

## New Mom Mistakes: Befriend Yourself and Move Forward

by Heidi Smith Luedtke, PhD

As you reach for the remote control, your precious bundle rolls off the bed and lands on the floor with a thump. You're mortified. And scared. Yesterday, when your husband asked how soon your son would roll over, you said "It could be any day now." You just turned your back for a second and it happened. If he's hurt, you'll never forgive yourself.

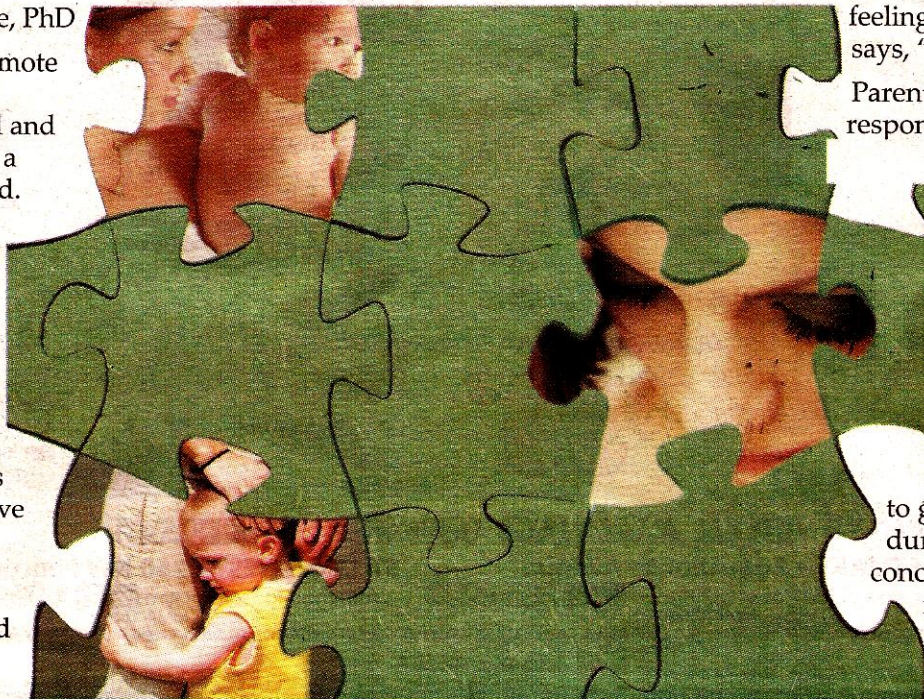
### In Good Company

Even the most prepared and best-intentioned new parents make mistakes. Warming a bottle a bit too long and failing to test the temp? Done it. Forgetting to buckle the chest clip on the car seat? Yes, I've done that, too. And my kids are okay.

Our tendency to believe there is a right way to parent may cause us to feel we've failed, even when everything is fine. While my son slept safely and happily in his swing, I lay in my own bed feeling defeated because I couldn't get him to sleep in his crib. "We have more choices than ever as new parents, and we can see everywhere what other parents are doing," says Devra Renner, MSW, co-author of *Mommy Guilt: Learn to Worry Less, Focus on What Matters Most and Raise Happier Kids*. You're probably doing a better job than you think, but (no matter what you do) it may not feel good enough. Any small slip-up can send you over the edge when you're running on too little sleep and too much anxiety.

### How We React

"It's common for new parents to catastrophize about the consequences of their errors," says Sana Johnson-Quijada, M.D., psychiatrist and mother of three in Temecula, Calif. When the baby bonks her head on the door jamb as you carry her in your arms, worst-case thinking prevails. "What if she has a closed-head injury?" you wonder. "What if she develops seizures or swelling?" "Maybe there's brain damage." Anxiety builds, too. "We don't choose our



feelings," Johnson-Quijada says, "they choose us."

Parenting is an enormous responsibility, so it's easy to over-personalize mistakes. In our rush to judgment, we focus upon internal, global and stable causes for our errors and ignore external or changeable factors involved. For example, a new mom who struggles to get a comfortable latch during breastfeeding may conclude she isn't naturally nurturing or that she's not tuned in to her baby. Attributing shortcomings to lack of ability, rather than

lack of experience, prevents us from learning new skills. Self-blame undermines new moms' self-confidence. "We tend to second guess ourselves more than we need to," says Renner. Unsure we can trust our instincts, we look to others for advice on how to do parenting right. And the cycle continues.

### How to Befriend Yourself and Move Forward

Feelings of calm, generosity and connectedness are restored when we treat ourselves as treasured friends instead of internal enemies. "If you want to be a good mom, fight hard to be good to yourself," says Johnson-Quijada. Here's how:

**Acknowledge Biology.** All babies aren't easy. If your little one has a high-intensity, hard-to-soothe temperament, she'll cry more often and longer than your girlfriend's happy-lucky baby. That's not an indictment of your parenting prowess. "The gene pool has no lifeguard," Renner jokes. Kids' quirks aren't your fault.

**Own Your Expertise.**



**Own Your Expertise.** You'll find advice around every corner whether you seek it or not. "You're the expert for your own kids," Renner says. "What's right for your family may not be right for others." Joyful parenting means trusting that you're doing the best you can do for your children. When you falter, learn from experience.



**Stay Centered.** If unsolicited advice makes you anxious about your approach to parenting, respond simply. Just say "thank you." Those two little words tell would-be advisers you heard their suggestions and close the conversation, Renner says. No prolonged justification or discussion is required.

**Lower Your Expectations.** As a parent, you'll set high but realistic expectations of your children to motivate their achievement. Do the same for yourself.

"You aren't being friendly to yourself if you expect more from yourself than from anyone else," Johnson-Quijada says. Don't idealize perfection. You're human, not super-human.

**Copy Your Kids.** Babies bounce back very quickly from unexpected events. So should you. When things go wrong, "A do-over is perfectly acceptable," Renner says, "and so is a nap." Let go of disappointment and flow with what comes next. Your child will move on much faster than you anticipate.

**Take Time Away.** Mistakes are magnified by the constant grind of new parenting tasks. "You can't give what you don't have," Johnson-Quijada says. Step back, get

### Five Acts of Self-Compassion

1. Give yourself a hug
2. Savor a favorite treat
3. Take a time out
4. Affirm your own value
5. Start fresh tomorrow

perspective, and renew your energy. Pursuing your own interests sets a healthy example for your children.

**Be Yourself.** Tune in to who you are as a person and go in that direction. Self-care is more than sleeping when the baby sleeps. "If you long for adult conversation or meaningful work, seek it out," says Johnson-Quijada. "Explore what works with your natural wiring. Claim your freedom to make different choices if necessary." No one can do that for you.

**When you disappoint yourself, practice compassion.** As Albert Einstein said, "Anyone who has never made a mistake has not tried anything new." Great moms aren't born with the instincts of the Baby Whisperer or the behavior-modification skills of the SuperNanny. They are made through the ups and downs of experience.

*Heidi Smith Luedtke is a personality psychologist and mom of two who openly shares parenting errors and what she learned from them at [heidiluedtke.com](http://heidiluedtke.com).*

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