygiene regime – will become unpredictable, and you will be forced to juggle and adapt, even if that is not your natural personality. These are the realities of parenthood, and there is no way around it. Why didn’t someone at the baby shower tell you the whole truth about parenthood?

All of the baby-product commercials on TV make it look so easy, clean, and delightful. The smiling parents look so well-rested, and their houses are practically spotless. Of course, it is no wonder – who wants to buy a product endorsed by a crying baby whose mother looks like a zombie? But, many new parents have never been around babies before, so it is tempting to see these images and think that they represent real life with a baby. Of course, babies are delightful – just not all of the time. Not to overstate the obvious, but things will be different when you become a parent.

I do not mean to say that things will be worse – as a parent and a pediatrician, I can honestly say that life with children is much richer than life without children. Before you embark on your own journey into parenthood, I think it is important to understand what the commitment to parenthood really means, especially in the early years of infancy and toddlerhood.

I try to write about things that are common, and all too often I see new parents who are having a very difficult time with this new version of their lives. I strongly believe that those who have the most difficult time with the transition are those who either have an unrealistic, fairytale notion of how things will be or those who expect life to essentially return to the way it was before having a baby. Some are frustrated that the nighttime awakenings have not gone away when they had hoped. Others are still trying to have get-togethers with friends, even when their babies are newborns, and some are not yet tuned in to the idea that they need to help out when they get home from work. In short, they are not able to accept the fact that they are no longer able to do all of the things that they want to do, when they want to do them. There’s a new sheriff in town, and he/she is twenty inches long!

There is no such thing as a “typical” parenthood experience, so it is almost impossible to predict how life with a baby will be. Some babies are born “easy”, and some are born “difficult”. Some babies take two-hour naps, and other babies have fifteen minute naps on a good day. Some babies are calm and content, but other babies are colicky and

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cranky. Some will be challenging or totally dependent for years to come. Just as you cannot plan to have an “easy” baby, you cannot plan to fall right back into your pre-parenthood routines as if nothing ever happened. Every now and then, some new parents seem to be able to do just that, but this is not the norm, and you certainly cannot expect for it to happen. If you happen to get an “easy” baby, keep in mind that it is probably not because of something you did; your next baby could be just the opposite!

As a parent, taking care of your baby is a 24-hour a day job, and you are never off duty. Nature assumes that you have nothing else to do and nothing else you want to do (especially if you are a nursing mother). That does not mean that it is impossible to do other things – I am a big believer in sanity breaks – but it means that you have to have some careful planning (and help) to make it happen. You may also have to change your expectations; a thirty-minute phone conversation with a friend might become a ten-minute conversation, a daily trip to the gym might become a trip every 3-4 days, and Saturday night outings with friends will almost certainly happen less often. It also means that you have to be flexible when things do not seem to work out (I remember planning an outing with my infant daughter and giving up after three very necessary outfit changes and an hour of crying before I had even gotten her into her car seat – it was a relief to admit defeat). Your friends without children will not “get” this, but everyone who has kids will.

My goal here is not to make parenthood sound unappealing. Nothing could be further from the truth. However, I think that the decision to become a parent should be an informed decision, so people go into it with realistic expectations. I think that those who have the easiest time with the transition to parenthood are the ones who assume from the start that things will be difficult, but tolerable. When the expectations are realistic, then the challenges of parenthood seem less problematic and less of a big deal. It becomes less of a problem when your child is not a “good napper” and you are not able to do the things you wanted to do when your baby was supposed to be sleeping. It becomes less annoying that your clothes smell like sour milk. In short, these things become normal and accepted, rather than problems that need to be solved.

The spectrum of realities is extremely broad, and your personal experience may not be this dramatic. But, even raising an “easy” baby requires a level of devotion that is unlike anything most of us have ever done before. There will be moments of the most complete joy and the greatest love you have ever felt, but they will be mixed in with all the rest. I promise it is worth it, but I wanted to tell you the truth – the whole truth!