

# Bucking the trend

**M**otherhood held no attraction for me whatsoever until I was about 37 years old. For a long time, it hadn't occurred to me that having children might be interesting. I'd seen it as conventional and dull: I thought of children as simply encumbrances that would stop me doing the things I wanted to. It was a book that first changed my mind: Libby Purves' *How not to have a perfect child*. I was intrigued by her discussion of the issues involved: it hadn't occurred to me that bringing up children might be an intellectual challenge.

I've read lots of birth stories that say something along the lines of "When I held the baby in my arms I knew my life had changed." That didn't happen to me at all. My main emotion after the birth was relief: that I'd done it, that it was all over, that I was alive and healthy, and my baby was

alive and healthy

(and that I didn't have to be pregnant for a moment longer, too – nine months seemed an excruciatingly long time). But I didn't feel a different person: I felt like me, with a baby.

I still don't think of myself as 'a mother': if I had to describe myself, I would still say that I'm an Information Designer. The fact that I've had a baby is no more important than the fact that I can sing in tune or explain ISA regulations: in fact, it's probably less important, because it's something that lots of other people have done.

Nor do I remember feeling worried about coping: I was so pleased to have stopped commuting to London and working full time that looking after Sasha seemed like a wonderful holiday, especially at the beginning when all I had to do was breastfeed him and change his nappies. I felt relaxed and confident right from the start. Maybe being 41 when I had him made a difference; perhaps all the reference books I read had reassured me too. But there didn't seem to be anything difficult or mysterious about it: I felt sure that anyone with a modicum of intelligence could look after a child.

My partner had already had children, which made a big difference: I didn't feel that I had to be the expert or

**Is it true that a mother's place is in the wrong? BECK LAXTON has tried to find ways of avoiding the guilt trip...**

always take responsibility. Right from the beginning, there were things that Kieran was better at than me: when it came to lulling Sasha to sleep, for instance, he was much more patient than I could ever be. Sometimes he's the one who gets up first if Sash screams in the night; sometimes he's the one who notices that a nappy needs changing – and changes it. Because we've never divided household tasks along conventional lines – I mow the lawn, Kieran does most of the cooking, we both build shelves, and nobody ever does any ironing – it didn't feel as though any special effort was required to share responsibility for

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Sasha. However, it's come as a surprise that what seems normal to us is a source of astonishment to many of our friends, and we've been disconcerted to discover that some women won't leave their babies with their partners at all.

Our arrangement is possible partly because Kieran has always been keen to look after Sash: if he'd been reluctant, I'm not sure how I could have changed that, except by trying to give him

confidence. I know that I was very keen to avoid the martyr syndrome, whereby, as the person who'd had the baby and spent most time with it, I'd be the person who always knows best; the only person who understands the baby and knows how to do anything for it, so that nobody else is allowed to help – or only with a great deal of correction. And so eventually nobody would, and I'd end up overworked and grumpy, yet demanding gratitude for my self-inflicted sacrifice.

Being confident myself has helped me have confidence in other people: I don't fret about leaving Sasha with anyone else, and he's always happy about it too. Sometimes it's an effort not to be always thinking of worst-case scenarios, because you have to be looking out for possible danger, but I do think that you have to force yourself to believe that

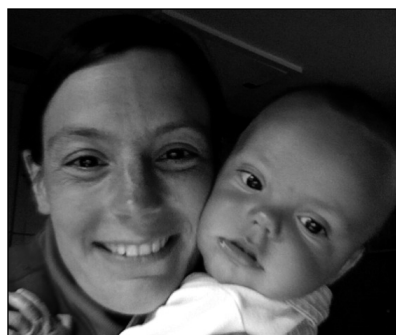
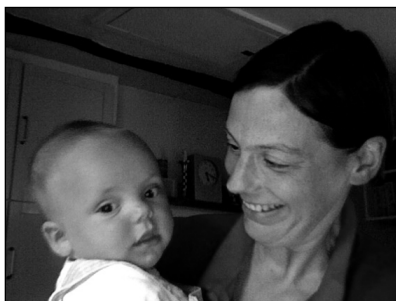
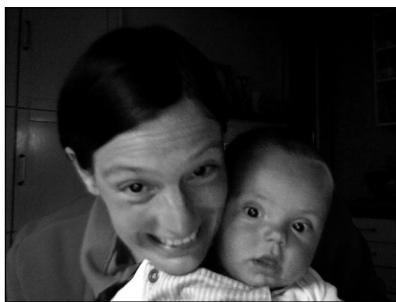
nothing horrible is going to happen, or you can't give your child any freedom at all. As it happens, I've found I really appreciate having other people to look after Sash, since they all seem to discover things I haven't: I suspect that spending most of my time with him means that I get into a bit of a rut – he's changing constantly, and sometimes it's an effort to keep up. It takes someone less familiar to teach him new things. But I love the idea that every new person brings him something different.

Several women I've encountered have come up with rules for themselves that seem designed to make life harder. There was one who was set on keeping her daughter by her side for the first year of her life; another who'd decided – I don't know why – that her child would never go to sleep crying; and one who's refused ever to use a babysitter, and so hasn't been out for an evening with her partner for six years. All these seemed insane to me, though I did enjoy the story of the couple whose serious discussion about how they would bring up their child had resulted solely in the decision to have only wooden toys.

So my decisions were about making life easier, often by having low standards.

I wanted to be around Sash, but not constantly focused on him. I seized on baby-led weaning because it sounded sensible and a great deal less work for me, but it's paid dividends: I've got a child who's fed himself since he was five months old, and will eat absolutely anything. Even slapdash hygiene turns out to be good: as a general rule, I'm happy to pick food off the (not very clean) floor and give it back to Sasha to eat, but recent research backs me up, showing that children brought up in too-clean surroundings get allergies and asthma later.

I used terry nappies because they're cheap and I thought they'd be fun, and because one of my motherhood fantasies had been of



pegging out nappies on the line in the garden. After nearly two years, I still enjoy it – and the kudos that comes with avoiding disposables is well worth the trouble.

I vowed not to buy anything new if it could be got secondhand – so Sasha, in two-year-old second-hand terry nappies and charity shop clothes, playing with household objects and toys bought from jumble sales, and sleeping in his eBay cot, is very cheap to run.

My ideas about motherhood were much more about how I wanted my life with the baby to be than how the child itself might turn out, and I think my lack of expectations were a help. I've also stopped reading advice, so I'm continually thrilled by what Sash gets up to rather than chafing about the skills that BabyCentre thinks he should have mastered five weeks ago. Also, partly because of the influence of that Libby Purves book and partly because of looking after my partner's children when we have them, I've been focused on children rather than babies. Having long-term goals about what kind of life

I want us to have as a family, however unrealistic they may be (can you really have a 1950s childhood now?) has

helped me get over some of the short-term obstacles.

I'm not overwhelmed by Sasha; for hours at a time I can forget I ever had a baby. My partner is still the most important person in my life. But there are aspects of parenthood that simply didn't occur to me. The sheer cuteness of children: how adorable Sasha looks trotting along in his dungarees and jumping wholeheartedly into puddles; his first lisping words; his rosebud-mouthed kisses and enthusiastic hugs. I'm amazed by how rarely I feel bored in his company. I love his unbridled enthusiasm and the gusto with which he approaches everything. Perhaps, rather than changing my life, he's just let me enjoy it more. ♦

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