

GROW WITH IT

How to Thrive at Each Stage of Motherhood



From the first sign of pregnancy, you wonder if you're doing what's best for your child. And, just when you think you've figured it out, the challenges change. Moms who thrive approach the process with openness, patience and a sense of humor. Motherhood is a wild, wild ride. Just grow with it.

Mom-to-Be: Great Expectations

When you're pregnant, nine months feels like an insanely long time. The joy of knowing you have a new life inside you intensifies as the baby grows. Those first fluttering movements are awe-inspiring. You should rest, but nesting instincts and anticipation take over. Pregnant moms express their anticipation in each little detail: buying baby gear, painting the nursery, washing tiny clothes.

Along with the wait comes the worry. Each twinge and tickle makes you wonder if something is wrong. When the baby stops somersaulting or you fail the glucose tolerance test, you panic. More tests and more waiting follow. It's easy to get a little obsessive. You just want to gaze into baby's eyes, count his toes and know that everything is alright. But first comes childbirth.

It is natural to fear labor pain, says Colleen Rasey, a Labor and Delivery nurse and newly minted mom. The more information you have, the less scared you will be. "Even after

14 years as a labor and delivery nurse, I still took prenatal classes and read books to prepare," Rasey confided. Try to be flexible with your birth plan. Going without an epidural or giving birth in a bathtub aren't the keys to delivery room success. What matters is being present in both mind and body, focusing all your energy on a safe delivery.

Reflecting on her first four months of motherhood, Rasey concludes, "It is harder than I thought it would be. It's not just pure maternal bliss." Hearing your fussy baby cry while you are swimming in your own sea of hormones can make you feel like a failure. "I took his crying really personally," says Rasey.

When your baby sleeps peacefully on your chest, his breath rising and falling with yours ... savor it. These small moments are a refuge. You may not know it all. You may think you don't know enough. But you will know, with unshakable certainty, that you've never loved anyone so much.

BY HEIDI SMITH LUEDTKE

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The Early Years:

Can't See the Forest for the Laundry

Before you know it, your baby is walking and talking. She claps with delight when her brother tickles her. She puts everything in her mouth, including the dog's food and the dog's tail. She runs her fingers through her hair and it stands on end, held in place by the cement-like substance only a teething biscuit can create.

Don't forget to take pictures of events you'll want to recall later, like the day your toddler emptied a thousand Q-tips on the bathroom floor. Write down idiosyncratic expressions, too. Missie Ellis, mom of two college-age boys, remembers fondly how her youngest son used to pull dandelion flowers from the soccer field and present them to her at the end of practice. It was very touching, she says. "And it put me in quite the conundrum since I am a lawn freak who hates weeds. There I was putting them in vases and displaying them with pride!"

Mountains of laundry and epic exhaustion are not-so-happy facts of life in this stage. Remember: Sleep deprivation is used to torture prisoners of war. "I once went to the grocery store with my shirt on inside out," recalls Kris Koenig, mom of five girls ages 5 to 15. "My then 3-year-old waited to tell me when we got home." Temper tantrums, potty training and limit-testing can try the patience of any mom. But a few deep breaths and making some time for yourself — even just 10 minutes here or there — will rejuvenate you.

Starting preschool or daycare is also challenging. Knowing that your child stops crying only minutes after your departure won't make it that much easier. Missing everyday experiences is sad, and even when your head says you're doing the right thing, your heart will break a little.

A willingness to be present is key, says Cathy Cassani Adams, parent coach and author of *The Self-Aware Parent: 19 Lessons for Growing with Your Children*. "Life with small children can be repetitious, even boring." Worrying about milestones is normal. Kids don't come with instruction manuals and — even if they did — each child has unique needs. "Everyone wants to tell you the best way to parent, but their approaches may not work for you," says Mary Miller, mom of two. Trust your own instincts and you'll be fine. No one knows your kid better than you.



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The School Years: Homework and Carpool, Oh My!

Watching your child become independent is truly a joy, says Koenig. "Each year on the first day of school I shed a few tears, but they are happy tears because each year brings new experiences and knowledge." Your kids will choose their own friends and make decisions without you. But they're not grown up yet. "My kids still like me to lie with them at night and tuck them in," says Miller. "I treasure that. My son claims he's too old to hold hands in public, so I sneak in hugs on the sly."

Developing good values and healthy habits is important. The education kids receive in the school years is the foundation for their future. "I try not to give them every little material thing the other kids have, or to enroll them in every activity," says Miller. Extracurricular interests build skills and expand kids' social circles, but parents need to protect family time.

"My proudest moment ... is when my children achieve something they've been working at very hard," says Miller. "For example, when my son scored his first soccer goal this year, he smiled from ear to ear." Seeing the joy in your kids' eyes after a hard-won accomplishment is fulfilling.



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"My proudest moment as a mom is when my children achieve something they've been working at very hard," says Miller. "For example, when my son scored his first soccer goal this year, he smiled from ear to ear."

Even so, letting go of control is difficult. Kids spend much of their time away from home, at school or outside. Bullying is a real threat, and kids aren't always aware of the physical or social dangers they face. "It's hard not knowing who is doing what to my child when they're not with me," Koenig says. "You can't protect them 24/7."

Good communication is a must. "Listen to your kids, be curious and ask questions," Adams advises. You may be spending less time together, but stay tuned in to their interests. While you're at it, nurture interests of your own. "Put yourself on the list," says Adams. If you don't spend time alone, you won't know who you are anymore. Set a good example and pursue passions of your own.

Teens and Beyond: Up, Up and Away

"It fills my heart to see what an amazing person my teen is becoming," Koenig enthuses. The results of your earlier teachings — kindness, respect, and persistence — are gratifying. Ellis enjoys her sons' holiday homecomings. "I love to listen to them interact with one another because, despite the sibling rivalries they had growing up, their bond of brotherly love is very apparent."

Ellis confronted her son's independence when he went to Egypt for a semester abroad, just in time for the political uprising. "His podcasts were tough to listen to ... I could hear the adrenaline, excitement and fear in his voice," she says. "Oddly, I wasn't too worried. Having my husband beside me gave me strength, even if his sage advice — 'know where the nearest hospital is, so you can go there if you get a rock to the head' —



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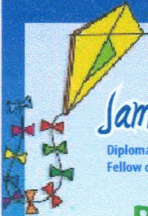
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As much as you'd like to chart their life's course for them, your kids will follow their own paths. They may suffer big setbacks, like school failures, job loss and divorce. Let them tell you who they are rather than telling them who to be.

wasn't so funny." When he fled Egypt, Ellis' son left all his cash with his roommate. "He wanted her to be able to survive longer with his additional money. I was very proud of him for doing that," Ellis says.

As much as you'd like to chart their life's course for them, your kids will follow their own paths. They may suffer big setbacks, like school failures, job loss and divorce. Let them tell you who they are rather than telling them who to be. If you're lucky, they'll hire you on as a consultant.

Knowing when to step forward and when to step back is challenging, says Susan Mather, mom to two adults. "Talk to your grown kids about your feelings and your mistakes; be real and be human," says Adams. By doing so, you let them know what they are feeling is normal. Support them, but don't ask them to bear your burdens.

"There is a void I feel without my kids around me," says Ellis. "I'm not sure when — or if — that will end."

Friends your own age are probably going through similar empty-nest emotions; it's good to talk about what you're experiencing. Take this time to rekindle romance with your partner. Rediscover what fulfills you as a person while knowing that your kids are out in the world experiencing the life you gave them.



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Being a grandparent is so much fun that some people wish they could skip parenting and be grand from the get-go. Seeing the world through children's eyes never gets old.

Mom-of-a-Mom


Being a grandparent is so much fun that some people wish they could skip parenting and be grand from the get-go. Seeing the world through children's eyes never gets old. The stereotype, of course, is that grandparents spoil kids rotten, with no responsibility for the consequences. Louise Armstrong, mom of two and grandmother of four, disagrees.

Being a grandparent is another chance to get it right, says Armstrong. "I want my grandchildren to know that I love them more than life itself." She models attributes she wants her grandkids to learn. "I want them to make a contribution to the world," she says.

Watching her own kids as parents has shown Armstrong that the generation gap is far less than she thought it was. "They have the same struggles I had as a young parent," she says. Every generation strives to do their best for their children.

"The most challenging part of being a grandma is holding my tongue when I see parents make, what I consider, a mistake," Armstrong says. "My job is to love the grandchild and his parents, not judging either. Living by example is preferable to lecturing, but holding your tongue is difficult. "I often have to bite my tongue to keep from meddling. My tongue is lots shorter because of that," she jokes.




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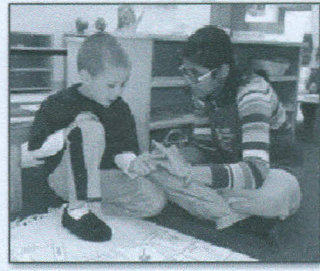
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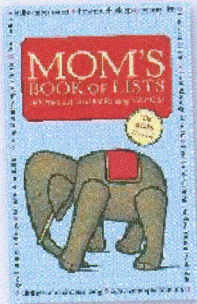


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Although she lost her own maternal grandmother early in childhood, Armstrong remembers her grandma loved her and was proud of her. "I hope my own grandchildren remember that I encouraged them and expected their best. And I hope they remember digging in the dirt, planting flowers ... playing games and watching *Charlotte's Web*. We may be separated by generations, but we are so much alike," she says.



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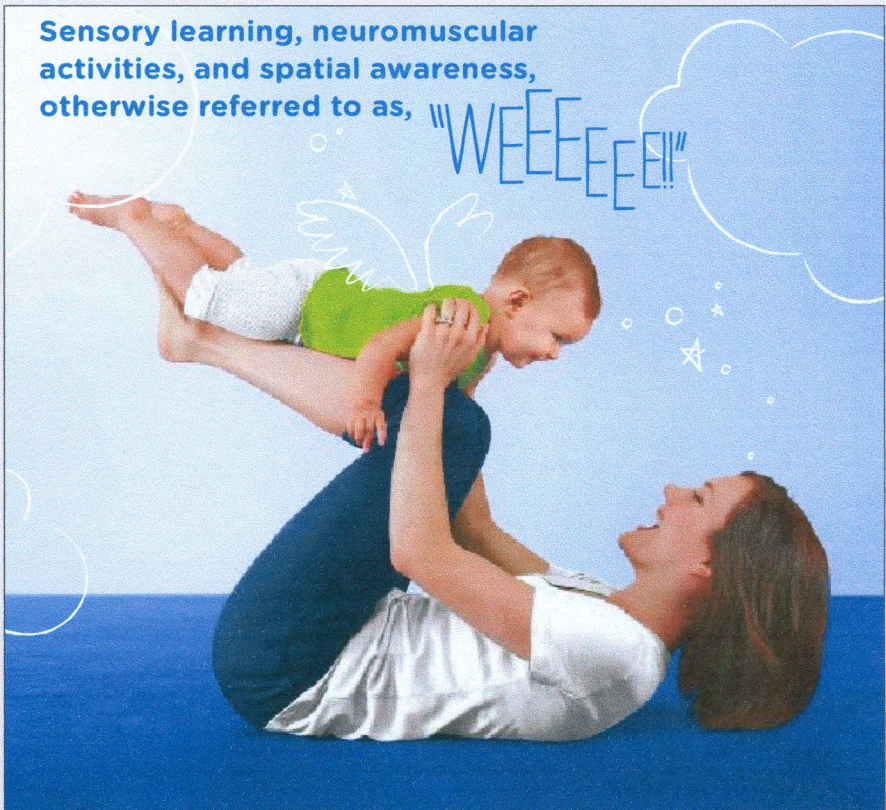
Lovin' Every Minute of It

When challenges overwhelm, it's natural to wish your kids were at a different stage of development. Stages that play to your strengths become favorites. You may feel comfortable with babies but fear the terrible twos (and threes). You may wish to fast-forward so you can communicate with kids on an adult level. Looking back from the teen years, you may fondly remember sleepless nights when the only thing keeping you up was colic.

To make the most of where you are, take comfort in small things. "My 7-year-old is very strong-willed. But when she curls up with me while we read *Fancy Nancy*, I realize that those tough moments will pass," says Miller. Find ways to grow with your children and anticipate the joys to come. Susan Mather looks forward to becoming a grandma in June. "I hope to be the primary babysitter for the first year," she says.

In the end, you may not do everything perfect as a mom. But if you savor the moments along the way, the sweet day-to-day bits of life as a mother, be assured that you're doing great. Remembering that it's the journey, not the destination, that matters will help you enjoy all the stages of motherhood, each one unique in its own way.

Heidi is a psychologist and freelance writer who recognizes that she, like her kids, is a work in progress. Follow her blog on parenting as leadership at leadingmama.com. 



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