

# Do Go Gently

One new mom's struggle to learn that taking care of your baby means taking care of yourself.

BY SARAH BERNARD



When your baby nurse begs you to call up some friends, take yourself to a movie, buy a new outfit, do something for yourself—you have to admit there might be a problem. My twin girls, Scarlett and Orly, were born last April. They

arrived unexpectedly early, two days shy of 33 weeks. I spent a month hyped up on adrenaline and worry, traveling to the NICU three times a day for feedings and “kangaroo” cuddling, even though my doctors strongly advised letting the nurses—“the best babysitters money can buy”—handle things. A logical suggestion, yes, but one I doubt any mother with kids in an incubator takes seriously. I will rest when they come home, I thought.



Top left: Sarah Bernard and husband Hugo Lindgren move their plates aside to make room for feeding the girls.

Above: The couple gets some “alone time.”



Sarah and the girls during their month in the neonatal intensive care unit.

But when the girls got home and their baby nurse fed both simultaneously on her lap, then bathed them and wrapped them up like little burritos, I was overwhelmed with how much I needed to learn. I followed her around with a notepad and peppered her with questions while the babies took their naps. When I begged her to let me sleep in the room with her so I could “see how she handled the nights,” she finally staged an intervention. “You know, I’ve done this for 11 years,” she said. “You’ve gone out less than anyone I’ve ever worked for. Do you realize how much you’re paying me?”

She was right, of course. But there were other impediments—the exhausting loop of breastfeeding two babies, for instance. Each session took an hour-and-a-half, which gave me only an hour before I had to report for duty again.

One Friday night, my husband announced he’d bought tickets to see The Ark, a glam-rock band from Sweden that we love (picture Queen mixed with ABBA), and there would be no excuses. I was going to step outside of the box I’d been living in. I wasn’t even sure I knew how to be outside anymore, but once we got to Bowery Ballroom and pushed our way to the front row as the band tore into their guitars, I was giddy. No one questioned why I wasn’t with the babies. Just the opposite. Friends I hadn’t seen in months wondered why it took me so long to get out of the house. The idea that I could—and should—let myself do something for my own enjoyment while my burritos were sleeping safely 40 blocks uptown was arguably more mission-critical than perfecting the art of the sponge bath.

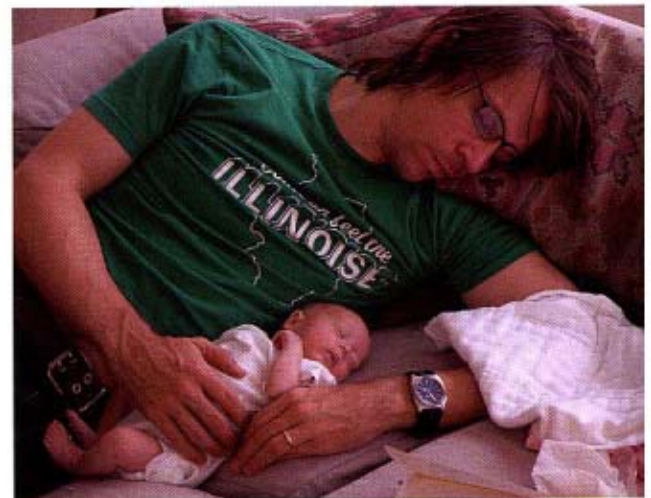
#### A SEA CHANGE

Only a generation ago, being a good mom meant caring for your child so selflessly that taking time to get a haircut, let alone see a rock show, was frowned upon. It may not have been explicitly so, but the message to moms was the more haggard you looked, the more virtuous you were. Even as recently as the early '90s, the classic sitcom matriarch had a bad haircut, food on her ill-fitting shirt and Grand Canyon-size circles under her eyes. In the last five years, however, things have slowly started to shift. Moms of the moment are confronted with a bumper crop of books—like Muffy Mead-Ferro’s *Confessions of a Slacker Mom* (DeCapo Lifelong, 2004) and Renée Trudeau’s how-to tome, *The Mother’s Guide to Self-Renewal: How to Reclaim, Rejuvenate and Re-Balance Your Life* (Balanced Living Press, 2007)—that represent the opposite point of view: Being an overwhelmed and overworked mother who sublimates her own needs is not only old-school, it’s unhealthy for mom and baby.

The message to moms used to be: The more haggard you looked, the more virtuous you were. No more.

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Nap time comes when you least expect it. Be sure to make the most of it.



"You'll be a more energetic parent, a more enthusiastic parent if you have some outside stimulation and some time to rejuvenate your body," says Susan Newman, PhD, a social psychologist and author, most recently, of *The Book of No* (McGraw-Hill, 2006), which trumpets the importance of creating boundaries. "You're not being selfish by telling people they can't pop in or telling them 'I've had so much company I can't handle anymore,'" she notes. "You can even ask your own mother to back off."

A catalyst for the sea change may have been the more public dialogue about postpartum depression (thank you Brooke Shields and Tom Cruise). Another could be a rebellion against the tenets of attachment parenting, the philosophy popularized by baby guru Dr. William Sears in his 2001 book on the subject. The philosophy advocates co-sleeping, baby-wearing and, in general, minimal physical separation between mom and baby, which critics call guilt-producing at best and, at worst, untenable.

The number of moms who are having babies later in life may also have had something to do with the shift. As Newman notes, they've had more years to know what they want and what they like in terms of their own well-being, and are less willing to give up those things. "We get that babies are a blessing," says Amy Nebens, a 38-year-old mother of three and cofounder of the Web site *poshmom.com*, "but we don't have to completely revolve our lives around them to the point where we're neglecting our own. It's okay to want to find a break. It doesn't mean you're a bad mom. It doesn't mean that you don't want to do it, but there's got to be something to look forward to when the bath is done."

#### BABY STEPS TOWARD SELF-CARE

Taking care of oneself doesn't have to involve a grand gesture. It doesn't have to be a gesture at all. It could simply be a change in mindset. When Renée Trudeau, 41, the aforementioned author and life coach based in Austin, Texas, broaches the subject of self-care with her new moms, they automatically assume she's talking about getting a massage or booking a pedicure, which nearly everyone says they don't have time to do. "Those are wonderful forms of *physical* self-care," Trudeau says, "but we break it down into physical, emotional, spiritual and mental. It's usually a real eye-opener when I say, 'How about eliminating critical thinking or not over-scheduling?' It's all in the way you introduce the concept."

When Paris Stulbach, 39, a former TV producer, was home with her twin girls, "my world just shrank," she says. She could only travel as far as she could push a double stroller, which meant not seeing friends who lived outside a few blocks' radius. "I felt like it was a great accomplishment to walk the two blocks to Barnes & Noble," she says. Self-care was not in her vocabulary, but she knew she was headed for rock bottom if she didn't try something. She met some mothers at the park, got their e-mail addresses and formed an online network of twins' moms in her neighborhood who all felt similarly marooned. The group, called *Twins in the City*, is now 425 strong. Every six weeks, a



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member hosts a dinner at her house, which moms attend when they can. Mostly, the group functions as an online form of support on a daily basis. Members can ask other members for advice about everything from pediatricians to playgroups to what to do about bumpy patches in a marriage. "There's no marriage that's going to withstand that stress very gracefully," says Stulbach, who marvels at how often other moms thank her for putting them together. "I never thought it would get as big as it is now. My thinking was, 'I just need a handful of friends who can say, "Paris, you're not losing your mind. We're the same way. We can chat during the day, we can get together when schedules allow and, if nothing else, look at each other across the table and say, "You're not alone.'""

Advocating self-care, even on a microlevel, is the cornerstone of Nebens' rapidly growing *Posh Mom* empire. Almost a year ago, she and Jara Negrin, a mother of two, launched their Web site, which e-mails "digestible bites" of information that keeps subscribers abreast of current trends—a new exercise regimen, a beauty product, even a new cocktail—and suggests ways they can work some pampering into their hectic lives. Their book, *The Posh Mom Life* (Sourcebooks, 2007), has just been published.

Nebens was working part-time for *Martha Stewart Living* magazine when she was pregnant with her second child. Every night she'd race home to Westchester to put her daughter to bed. All she had the energy to do afterwards was fall into her own bed, exhausted, and maybe watch TV. "I realized this was what my days had become and I didn't want it," she says. She talked to her friends and realized the same routine was happening at their houses. After giving birth, her immediate solution was planning a girls' night once a month. Something as minor as taking the train into New York to meet friends for lunch changed her entire outlook. On the way she'd plug in her iPod and listen to her own music instead of the music dictated by her "little DJs in the backseat." "It was so calming," she says, "but there was also a little bit of adrenaline.

I thought about them back home, but I was so excited that I was still me. Remembering who you are as a woman helps you be happy in being a mom—and when you're a happy mom, you have happy kids. That's just the bottom line."

Trudeau had a similar awakening when her son Jonah was 6 months old. Despite years of coaching others on self-empowerment, she'd let her own needs go out the window. It was the same story with her friends, who were mostly first-time moms over 35. One, in particular, confessed that her idea of a "treat"

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Scarlett (on the left) and Orly enjoy their first Hallowe'en together.



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was being able to take a shower that day. “That really disturbed me,” Trudeau says. She decided to launch a “self-renewal” group specifically for new moms like her. It wasn’t hard to find participants. Twenty women between the ages of 30 and 40 signed up. The goal was to share the trials of mastering the ins and outs of their children’s babyhood, but also to help each other reconnect with the aspirations they had for themselves before they became mothers. Trudeau’s self-care tenets can seem rather basic. Appreciating your body, having a heart-to-heart with a friend, meditating and reading a good book are not exactly novel concepts. But there’s something about discussing them in a room alongside other women that is therapeutic in and of itself. As Trudeau notes, research has shown that, when women get together in groups, they release oxytocin, the hormone known to increase trust and a sense of well-being. Her book *The Mother’s Guide to Self-Renewal* is a primer to help readers facilitate renewal groups of their own.

Lisa Spiegel, co-director of Soho Parenting, a nationally recognized resource for everything from sleep training to separation anxiety, leads several group sessions a week for parents of newborns, toddlers—even teenagers. The best outcome of the self-care revolution, as Spiegel sees it, is that being part of a mommy group or reaching out for some kind of help is no longer taboo. “What we try to do is be a calm hand on the shoulder. Life is up and down, kids go up and down, marriages feel great for a while, then they feel strained,” she says. “That’s what life is. Things are changing all the time and it’s important not to feel like a failure if things feel off. A lot of women had very successful professional careers where they were in charge of a lot of things, and there’s nothing like a baby or two to humble you. Just hearing that can be a really important part of self-care.”

I haven’t been able to get to a group yet, although I like the idea. In the months since my baby nurse left and I’ve gone back to work, I’ve realized that, in my time-challenged existence, even the smallest doses of self-care can go a long way. A Pilates class. Meeting a friend for breakfast before work instead of dinner. (My typical pre-baby bedtime was 2 a.m., but these days I can’t make it much past 10 p.m.) Most of all, though, it’s just talking to other moms, like Nebens, every few days that helps me feel the way the rock concert did—like there are other aspects of myself in addition to being a mother to my delicious girls. Hopefully, they’ll learn to appreciate that at some point. They seem to like dancing to *The Ark* an awful lot already. **p**

Sarah and Hugo grabbing a joint cup of coffee.

