

EXPECTATIONS OF PARENTHOOD

Parenthood is not at all what I thought it would be. Before I was a parent, I had a whole host of unrealistic expectations about what life as a parent would be like and about what my children would be like. Like most new parents, my expectations were based partly on my picture-perfect view of what I thought my children should be like and partly on my vain attempt to hold onto the luxuries of pre-parenthood life. Reality was quite different.

One of the earliest myths to be debunked was that one could follow a method and wind up with a baby who sleeps like a little angel. I was not the first to be fooled by this myth, and I will almost certainly not be the last. I hear parents fret over this every day. To make matters worse, their friends all seem to have perfect babies who go right to sleep and sleep for hours and hours on end. They have read all of the books and tried all of the foolproof techniques, but no matter what they do, it does not seem to work. It seems like everyone else as a “normal” baby, except them.

Of course, the reality of the situation is that you can be surrounded by people whose children sleep for hours on end, but the spectrum of normal and the spectrum of reality are both significantly broader than that. It is possible to do absolutely everything right and still have a baby for whom a fifteen minute nap is all you will get, and three straight hours at night is considered a small miracle. This is their “normal”, and so much depends on factors that you cannot control, such as your child’s sleep requirements, your child’s personality, your child’s anxieties, and whether or not they have really bad reflux problems. My daughter was three years old when she slept through the night for the first time! Sometimes, we have to simply change our expectations.

Another way of saying it is that it is possible to do absolutely everything right and still have a reality that does not meet your expectations. This is hard for a lot of parents to face, and it can go far, far beyond whether or not a baby is a good sleeper. It is true for all of our expectations – our hopes and dreams for our children – whether it is being intelligent, being athletic, being popular, being healthy, or simply being able to get along with other children. When you decide to be a parent, there is a certain amount of risk that you have to be willing to accept, and the spectrum of reality includes the happy, healthy, low-stress babies as well as the babies who will be just as dependent upon their parents for total care in adulthood as they are in infancy.

My children are at neither end of the spectrum, and I am always so thankful that they are not all the way at the far end. They have both had their share of issues, and we have had to change our expectations about a lot of things – some of them have been small changes, but some of them have been pretty big. Most kids will be somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, which means that most parents will have a few curve balls along the way; something about your child’s health, behavior, personality, emotional stability, learning abilities, or physical abilities is likely to come up, forcing you to change your

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expectations. It may be something minor like not being very good at math, not being very good at sports, or potty training later than you might have hoped. It might also be something more significant like having asthma, ADHD, dyslexia, impaired hearing, Sensory Processing Disorder, depression, or a major birth defect.

Notice that I have been saying “change your expectations”, not “lower your expectations”. The goal here is to make your expectations more realistic for your situation, not to encourage your children to strive for mediocrity. Some things about your child may not be “fixable” or changeable, whether it is a personality trait or a medical diagnosis. If your child is doing the best that he or she can, then changing your expectations is much more realistic than trying to change your child (and whatever you do, don’t let them think that you are disappointed with who they are).

However, just because you have had to change your expectations does not mean that you have to give up. If your child has Sensory Processing Disorder and you know that he cannot walk very far without resting, you simply arrange your itinerary in Disney World with a lot of rest stops along the way and plan to do about half of the things that you would normally do in a given day. If you know that he will have an emotional breakdown from the sensory overload of the more thrilling rides, you simply plan to ride something else that is more his speed without making a big deal about it.

There is no formal training for parents, yet we have to deal with many different challenges that we often feel ill-equipped to handle, from the behavior problems to the sleeping problems that never seem to end. It is important to enter the world of parenthood with an open mind, realizing that you may be faced with problems that do not have perfect solutions. Learning to live with reality, rather than changing reality, is the best treatment plan for many complex problems of childhood.