

Emergency! What your sitter must know

NOVEMBER 1996

Parents

The best
toys
of '96



Danger-proof
your toddler

Tips for
taming
tantrums

Health update

- SIDS alert
- cold prevention
- finicky eaters

Good-bye guilt!
Moms don't have to be perfect

\$2.50



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The image:
A baby who
never cries
and a mother
who's rested
and radiant.

The perfect- mother

Making mistakes
is the only way
to learn what your
baby needs.

myth

BY JEAN KUNSHARDT, LISA SPIGEL,
AND SANDRA K. BASILE

When a day goes like clockwork, and I recognize my baby's cries for what they are and respond to them correctly, I feel like a perfect mother," says Gillis Kallem, a teacher in Providence, Rhode Island, whose baby, Till, is 10 weeks old. "But it's very fleeting. On bad days, I can't seem to do anything right. I can't nurse her enough. I can't soothe her. I can't distract her. That's when I'm at my lowest and I feel like a failure."

Parents today understand, perhaps better than their own parents did, that children are deeply affected by their earliest experiences. But the price of this increased awareness is an extra

dose of anxiety, which can make a woman feel she has to be the "perfect mother." It's easy to assume that every exchange with your baby is critical—and that she will have lasting damage to her psyche if you allow her to cry for more than a minute or let her soothe herself with her thumb or a pacifier. These standards of perfection can leave little room for the very human woman who is trying her best, for the very human baby who is more resilient than you might think, and for spontaneous give-and-take between the two of you.

As mothers and parent counselors, we (Jean and Lisa) have had a privileged vantage point for nearly a decade on the exciting early months of new motherhood. In 1987 we founded

what is today the Soho Parenting Center, affiliated with a pediatric practice in New York City. Our support groups have included hundreds of new mothers referred to us by their pediatricians, and almost every one has expressed concern about not being a perfect or even good enough mother. These feelings are most acutely felt during the first six months of motherhood, but if unaddressed, they can resonate for a lifetime.

Sometimes a woman's desire to be a perfect mother emanates from her past, from childhood hurts great and small. Sometimes perfectionism is a way of life, a standard imposed on her career, on her relationships, and now on her child rearing. We try to help new mothers understand what

**The reality:
You're only
human,
and so is
your baby.**



fuels their need to do everything right. We try to help them debunk the myth of the perfect mother.

In the first months it's natural for your self-confidence to fluctuate from day to day, even from hour to hour, depending on whether your baby is content. But when you feel like a failure, it usually has less to do with your mothering skills than with your fears—about your baby's development, health, and safety, or about your ability to love your baby enough. Perhaps the most poignant fear is that your child will somehow internalize your anxieties.

All babies need to cry sometimes

New parents usually need to be reassured that all babies cry. Although your infant's cries are biologically programmed to make you respond, it's helpful to remember that crying in and of itself won't harm your baby. In addition to communicating hunger, fatigue, or discomfort, crying also can be your baby's way of blocking out unwanted stimulation, discharging tension, or even falling asleep. Babies are adaptable and forgive-

I sterilized all of my son's bottles, nipples, and pacifiers three or four times a day—even when they hadn't been used.

Anu Khurana
Providence, R.I.

I was obsessive about packing the diaper bag and wanted to be prepared for anything. My husband used to say, "Do you have food for three days in there?"

Susan King
Acton, Mass.

I would always abandon my plans if they conflicted with my daughter's nap schedule. Anytime she fell asleep in my arms, I would just sit and hold her for hours, trapped on the couch, motionless.

Sabrina Foulie
Atlanta, Ga.

I felt guilty any time my daughter, Cerise, fell asleep in the automatic swing. I watched her the whole time, but I wondered if I

was a bad mother to let her sleep sitting up with her head all slumped over.

Bobbie Demme San Filippo
Lake Mary, Fla.

I realize now I went overboard with childproofing. I wouldn't tolerate a loose button or a hard edge. I found myself hovering over her to protect her from any possible bumps or bruises.

Chris Thompson
Providence, R.I.

Are you your spouse's harshest critic?

"I know why my husband backs off from helping me with Jack," says Maggie. "I can't help it, but I correct him all the time. You put the outfit on backward. The

diaper's on too tight. Hold him more securely in the tub.' I'd back off too if he talked to me like that." Most mothers describe themselves as desperate for a

more equal sharing of the work of parenthood with their spouse. Yet these same women explain that they are often unable to let go of the controls. Fathers confirm that the more they are judged, the less adequate they feel, and the less inclined they are to help. It's all right for dads to do things differently. So bite your tongue, keep your eyeballs from rolling, or simply leave the house so your partner has the chance to make his own mistakes. It's critical for new fathers to build their own expertise in their baby's care and their confidence in this new relationship.

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Step aside and let your husband and child build their own relationship.



harder at bonding with your baby, providing developmentally appropriate activities, childproofing every square inch of living space, or doing three things at once, you could indeed be the ideal mother.

"I read a lot of books about babies," says Beth McGrath, a human-resources manager in New York City, whose son, Christopher, just turned 5 months. "The book that affected me the most was about early learning, and I followed its program of exercises to stimulate my baby's senses. In the beginning it was fine, but slowly the program started having a negative effect on me. I felt as though not a second should go by without some valuable input for the baby. If my husband was sitting with the baby and reading the newspaper, I'd say, 'Read the paper to Christopher!' When I'd measure Christopher against the developmental milestones in the book, I'd get nervous and think, 'Oh, no! Christopher can't hold a rattle yet!' and feel as if we'd both failed. It took me weeks before I realized I had to get rid of that book."

The truth is that you are fast becoming the best expert on your own baby. Many women tell us they sense a transition in their self-confidence around the fifth or sixth month. By this point, your fragile, unpredictable infant is sturdier, more familiar to you, and more settled, and you feel more comfortable trusting your instincts and enjoying your time together. When you give yourself permission not to be perfect, your baby will learn to see you as a person with both strengths and vulnerabilities, and this will ultimately help him to accept and love himself as well. □

Jean Kumbart, M.A., Lisa Spiegel, M.A., and Sandra K. Basile are the authors of *A Mother's Circle: Wisdom and Reassurance From Other Mothers on Your First Year With Baby* (Aron).