

## PARENTAL INSTINCTS

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Having retrieved my cell phone during its last ring, from my make-shift office space at the end of our kitchen counter, I hastily shushed Ellie and Landon, warning, “it’s a call for my work. I need you guys to keep it down while I answer the phone.”

“Hi, Kimmelin, it’s Emily. I was hoping you could offer some advice on problems we’re having with our son’s sleep patterns.”

“Sure, Emily. What’s going on?”

“Well, at two months old, Issac hardly naps during the day. I can tell he gets tired, but every time I put him down in his crib he just screams and screams. I have a few more weeks before I have to start going back into the office, but I’d agreed to do a little work from home in exchange for extending my maternity leave. But with the baby waking up twenty minutes after I put him down—or not going to sleep at *all*—I’m hardly getting anything done.”

The exasperation and desperation in this woman’s voice was practically oozing from the telephone.

“Well, Emily, let’s start by talking about what Issac’s sleeping patterns are like at night time...”



Trusting parental instincts is an endangered art form. I see this again and again as I interact with new parents

who have taken my classes and end up calling me in the weeks following their babies' births, confused and frustrated over the conflicting advice they have read or been given by well-meaning friends, family members and healthcare providers. With the overwhelming number of child-rearing guidance books available, it's no wonder young parents are increasingly doubtful of their decisions and parenting methods.

Ours, like many parents' bookshelves, are filled with Drs. Sears and Karp, Penelope Leach, Vickie Iovine, Ina May Gaskin, and even a couple of the *What to Expect* chronicles. Interspersed are titles on potty training, infant and toddler massage, and baby sign language. While struggling to entice Landon, at seven months old, to begin sleeping through the night, we invested in numerous publications on teaching, training, and coaxing good sleep habits.

I believe these resources have their important, and sometimes essential, place in every young parent's household...but sometimes that place is on the shelf, right next to a bookend, or the thrice-read, well-loved copy of Naomi Wolfe's *Misconceptions*.

Parents need the opportunity to experiment with a little trial and error. Only then can they confidently discover their own style of parenting—as an individual, and as a couple (if this applies).

When a person is in an incredibly vulnerable state, as most new parents are, absorbing dueling pieces of advice is confusing at the very least and defeating at the worst. Rather than being able to pick and choose what feels and sounds right to him or her from a variety of sources, the

new parent attempts to synthesize the information in a way that is clearly impossible to employ. Add to this the input from well-meaning family and friends, and a new mother or father finds her or himself dizzy with options that lead back to the starting point of not knowing what to do.

While shopping with all three kids in tow for an upcoming baby shower we would attend as a family, I meandered through the local baby supply store, ending up visiting with the young woman behind the counter. As she and I talked about all the great baby and parenting products available these days, Ellie and Landon explored the store—climbing in and out of the display strollers and bunk beds, and testing out the toys and scooters.

The woman, a mother of three young children herself, revealed to me that she was in the process of setting up a website that was geared toward new mothers in our local area.

“I’m going to put tons of information on the site—answering every question a new mother wonders about. All they’ll have to do is come to my website, and they can get all the answers there. All the things I wish I’d known when I was a new mom.”

“Hmmm,” I replied—wondering whether or not I should point out the obvious.

On one level, I applauded her for her visceral desire to share her knowledge and experience with other women who were delving into the experience of Motherhood for the first time. But if it was as easy as capturing “all the answers” regarding caring for babies, their bodies, their lives and their households, all in one concise resource, it would have been done ages ago.

*“Here you go, Mrs. Harvey. Here is the Life With Baby manual that accompanies every new infant we send home from our hospital. Diapering and feeding issues can be found on pages fifteen through twenty-five. Caring for your postpartum body is found in chapter three. A step by step guide to re-defining yourself can be found on pages 100 through 101!”*

But, no such perfect manual exists.

As every new parent faces that first twenty-four hours with their newborn child, during their first day home from the hospital, or the first day without the midwife or doula’s presence, there is a certain amount of anxiety that accompanies the opportunity to face the challenge in the eye, and learn by doing.

As Andrew and I tried one technique after another in hopes that Landon would give up his frequent nighttime awakenings, I grew sick of the books that made their particular solution sound fool-proof, only to be proven unhelpful in our own household. Exhausted and desperate, I finally asked the advice of two women, childbirth educators and mothers, under whom I was studying at the time.

“He’ll sleep through the night when he’s ready to,” they agreed, offering the suggestion gently and emphatically. “Babies wake up at night for different reasons. It’s not always because they’re hungry. Maybe he’s lonely for you.”

I hadn’t had to conduct any extensive research or pay for yet another book to land upon this priceless reply. It suddenly made sense to me: I had all the time in the world to make up for lost sleep (of course that time wouldn’t come for several more years). If my baby felt the need to

have his parents close by during the night time hours for a few more months, what could it hurt? He was, after all, just a baby.

Later, I would come across the notion that most children don't usually make a regular habit of sleeping a solid ten to twelve hours a night until they're two-years-old (after the remaining baby teeth—the second year molars—have finally come in).

But whatever Landon's particular reasons were, it didn't really matter. The women I consulted were right. He just wasn't ready yet. And so with grace and understanding, I accepted this and trusted that he would lengthen his stretches of sleep when he was ready.

I find the issue of trusting one's own parenting instincts also comes to light with vigorous frequency for new breastfeeding moms. Aside from calling to announce the arrival of their little cherub, the most common postpartum call I receive from women who've taken my classes revolves around breastfeeding.

This, I can totally understand.

Having committed myself, even before her birth, to breastfeeding Ellie, it was a terrible shock to discover how difficult it was for me during the first month of her life. Now that I look back, my "inadequate milk supply" that my doctor convinced me of, had nothing to do with my body's inability to produce milk, and everything to do with the stressors of life with a new baby, paired with an impending cross-country move that disallowed me to care for myself well enough to encourage the natural process my body would have otherwise performed. Rather than allow Ellie to direct

the amount of time on each breast, I felt obligated to follow the stringent regulations of the lactation consultant who advised following a “twenty minutes on each side” regimen. I was discouraged from allowing the baby to fall asleep at the breast, instead of being encouraged to take a “nursing vacation” during which Ellie and I could have spent several days shut away in my bedroom where we attended to nothing other than establishing a strong and healthy nursing relationship.

After four weeks of suffering through blistering, cracked nipples, microtube supplementation feedings, and applying loads of lanolin ointment and Soothies gel pads to my painful nipples, I finally broke down and introduced a half time formula supplementation schedule. I don’t entirely begrudge this, as Ellie is a healthy, smart, allergy-free child who continued to breast feed part-time until her first birthday. But had I known better—had I felt confident in trusting my instincts, and my body, I might not have had to go through the cascade of frustrations that defined my introduction to breastfeeding. Two children later, Gabriel was exclusively breast fed during his first year of life, and then supplemented with rice and soy milk as he became capable of drinking from a sippy cup. I never had to increase his caloric intake with formula once during those twelve months—because my body *really could* do what it was meant to do. I had just needed to give it the chance.

Not only do new parents struggle with sleep and feeding issues, but the innate ability to trust in the *very process* of childbirth has become, in so many circles, a dying art form.

While teaching a private Lamaze class session to a young

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couple who were quickly approaching their due date, the woman asked me, when we were discussing the utilization of different positions during the course of labor, “how do women know how to do this stuff if they don’t take a class?”

I looked at her and smiled. She knew the answer before I even gave it away.

“Women have been doing this for thousands of years, and it’s only been recently that they *even needed* classes to learn this stuff. All they really need to do is listen to their body and trust their instincts. I can guarantee you that if you listen, your body will tell you what to do.”

While Andrew and I occasionally still open one of our many childrearing guidebooks for consultation on a particular issue of concern, we seem to have grown in our ability to trust ourselves—and each other—in deciding what is right for our children. In a world where theories are meant to be proven and studies are valid only if reproducible, it can be difficult to sometimes just go with your gut instinct. But, alas, God gave us instincts for a reason, and so I, for one, plan to use them.