

What Happened to My Life?
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Adjusting to life after baby is no easy feat. After about three weeks of intensive carrying, nursing, changing, comforting, making faces, playing with toes, decoding of cries, and very little sleep, I was relieved to have an expectant friend from college stop by to visit. I looked a wreck. At 11:30 am I was still in my nightgown with my hair unbrushed. Fearing, I think, for her own imminent future, she implored, "Debbie, what can I do for you?" "Dress me," I groaned, "then feed me." In short order she started my breakfast then held the baby while I dressed. She even took us to a party. Although I knew everyone there as college chums, I felt altered. I had crossed the generation line. My life, my everyday plans and possibilities, would forever include my little son.

Even without the challenge of sleep deprivation, there are many changes that impact on one's reality. Acceptance of that reality may be the key to coping with and actually delighting in new parenthood.

Social Reality

The human animal is a social animal. We were not meant to parent alone. As you take on this new role, you start to consider the merits and demerits of the parenting you see others doing. While there is certainly some "instinctive" parenting, much of it is learned from those around us.

The people you will find most helpful are those who support you as the parent you want to be. Identify your parenting network. Whom can you call upon for advice, compassion, or spare diapers? A mother of toddler twins told me she was advised to look for her "mother" and her "sister" when she moved to a new community. In the absence of supportive relatives nearby, we need to seek out those who can serve in their stead.

Informal support groups develop naturally at playgrounds, baby gym and swim classes, and library story hours. If you work, you should start connecting with other parents, sharing the daily ups and downs of childcare, stages of development, and the illness of the week. My mother made lifelong friends as she chatted with two other moms who frequented the pediatric waiting room with their broods. They now compare notes on grandparenting.

Parent education programs bring together parents of similarly aged children. Sharing experiences and information, parents come to know more about themselves and their children. You can take advantage of the

cumulative stores of knowledge about parenting and child development that exist. Find out what feelings are normal for parents in different stages of parenting. Learn recommendations for solving common problems, and how to differentiate these from problems that are "just a passing stage." What a relief to realize your baby is not out to get you! We need others, and our children need others, too.

Economic Reality

A big adjustment is in how you will earn a living after you have a baby. The cost of having a new baby is not so much in their food, clothing, toys, and furniture, but in their daily care. Someone must be with that baby at all times. Unless you have relatives willing to sit for free, the choice is between parental childcare or paid childcare. If one parent gives up a full time job to stay home with the baby, there goes one full time income.

There are diverse solutions to parents earning a living, each with their benefits and drawbacks. The decision may be to put all the breadwinning responsibility on the one who can do it the best. This sometimes affects the economic balance of power in a marriage. Does the one who does the earning have more say about how to spend it? Alternatively, the long-term gain in both parents keeping their jobs may be the security of not losing one's footing on the career ladder. The temporary high cost of paying for infant care (so you can continue to draw your current salary) may be worth the steadily increasing paychecks you will get as you advance in your career.

Part-time employment for one parent still affords a part-time income, so long as there isn't a matching expense for childcare, transportation, and an office wardrobe. More employers are recognizing the benefit of retaining a valuable employee as part-time help during early parenting as opposed to hiring an inexperienced replacement. Keeping the same job you had before parenthood can help you with the transition, too. You still have your work friends, your work identity, and a portion of your prior income. But you also get to spend time becoming attached to your baby.

Some couples alternate shifts between the two parents. One works days, one works nights. You literally pass the baby between shifts. The downside to the "Hi, Honey" "Bye, Honey" arrangement is that there is no time to be together as a family -- you are always "single parenting," a difficult task in the best of circumstances. And just forget about time alone as a couple.

Taking the baby to work or working from home may work for some professions. Baby proofing an office must be taken just as seriously as baby proofing a home. As more people explore this option, and work out the kinks, it will become more prevalent. When your business is conducted via telephone, fax, and e-mail, who needs to know that there is a baby drooling on the keyboard?

If you do have a dip in family income, this will require some compromises on spending. Arguments about how the money is spent can definitely strain a marriage. Budget meetings may help. Determine how much you have and what portion goes to each expense. Ask anyone from "The Depression Era" for tips on low budget dining and entertainment. You may glean some valuable insights into cutting costs without compromising your quality of life. A fond memory from our own "salad days" was taking the baby in the double stroller through our neighborhood's weekend yard sales. I got exercise, he got scenery changes, we met neighbors, and we picked up incredible bargains in toys, clothes, and baby furnishings. Come to think of it, that was how I got the double stroller!

Figure out the best economic plan for you and live within your budget. You may discover that the best things in life – a baby's laugh, for one – are indeed free.

Relationship Reality

What happens to "just us two" when "baby makes three?" You used to live only for each other. Now your relationship is tested by an interloper who demands to come first. The adjustment to a threesome requires giving in to this notion without totally ignoring the needs of each other. Try to think of working together toward meeting the baby's needs, instead of resenting how much the baby comes between you and your mate (or how little your mate is helping you with the baby).

Trade off, for example, who gets up for the baby in the middle of the night. Divide chores, so that for instance, it is always one person's responsibility to keep the diaper bag stocked, while the other keeps tabs on the laundry needs. Work as a team for some tasks, like loading the car with all the necessities for an outing. Cooperate when important matters concern you both, such as coordinating pediatrician visits to meet everyone's schedules. Communicate your needs and feelings, without expecting that your spouse should make it all better for you. With a new baby your personal resources are already tapped to the limit. Discuss how you can reduce the load for each other, perhaps by using outside help for

cleaning, cooking, or childcare. Diaper service, fast food, and grandparents are some possible resources to consider.

When things calm down after the first few months, take advantage of baby-sitting offers and treat yourselves to a date. As soon as you get away, you'll chat about how wonderful the baby is. But talk about yourselves, too. Many new parents remark that the parenting role brings out the best in them -- patience, responsibility, caring, crisis management. Recognize each other's contributions to the enormous task you've undertaken together. And take some time to just adore one another for a while.

Time Check

At the start of it all, it seems as if you will be parenting forever. Actually, children are intensely needy the first year or two, gradually forming attachments to people outside the immediate family, and eventually gaining independence. When our son was nearly six, and our daughter almost three, they would go together to the neighbor's yard to play for short periods. One late spring afternoon, they were still outside, and I was deliciously "kid free" as I cooked dinner and set the table. My husband and I debated whether to call them in or to sit down to the first unplanned dinner alone in almost six years. We joked about their coming back when they got hungry, but just for a moment, we realized that they didn't always need us any more.

You and your spouse will hopefully be married to each other for many, many years. The years of diapers and fevers and midnight monsters are but a brief period in your lifetime. There will be parenting moments you'll cherish together, and hardships you'll marvel at someday. Nurture your love affair as much as you can while your parenting affairs take precedence. If you keep the spark alive, the fire of passion will still be there when the children no longer are.