

On Being Mom
by Anna Quindlen

If not for the photographs, I might have a hard time believing they ever existed. The pensive infant with the swipe of dark bangs and the black button eyes of a Raggedy Andy doll. The placid baby with the yellow ringlets and the high piping voice. The sturdy toddler with the lower lip that curled into an apostrophe above her chin. ALL MY BABIES are gone now. I say this not in sorrow but in disbelief. I take great satisfaction in what I have today: three almost-adults, two taller than I am, one closing in fast. Three people who read the same books I do and have learned not to be afraid of disagreeing with me in their opinion of them, who sometimes tell vulgar jokes that make me laugh until I choke and cry, who need razor blades and shower gel and privacy, who want to keep their doors closed more than I like. Who, miraculously, go to the bathroom, zip up their jackets and move food from plate to mouth all by themselves. Like the trick soap I bought for the bathroom with a rubber ducky at its center, the baby is buried deep within each, barely discernible except through the unreliable haze of the past.

Everything in all the books I once pored over is finished for me now. Penelope Leach. T. Berry Brazelton. Dr. Spock. The ones on sibling rivalry and sleeping through the night and early childhood education, all grown obsolete. Along with Goodnight Moon and Where the Wild Things Are, they are battered, spotted, well used. But I suspect that if you flipped the pages dust would rise like memories.

What those books taught me, finally, and what the women on the playground taught me, and the well-meaning relations --what they taught me was that they couldn't really teach me very much at all.

Raising children is presented at first as a true-false test, then becomes multiple choice, until finally, far along, you realize that it is an endless essay. No one knows anything. One child responds well to positive reinforcement, another can be managed only with a stern voice and a timeout. One boy is toilet trained at 3, his brother at 2. When my first child was born, parents were told to put baby to bed on his belly so that he would not choke on his own spit-up. By the time my last arrived, babies were put down on their backs because of research on sudden infant death syndrome. To a new parent this ever-shifting certainty is terrifying, and then soothing. Eventually you must learn to trust yourself. Eventually the research will follow.

How silly it all seems now, the obsessing about language acquisition and physical milestones, the riding the waves of normal, gifted, hyperactive, all those labels that reduced individuality to a series of cubbyholes. But I could not help myself. I had watched my mother casually raise five

children born over 10 years, but by watching her I intuitively knew that I was engaged in the greatest and potentially most catastrophic task of my life. I knew that there were mothers who had worried with good reason, that there were children who would have great challenges to meet. We were lucky; ours were not among them. Nothing horrible or astonishing happened: there was hernia surgery, some stitches, a broken arm and a fuchsia cast to go with it. Mostly ours were the ordinary everyday terrors and miracles of raising a child, and our children's challenges the old familiar ones of learning to live as themselves in the world. The trick was to get past my fears, my ego and my inadequacies to help them do that.

I remember 15 years ago poring over one of Dr. Brazelton's wonderful books on child development, in which he describes three different sorts of infants: average, quiet, and active. I was looking for a sub-quiet codicil for an 18-month-old who did not walk. Was there something wrong with his fat little legs? Was there something wrong with his tiny little mind? Was he developmentally delayed, physically challenged? Was I insane? Last year he went to China. Next year he goes to college. He can talk just fine. He can walk, too.

Every part of raising children is humbling, too. Believe me, mistakes were made. They have all been enshrined in the Remember-When-Mom-Did Hall of Fame. The outbursts, the temper tantrums, the bad language, mine, not theirs. The times the baby fell off the bed. The times I arrived late for preschool pickup. The nightmare sleepover. The horrible summer camp. The day when the youngest came barreling out of the classroom with a 98 on her geography test, and I responded, What did you get wrong? (She insisted I include that.) The time I ordered food at the McDonald's drive-through speaker and then drove away without picking it up from the window. (They all insisted I include that.) I did not allow them to watch the Simpsons for the first two seasons. What was I thinking?

But the biggest mistake I made is the one that most of us make while doing this. I did not live in the moment enough. This is particularly clear now that the moment is gone, captured only in photographs. There is one picture of the three of them sitting in the grass on a quilt in the shadow of the swing set on a summer day, ages 6, 4 and 1. And I wish I could remember what we ate, and what we talked about, and how they sounded, and how they looked when they slept that night. I wish I had not been in such a hurry to get on to the next thing: dinner, bath, book, bed. I wish I had treasured the doing a little more and the getting it done a little less.

Even today I'm not sure what worked and what didn't, what was me and what was simply life. When they were very small, I suppose I thought someday they would become who they were because of what I'd done. Now I suspect

they simply grew into their true selves because they demanded in a thousand ways that I back off and let them be.

The books said to be relaxed and I was often tense, matter-o-fact and I was sometimes over the top. And look how it all turned out. I wound up with the three people I like best in the world, who have done more than anyone to excavate my essential humanity. That's what the books never told me. I was bound and determined to learn from the experts. It just took me a while to figure out who the experts were.