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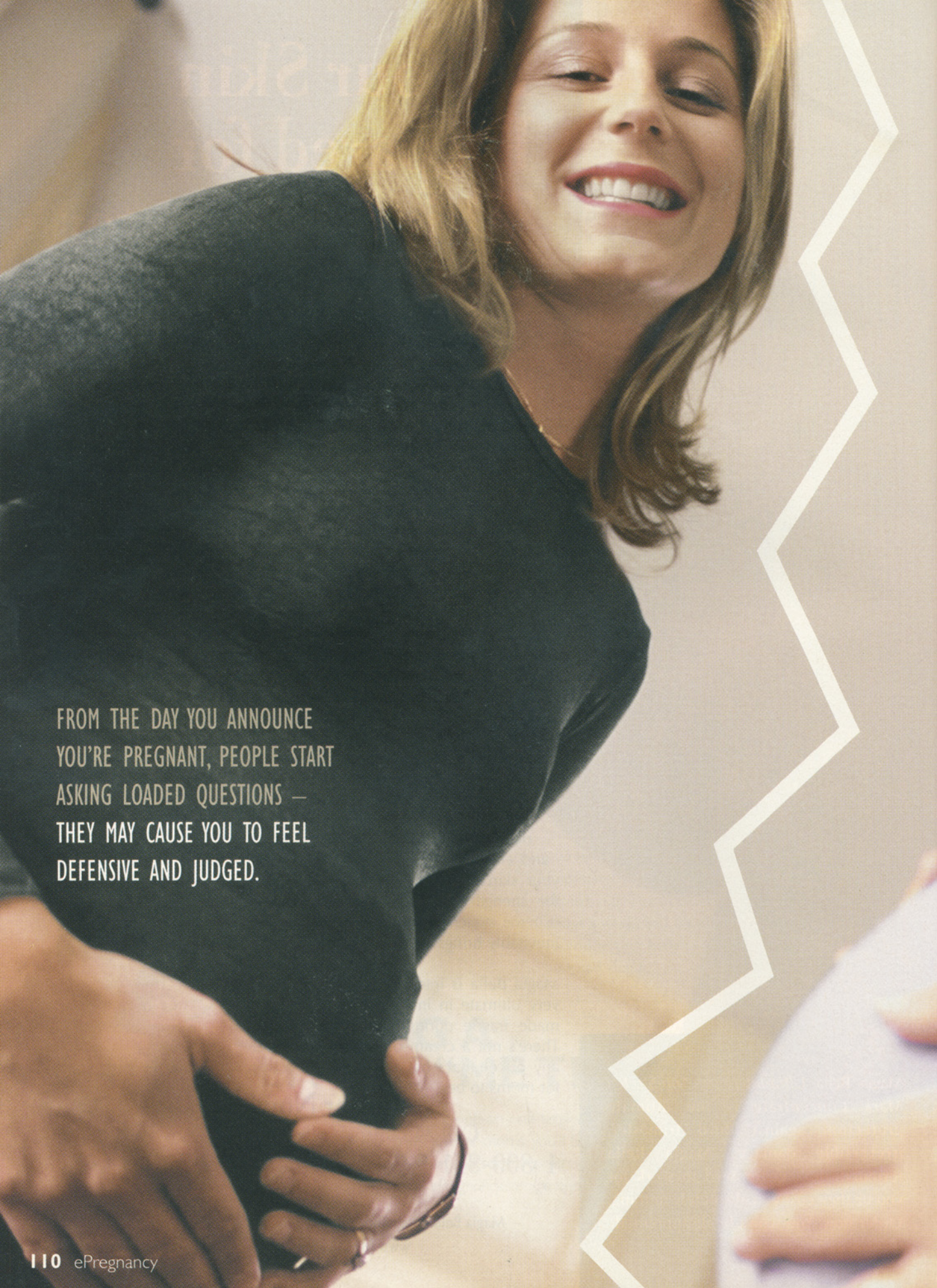
**10** of the most  
outrageous  
pregnancy myths

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FROM THE DAY YOU ANNOUNCE  
YOU'RE PREGNANT, PEOPLE START  
ASKING LOADED QUESTIONS —  
THEY MAY CAUSE YOU TO FEEL  
DEFENSIVE AND JUDGED.



THERE ARE MANY  
CONFLICTING IDEAS  
ABOUT WHAT 'GOOD  
PARENTING' IS, WHICH  
MAKES MOTHERING  
AN INCREDIBLY  
COMPETITIVE SPORT.

# *mother* nature

BY ALISA IKEDA

“Must be nice not to obsess about your figure,” comments the playgroup mom sharing my beach towel at the edge of the sand box, nodding toward my half-eaten peanut butter sandwich and bag of Cheetos. “I will lose these last five baby pounds within the next month if it kills me,” she laughs.

She’s noticeably thinner than I. Anyone—and certainly she—can see that. I flash what I hope is a convincing smile, but I mean it with all the sincerity of Kaa, that slippery snake in *The Jungle Book*. Staring at my son sifting pebbles and pine needles from the sand through his chubby fingers, I instinctively strike back. A fellow mom, I know just where it hurts: I play the breastfeeding card on this known formula ▶▶

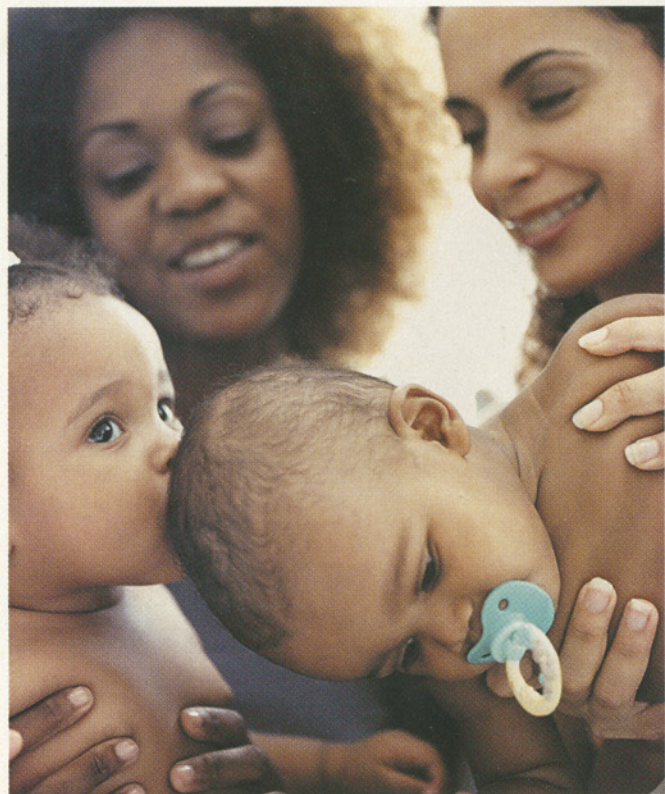
## mother nature

feeder. “Oh, my little guy needs the calories and protein I give him when I breastfeed. I guess I feel like it’s my duty to put him first and my weight goals on the back burner for now.” Take that, I think, punctuating my victory with a crunch of a Cheeto.

But the win is a hollow one, and moments later I wish I could bury my head in that warm, glistening sand.

### On the Defensive

“With so many conflicting ideas about what ‘good parenting’ is, mothering is an incredibly competitive sport,” according to Lisa Spiegel, cofounder and codirector of the Soho Parenting Center in New York City. From the day you announce you’re pregnant, people start asking loaded questions: whether you’ll return to work, if you plan to find out the gender before delivery, what you think about epidurals and circumcision... Before your belly even bulges, you feel defensive and judged—and pushed to take a stand.



alone, thinking everyone else has a contented baby, a sparkling house, and a blissful marriage. We assume everyone else is doing it right, and we let everyone else assume the same about us.

### Divided We Fall

Those of us who do make an effort to connect with one another don’t always achieve the fulfilling mom-to-mom bonding we’re after. Instead of laughing and crying together, comparing strategies and pooling resources, we often end up dividing around the many parenting platforms: breastfeeding vs. formula feeding, working vs. staying at home, attachment parenting, crying it out, and more.

Terri Cox of Knoxville, Tennessee, recalls a recent run-in with a mom friend over discipline differences. “One day, Beth announced that her son didn’t want to come over any more because he didn’t understand why my son didn’t ever get spanked or put into time outs. ‘Frankly, I don’t understand, either,’ she said. Beth proceeded to tell me how to discipline my child and that she would yell at him herself if she thought he needed it. I know our parenting styles are different, but I respect her choices and would hope that she would respect mine. It became clear that she couldn’t.”

It’s easy to become so riveted to our opinions that we are critical of others and compelled to convert them. Worse, we run the risk of closing our minds to what might be invaluable input and experience. Worse yet, we dampen the spirit of what could be an extraordinary, shared journey.

### Opening Up

Moms need a safe place for exploring the frustrations, joys, and complexities of parenthood. A facilitated mothers’ group can lend structure to mom-to-mom discussion that helps women open up and really talk about what matters to them, says Spiegel. “When women hear a ‘professional’ say, ‘We’re going to get down to the nitty gritty here—you’re going to be able to share your insecurities and the realities of mothering and not be judged,’ they just seize the opportunity.”

Look for a facilitated group in your area, or consider asking a local pediatrician, parent educator, or family therapist to help keep your group supportive of a variety of parenting styles and life choices.

**All too many of us face the mothering challenge alone, thinking everyone else has a contented baby, a sparkling house, and a blissful marriage. We assume everyone else is doing it right, and we let everyone else assume the same about us.**

With babe in arms, it only gets worse. “Motherhood can be incredibly isolating,” says Spiegel. “We long to connect with one another, but it feels so life-and-death that we’re afraid to admit we’re struggling.” Who dares to say she doesn’t know or hasn’t made up her mind about issues as important as vaccinations or the family bed? All too many of us face the mothering challenge

“There is no one ‘right’ answer,” says Sherry Reinhardt, who has seen more than 5,000 moms through her Berkeley, California, mothers’ support groups over the last 23 years. “I help mothers see that families have different values, strengths, and limitations. And children are born with different temperaments.”

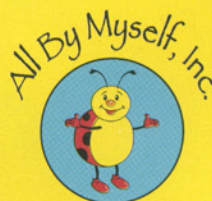
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There's nothing wrong with talking candidly about your personal experiences or beliefs. But whether you're at a formal mother's group meeting or sitting on a park bench, "It's really important to say things like, 'This is how I do it' or 'This is my opinion.' We need to take personal responsibility for what we say," advises Spiegel. Presented that way, different perspectives become not only tolerable, but helpful, too.

Likewise, advises Reinhardt, "If you are feeling uneasy about something in the group, bring it up early, before it grows. Too often, people start missing meetings, and the feelings grow bigger and bigger and more difficult to bring up."

### Maternal Instincts

Sometimes it's not even the moms themselves who are engaged in the competition. Jennifer Reno in Howell, Michigan, has two sisters who gave birth to their first children around the same time. One sister, Lisa, lived much closer to Jennifer and the rest of the family than the other; the family saw her son Hunter more frequently than they saw Amy's daughter Eliza. "Hunter was the first grandchild of the family, and we favored him over Eliza. Even as a baby, Hunter was more outgoing; Eliza wanted no one but her mother, and she would cry if we tried to hold her," says Jennifer.

Jennifer remembers a time when Amy was sharing a cute story about her daughter. "As usual, I brought up another Hunter story. I saw the flash of hurt feelings in Amy's eye, and I realized that every time she told me something about

Eliza, I countered with something about Hunter." Jennifer backed off about Hunter from then on. "Once I stopped comparing the two children and realized they were just different in temperament and development, I began to feel much closer to Eliza."

Now a mom herself, Jennifer appreciates the futility of comparisons about which mom has regained her pre-pregnancy figure, who drives a nicer car, or whose baby is crawling, potty-training, or reciting Shakespeare earlier. What matters is that we moms see one another as colleagues and not critics, as compassionate friends who can hold our hands and help us maintain our perspective and humor as we co-navigate the sometimes choppy parenting waters.

I admit I'm not feeling all that good-humored as I doodle in the sand with my toe, contemplating my next fat-laden bite. I overhear two older boys on the nearby teeter-totter, their voices escalating with each launch upward. "My mom's prettier than your mom," says the first. Without hesitation, the second snaps back, "Oh yeah? Well, my mom's smarter than your mom." I glance at the lean woman beside me and see that she has been eavesdropping, too. We exchange sheepish grins as we scoop up our sand buckets, shovels, and babies and head toward home. ■

**About the author:** No longer taking sides along the great mothering divide, Alisa Ikeda is a writer and mother in Marin County, California.