

Grow With It!

How to Thrive at Each Stage of Motherhood

by Heidi Smith Luedtke

When you're pregnant, nine months feels like an insanely long time. Your joy at the new life inside you intensifies as the baby grows and kicks. Along with the wait comes the worry. You want to gaze into your baby's eyes, count his toes, and know that everything is alright.

Each stage of motherhood brings joys and challenges. Moms who thrive approach the process with openness, patience, and a sense of humor. Motherhood is a wild, wild ride. Just grow with it.



The Early Years: Can't See the Forest for the Laundry

"Nothing beats super sloppy baby kisses," says Kris Koenig, mother of five girls ages 5 to 15. Snuggling your baby, smelling her hair and watching her fall asleep in your arms is amazing. "I also loved nursing my kids. It made me feel like I was giving them something special that they couldn't get anywhere else," says Mary Miller, mom of two. Fun firsts such as smiling, walking, and talking make every mom swoon.

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," Koenig recalls. Temper tantrums, potty training, and limit-testing can try the patience of any mom.

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. There is a lot of watching and waiting and worrying." Trust your own instincts. Being a new mom is daunting and you have to figure it out. "Everyone wants to tell you the best way, but their approaches may not work for you," Miller says.

How Have You Grown with Your Kids?

"They remind me to be curious; they remind me to slow down. I've learned to take care of myself so I can be at my best for them."

— Cathy Cassani Adams

The School Years: Homework and Carpool, Oh My!

Watching your child become independent is a joy, Koenig says. "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," Miller says. "My son claims he's too old to hold hands in public, so I sneak in hugs on the sly."

Letting go of control is challenging. Kids spend much of their day in school. 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.

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. 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, Adams says.

Teens and Beyond: Up, Up and Away

"It fills my heart with great pride to see what an amazing person my teen is becoming," Koenig says. It's gratifying to see kindness, respect, creativity, and

How Have You Grown with Your Kids?

"When I was younger, I thought if I worked hard enough I could have 'the perfect family.' However, I have learned that 'perfect' ... would probably be pretty boring if ever achieved! I have enjoyed watching my kids develop, and now find them very good company. They have become my 'perfect family.'"

— Susan Mather

achievement. Missie Ellis, mom to two twentysomethings, enjoys their holiday homecoming. "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."

As much as you'd like to chart their course for them, your kids will follow their own paths. They'll date the bad boy next door whether you approve or not. 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.

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How Have You Grown with Your Kids?

"I have grown ... DOWN! I have learned to get down on my kids' levels. It ... helps me to see the world from their perspective."

— Kris Koenig

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Knowing when to step forward and when to step back is challenging, says Susan Mather, mom to two kids, now grown. They may suffer big setbacks, like job loss and divorce. "Talk to your grown kids about your feelings and your mistakes; be real and be human," Adams says. 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," Ellis says. If you feel lonely, lean on friends your own age. Focus on romance with your partner. Rediscover what fulfills you as a person.

How Have You Grown with Your Kids?

"My kids are a constant reminder that patience is so important ... we try to take a step back and figure out how to proceed *without losing it!*"
 — Mary Miller

Lovin' Every Minute of It

When challenges overwhelm, it's natural to wish your kids were at a different stage of development. And we usually love the stage that plays to our strengths. You may feel comfortable dealing with your kids as babies but fear the terrible twos (and threes). Or you may wish that your kids would grow up overnight so you could communicate on an adult level.

When that happens, reflect on the joys of today. "It's challenging! 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," Miller says. Anticipate the joys to come, too.

Susan Mather loves being able to help her two grown kids and to rely on them when she needs help. "I am looking forward to becoming a grandma in June and hope to be the primary babysitter for the first year," she says. "After that I will probably not be able to keep up!" □

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