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How your life changes after each baby

Handling the biggest curveballs,
whether this is your first baby or your third

by **Hollace Schmidt** Photographs by **Andrea Wyner**

After having three kids, I find it ironic that people say you're "expecting" when you're pregnant. I thought I knew what was coming after the birth of each of my children, but each had its own unexpected curveball. With my firstborn, Joey, I had visions of serene evenings spent singing him to sleep in the nursery glider. Reality: Me, bleary-eyed at 3 A.M., rocking him by the kitchen sink because the sound of running water was the only thing that would get him back to sleep. By the time Hannah came along two years later, I figured I was a pro at this baby stuff. Wrong again. Hannah's crying upset her brother, who would join in with screams of his own, until I, too, ended up in tears. Three years later, I was already knee-deep in graham crackers and Legos, so I thought adding a third child couldn't be that big of a deal. Now, with our new baby, I have a revised definition of busy: Little Allison on my breast as I gingerly flip Hannah's grilled cheese sandwich and yell "One minute!" to Joey calling from the bathroom for me to wipe his bottom. This is not what I expected.

Parenthood rarely goes as planned—whether it's your first, second, or third child—but that doesn't mean you're doing anything wrong. It's normal for babies to turn our lives upside down. The best we can do is figure out how to adjust. How to deal with some of the most common curveballs, no matter how many kids you have:

Baby #1

The curveball: You have baby on the brain 24/7.

Michelle Weber of Madison, Mississippi, used to love going to dance classes and reading for her book club, but since the birth of her daughter, she can't seem to motivate herself to do either. She finds herself talking about Bianca, now 15 months, long after

she's put her to bed. "I'm consumed with her—what she eats, how many times she poops," she says. "No one warned me I'd lose and have to find myself again."

The straight answer: It's natural to be wrapped up in your wonderful baby. Being responsible for another human being is amazing and overwhelming, but it's vital to strive for balance between being a mom and having other interests. Otherwise, when you finally come up for air, you can find yourself feeling isolated or unappreciated.

So start with simple steps, like going to the gym for a half hour or meeting a friend for coffee. You'll return feeling recharged, which will make you a better mom. Also, keep in mind that this very dependent early phase of childhood won't last. You'll have more time to "find yourself" again as your child starts preschool and other activities.

The curveball: You're on an emotional roller coaster.

Amy Falk Sheldon of Arlington, Virginia, normally a pragmatic person, says she cried every day for six months after the birth of her son, Sam, now 2. "Mostly they were tears of joy. I felt everything about having a baby and creating a family was so precious," she says. "And forget when I'd see a sentimental commercial



on TV—I'd just start to blubber."

The straight answer: Crying spells like Sheldon's are explainable in the early weeks of having a baby. You're not sleeping, your body feels like it's been run over by a truck, and your hormones are off the charts. But even when those "baby blues" fade, your newfound sensitivity is likely here to stay. With your new role as Mom come these intense feelings of bonding (I never knew I could love someone so much), protectiveness (I would give my life for this child), and even fear (Can I really handle this responsibility?).

Embrace your tears—and remember to carry some tissues wherever you go. (If you feel, though, that the crying is getting in the way of your day-to-day functioning, you may want to talk to your doctor about depression, which is not something you should try to handle with just a few extra tissues.)

The curveball: You can't seem to get anything done.

Thought you'd clean out your closets and finally put together all those photo albums while at home with your baby? Hal On days when he's extra fussy or off schedule, you'll be lucky if you manage to finish a load of laundry. "It takes me a week to do what I used to get done in a day," says Jen Estrada of Herndon, Virginia, mom of Ryan, now 18 months. "I didn't realize there'd be no such thing as my schedule. It all revolves around him."

The straight answer: We're used to measuring accomplishment by how many things we check off our to-do lists each day. But the things you now spend your day doing—diapering, feeding, playing, rocking, and then doing it all over again—don't feel like stuff for the Palm Pilot. While slowing down can certainly be frustrating, it helps if you can think of it as a gift. "Babies force you to surrender a bit and notice things in the world you may have missed before, like watching a baby look at her hands," says Lisa Spiegel, coauthor of *A Mother's Circle: An Intimate Dialogue on Becoming a Mother*.

So continue to make those to-do lists, but be sure to include your new household and baby responsibilities—and don't feel stressed when it takes longer to get through them than you think it should. If the floor doesn't get mopped, it's not so bad, especially if you were singing "Itsy-Bitsy Spider" to your baby instead.



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Baby #2

The curveball: You're a novice all over again.

Stephanie Hicks of Shell Beach, California, could easily distract her first child, Oliver, now 4, from pulling everything out of her cupboards. Her second son, August, 16 months, doesn't fall for that. He throws the toy back at her and starts to climb the cabinets. "I'm amazed at how incredibly different they are. What works for one does not work for the other," she says.

The straight answer: Having a second child can be humbling.

How can the same adults create such drastically different kids? You may have to start from scratch when your second child arrives, figuring out brand-new parenting strategies that work best for him. The good news: Since you've already been through parenthood once, you'll trust your instincts more this time around.

One warning: "What you think of as normal is what your first child did, but don't use your first child as the bar," says Ari Brown, M.D., pediatrician and coauthor of *Baby 411: Clear Answers and Smart Advice for Your Baby's First*

Year. It's not good for your kids to be compared—and it definitely won't help you either.

The curveball: You're feeling guilty.

During her second pregnancy, Lorrie Moy of Bay Village, Ohio, was sad when she thought about how she'd never again be able to devote herself entirely to 2-year-old George Thomas. Now that 5-month-old Patrick is here, she sometimes wonders if she's shortchanging him too when she needs to put him down on a blanket or in the swing to dry her hair or cook dinner. "I'm not spending the same amount of time with Patrick that I did with George Thomas," she says. "The guilt goes both ways."

The straight answer: There's plenty of you to share. True, your new baby isn't going to get your constant attention, but you'll actually help him in the long run, as second-born kids are usually more independent because their parents give them space. Dr. Brown says. He also has the benefit of an older brother or sister he can watch and learn from. Having a sibling's great for your first child too (though he may not see it that way when he wants to play Candy Land and you're giving the baby a bath).

To keep a balance, spend time alone with each child. When Grandma comes for a visit, give her the baby and

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take your older child on a special trip for ice cream. Or when your older child is napping, spend 20 uninterrupted minutes with the baby. Not only will it make each child feel special, you'll also feel less guilty.

The curveball: You're always wiping noses.

It's inevitable. Your toddler is going to sneeze on your healthy baby, and the pediatrician's office may start to feel like a second home. Meg Ferrante of Snelville, Georgia, counted three colds and two fevers by the time her first son, Robby, was 3. Her second son, Luca, has beaten those numbers in his first year alone. "I

just never could have imagined the germ sharing that would come with adding another baby," she says.

The straight answer:

"Many parents worry that their second child has an immune deficiency because they get so many more illnesses and they occur at younger ages than their siblings," Dr. Brown says. "Not to worry. They're just being exposed to the real world." Ideally, when one child is sick, you should keep him separated and have him wash his hands frequently. But try telling that to a toddler dragging his hand across his drippy nose for the hundredth time in an hour. At the very least, try to wash the baby toys that your sick child touches and wash your own hands as much as possible so you don't transfer germs from child to child.

Baby #3

The curveball: You're stuck inside.

Cora Walker of Goshen, New York, was always off to the park or a playgroup with her sons, Matthew, 4, and Thomas, 2, but the arrival of Allison, now 5 months, has cut their going-out time by more than half. "To even run an errand is a major ordeal for me," she says.

The straight answer: Venturing out gets more intimidating the more kids you have, but it'll keep your spirits up to keep doing the things you really want to do, says Christine D'Amico, a mom of three kids under 6 and author of *The Pregnant Woman's Companion*. Just be realistic when you head to the zoo or mall for the first

time. All three kids won't be smiling and perfectly behaved the entire outing. "Even if you work for an hour to get there, it's okay if you only stay for an hour. You can bag it the moment the kids lose it," says D'Amico.

You'll need military-style planning to get out the door:

- Pack the diaper bag, lay out clothes and breakfast plates, and put untied shoes by the door the night before.
- Give your older children some duties, such as carrying bags or helping the younger kids zip their coats.
- Allow an extra 15 minutes for unanticipated disasters.



The curveball: You break the rules.

You find yourself doing things you swore you never would, like letting the kids watch way too many videos so the baby can nurse in peace or promising candy if they'll just let you finish shopping. Lisa Roehm of Mason, Ohio, made sure her two older children, Michael and Megan, were at home to nap, but her youngest, Jacob, slept on the go. "He never napped in his crib," she says. "I took him everywhere—dance classes, soccer games—in his car seat."

The straight answer:

It's called survival: You do what you have to do to keep things running smoothly. It's no big deal to bend with your kids to get through a particular moment, but save it for when you really need it. If you're constantly saying "No candy" at the store and then caving in, they'll push to get their way every time. Your third child might actually benefit from all the madness, though, because you're teaching him to be flexible and he'll likely grow up able to go with the flow. But if the schedule seems to be making your baby overtired and cranky, you're better off cutting down on your older kids' activities or hiring a sitter.

Spending time alone with each child will make them feel special—and you less guilty.

If you can commit to being flexible, you'll navigate all the surprises, and even find yourself in a better—if sometimes more complicated—place than before. ■

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