

Lessons Of **NEW** Motherhood

By Genita Kovacevich-Costello



Most parents think they teach their kids everything, but it's often the reverse. Here's what one mom learned from her twenty-pound "professor."

Before my son Brady was born, I took a crash course in parenthood to gear up on all the things I'd need to teach him once he arrived. Now that he's here, I realize I'm not the only one with a lesson plan in mind. He has a few insights he'd like to share with me too. Although learning has been fun, it has taken me a while to get used to Brady's teaching style. Refreshingly free of textbooks and long lectures, he is big on pop quizzes. So I do my best to keep up by reviewing my notes as we go along.

Experiment. Necessity may be the mother of invention, but a crying newborn also gives birth to new ways of doing things. That's how Brady inspired me to try out a

Babies unleash your hidden talents—and make a most appreciative audience.

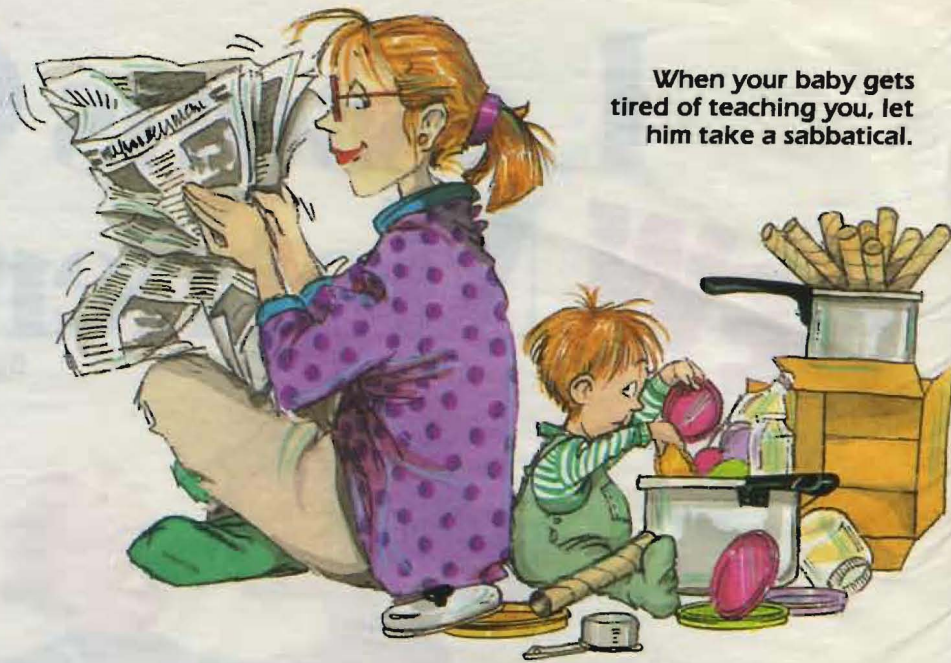
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New Motherhood (Continued)

new tune in my effort to distract him from his tears. At three months, The Name Game ("Brady, Brady, Bo Bady...") became part of my standard repertoire. I also discovered that our laundry room, with its heat fan and bright lights, could bring a hush to my wailing son. Of course, what works today may not work tomorrow. Experimentation, I've learned, is the key to survival.

Power sleeping. Living with a newborn, parents can't survive on the quantity of sleep they get at night, so they have to get by on the quality; that means falling into a deep slumber fast. This is where being exhausted really helps. Gone are the days of reading myself to sleep. It's sleep on demand because the supply is definitely limited.

Slow down. Babies take nine months to incubate and a good 12 to 24 hours to deliver. And they're in no hurry once they arrive, either. But at first I was. There was so much to do, from meeting deadlines to writing thank-yous, in what I quickly discovered was so little time. The solution was simple: I gave myself a week to accomplish what I used to do in a day. It also helps to remember that achievement is in the eye of the beholder.



When your baby gets tired of teaching you, let him take a sabbatical.

Seize the moment. The key word in parenthood is "change." A happy baby one minute can be a screaming one the next. Similarly, a sleeping baby can be awake in a flash. So it didn't take me long to realize that I had to make the most of my son's naps. As soon as he's down, I take inventory of which of my needs is the greatest: hunger, sleep, or a visit to the bathroom. One of the things that used to upset me the most in the beginning was interrupted meals. Having been married for thirteen years without kids, I had

grown accustomed to relaxing over coffee in the morning or reading a magazine at lunch. I've learned to let go of some of those expectations but also to seize the opportunity when it strikes. Quite often, I'll sit down to lunch even before I'm really famished, just to ensure finishing before Brady wakes up. I learned this trick after my hunger collided with his too many times.

Live in the present. I'm an experienced worrier and often find myself leaving the present to worry about the future. It's a habit that Brady is helping me break. Being late-bloomer parents, my husband and I are already trying for baby number two. But sometimes in the middle of playing with Brady, I'll catch myself wandering one year down the road and asking, "How will I ever be able to give myself like this to two babies at once?" Brady just smiles up at me as if to say, "You'll do just fine, Mom." And I realize he's right, since before he came along, I worried how I'd ever be able to take care of just one child. So I come back to the present and trust that I'll grow into what the future needs of me.



Like any good teacher, a baby gives you instant feedback.

If it isn't broken, don't fix it. I don't know why, but sometimes when I've got a good thing going, I blow it. For instance, Brady may be perfectly happy sitting in his infant seat, talking to himself and playing. But a little

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voice inside me pipes up and says, "You should be interacting with him." So I say something or hand him a toy, and the magic spell is broken. He gets fussy, and so do I. Well I'm learning. Now if he's content, I leave well enough alone and let him play it out for as long as he can. Who says I have to run through my whole repertoire of tricks every waking hour?

I'm a star. My son may be the only one applauding, but right now it's his opinion that counts. I can sing a rousing rendition of "Jingle Bells" (never mind 'tis not the season) and kick up my heels with the best of them. He loves it when I belt out a tune or dance him around, so we do that a lot—in the house by ourselves, with friends, on the street. His sheer delight brings me out of myself and puts aside my self-consciousness.

Keep it simple. Sometimes the best entertainment can be found right in my own kitchen cupboard. Plastic containers and lids prove fascinating to a six-month-old learning about shapes and sizes. Even brown paper bags, with their crinkling sound, keep Brady busy long enough for me to read the front page of the paper. I've learned to recycle boxes, cardboard cylinders, and plastic bottles. Although Brady must be closely supervised with all of these make-shift toys, they frequently do the trick when a genuine rattle or stuffed animal fails. The appeal escapes me, but my job is not to question why. Instead, I'm here to discover what works and to go with it, and sometimes simplest is best.

How to make friends with strangers. Basically I'm an introvert who likes spending time alone. But Brady has brought out a social side of me that had been in storage since college. He's an extrovert like his father, and when we're out, he loves to strike up a conversation with strangers, from the bank teller to the grocery clerk. With arms outstretched and eyes wide open, he catches their attention just enough to break the ice. Soon I'm



Shy about introductions?
Babies can teach you how to
break the ice.

beaming and chatting away with people I didn't even know a few seconds before.

Silliness counts. In my middle years, I'd managed to get serious about life. That was before Brady. Now you can find me making funny faces by 8:00 A.M.; and while I'm no Rich Little, I can do recognizable impersonations of Brady's favorite barnyard animals. It's as though this baby arrived on my doorstep and asked whether the silly side of me could come out and play. It's one of the best offers I've ever had.

While all of these hands-on lessons get a bit overwhelming, I'm actually relieved there is so much to

learn. Before Brady was born, I was sure my self-development would be sidetracked during my child-rearing years. Instead, I'm discovering something new every day, not only about my child but also about myself. And luckily for me, Brady, like most babies, is a natural teacher—persistent, creative, and good at giving instant feedback. It's too early to tell whether this twenty-pound professor is going to give me a passing grade, but one thing I'm sure of: There are a lot more lessons where these came from, and my teacher isn't through with me yet. ©

Genita Kovacevich-Costello, who now has two little "professors," writes a column for the *Oregon Lake Oswego Review*.