

Intro

Let me just start by saying things don't EVER go as you expect as a mom. It doesn't matter whether your kids are 19 months or 19 years old, if you have a vision in your mind, the odds of it going that way are about as likely as if you woke up tomorrow and realized you were the undiscovered queen of a tiny country in Europe. Do any of these sound familiar?

- You go to the ocean for the first time and one of the kids gets stung by a jellyfish as soon as they get in the water.
- You go to a fun day at the mall and the 2 year old decides to throw the fit of the century when you are on the 2nd floor of the mall on the OPPOSITE side of the parking garage and you have a 6 year old, a 4 year old, and a 6 month old you are trying to corral just long enough to get to the car while every 5 feet some new stranger asks you, "Is there anything I can do to help?"
- You take your kids on a special trip and your teenager complains the ENTIRE time about how sucky the whole thing is.

Did I mention all these things have happened to me?

You would think after 6 kids I would have realized that nothing is ever going to go how I planned it! I got another dose of reality one year on Christmas Eve. It all started with my 12 year old...

Now don't get me wrong, I love my son. He's actually quite hilarious and creative. Like many kids at 12 he loved YouTube and even had his own channel. Things would just go south when he decided to be bad for mom....Have you ever had a kid who decided to be one of those famous, snarky, YouTubers for Halloween? Well my tweenager decided he was going to be one EVERY DAY!

"Can you take the trash out?"

"I don't know, CAN I?"

"Go make your bed."

“Sure, Mom, WHATEVER.” (Continues to sit on the couch.)

“Make sure you take a shower before church, your hair is really greasy.”

“Your MOM is really greasy!”

Does any of this sound familiar? Well, this had gone on for days. Combine that with the fact that I woke up on the wrong side of the bed that day, let's just say Christmas Eve had a lot of FIREWORKS! It didn't take 5 minutes of being back from the Christmas Eve service (and probably 5 snarky remarks) and he was in his room.

Let me back up by saying that our 6 kids were born in pairs. 2 older boys, 2 middle girls, and 2 younger boys. Every pair has a buddy, and when they're not fighting, they are fierce allies (especially against their parents!) So when the youngest, who was 8 at the time, and buddy to my tweenage 12 year old, realized his brother was getting punished on Christmas Eve, he went into a tailspin. Ever seen an emo 8 year old? Head covered with a blanket, moping around like his dog just died, refusing to eat Christmas Eve dinner? Laying on the couch face down with his body and head completely covered? It was really quite a pathetic site! I wouldn't have been surprised if he had put on a black hoodie and some eye liner!

In truth my expectations for Christmas Eve were seriously not very grandiose. Christmas Eve service at church, basic turkey and mashed potatoes dinner with the fam, maybe a couple board games or something. But the ONE thing I had really been looking forward to was reading the Christmas story, and our favorite Christmas book, “The Best Christmas Pageant Ever”. And really this wasn't even purely a Christmas wish, this was actually a response to serious MOM GUILT.

In the back of my mind I had realized for quite a while that my youngest 2 kiddos had not had a lot of the same experiences as my oldest kids did. Now I know that is common in large families, but there is one area that had really nagged at my conscience, and that was reading to my youngest boys. I had all kinds of justifications:

“My 12 year old has always complained about reading at night so since they shared a room I just never read to the 8 year old either. It was too much hassle.”

“I was always reading books that were meant for the older kids when the younger ones were really little, so I never had time for both.”

“After taking care of everyone all day I just didn’t have enough energy left to read to them.”

But the truth is actually worse. Ten years ago when my oldest kids were little they didn’t have all this YouTube and Nintendo Switches and Amazon Prime. As a matter of fact, when the first few were born we didn’t even have a TV! I remember my 5 year old asking me, “Mommy, what’s a commercial?” and feeling like I was mother of the year! Well, that crown got taken away a LONG time ago!

Needless to say I’d be a liar if I said I never let my kids on media a few times more than I should have...OK, maybe a few hundred times! And that’s probably really the most compelling reason why I wasn’t reading to them.

It really hit me a couple days before Christmas when I was at Barnes and Noble with my 14 year old and we were looking at some humorous books. One was a parody of Goodnight Moon. My 14 year old and I were cracking up because it was so funny. Of course she knew the real Goodnight Moon practically by heart from hearing it so much as a child. I went home and asked my 8 year old if he’d ever heard of that book and he said, “No.” Wow, if I had any mom points before, they were down to zero! (Ironically, the parody is called Goodnight Ipad and the grandmother says “Goodnight” to all of the family’s electronic devices—to their horror—and throws them out the window!)

So I was determined that we would read the Christmas Story at dinner, and not just baby Jesus, no, we were going to start all the way back with the story of Zacharias and Elizabeth and not quit until we got to Joseph returning from Egypt! After all, if the kid didn’t even know what Goodnight Moon was, where else had I failed??

Except, by the time we sat down to dinner and I started reading the story, my 12 year old was in his room and my 8 year old was face down on the couch with his blanket over his head— and I was a sad mess! My 14 year old daughter reached over gently and said, “Mom, want me to read it?”

“That would be great.” I said, defeated.

So she started reading.

“An old priest named Zachariah...” Suddenly the lump on the couch began to wail.

Let's just say, being a mom is never dull! It can feel like holding up a wrecked car with King Kong on top, or like the Grinch when his heart grew so big it nearly popped out of his chest with joy and happiness...all in the same day!

And, guess what, we're never going to get it right all the time. And if you haven't already noticed, things are almost never going to go how you expect! The sooner you embrace that truth, the happier you'll be!

And that neighbor or friend you wish you were like, or that book that said you should be a certain way...ditch that line of thinking quick! It will just make you miserable. No one is just like you, no one's husband is just like yours, and no one's kids are just like yours.

Do you ever find yourself thinking "No one understands." or "I'm never going to get through this." or "I don't know what I'm doing."?

I know I do! Listen girl, 6 kids and 20 years later, I know exactly how that feels. Believe me, you're not the only one! We ALL feel that way as moms at one time or another. And I want to share with you all the things I wish I had known 20 years ago, so you can kick those thoughts in the butt!

Take a break, have more fun, laugh as much as you can, and don't take yourself too seriously! Life's too short! Your kids won't! I guarantee you that! So why waste your brain cells?

Part 1 *Have we Gotten off the Crazy Train Yet?*

Chapter 1 *Mom Guilt*

***"Me, before kids:
I'm going to run such a tight ship.
Me after kids:
Annnnnnd the ship is on fire."
-amrealtor-Instagram Mom***

One day I had such an unusually productive and satisfying day that I had to write it down! This is what I did:

- Got up early
- Worked out
- Cooked a healthy breakfast
- Helped the kids with their schoolwork
- Got the kids caught up on some late homework
- Cleaned the kitchen, my room, and the bathrooms
- Made a wonderful dinner
- Played outside with the kids
- Had a great conversation with my teenager while teaching her to drive
- Worked on my blog
- Spent time with my husband

If only that were the rule and not the exception! Unfortunately, it was a MAJOR exception! Here's an example of what a NORMAL day looked like. I picked this one out from the years when we were homeschooling:

- Wake up early to dirty kitchen
- Escape to gym to avoid kitchen
- Come back and rearrange dirty dishes so there's enough room to cook breakfast
- Rearrange stuff on the table so we can eat breakfast
- Let kids watch just ONE more episode of Arthur while I take a shower
- Never make it to the shower because I walked by the couch
- Finish last episode with the kids
- Yell at everyone frantically to hurry up and get their chores done because we are 30 minutes behind schedule
- Finished preparing for science while the kids clean up because I forgot to do it last week
- Have the kids sit in the kitchen so I can wash dishes, sweep, clean counters, and prep for dinner while I help with grammar, writing, math, and spelling at the same time.
- Eat a healthy lunch of frozen pizza
- Teach geography, science, Spanish, art, and read aloud
- Collapse into a coma on the couch while the kids...actually I have no idea what they were doing...
- Wake up and yell at the kids to get off YouTube and GO OUTSIDE!
- Stumble into the kitchen....open the door and yell at the kids to COME BACK IN and clean up

- Help the kids clean up from lunch, science experiments, art, workbooks, writing, snacks, Sonic cups from the quick run we made for geography...you know, orange sodas for studying Florida....oranges.....Florida....you know....
- Make dinner
- Leave dinner on the table for everyone else while I run kids to dance, soccer, baseball, etc.
- Realize belatedly as I walk out the door that I never got a shower and I'm still wearing my workout clothes....
- Catch up on the 500 emails I got that day while I'm at the practice
- Come home, walk passed the dirty dinner dishes, see my husband on the couch
- Sink into the couch
- Listen to my husband tell me about his day
- See a pillow and blanket left from this morning when the kids were watching Arthur
- Snuggle up on the couch
- Try to remember what my husband was just saying
- zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz!

Ah yes, real life is not perfect! But for some reason we have expectations of ourselves that boggle the mind!

“My house should look like no one lives here.”

“I should be gorgeous and fit.”

“My kids should only eat healthy food.”

“My kids should be well behaved in every circumstance.”

“My kids should be at the top of the learning curve and constantly immersed in educational and athletic opportunities.”

“I should be excellent at work, spend lots of time with my kids, and fall into bed passionately with my husband every night.”

“I should have tons of friends and be liked by everyone.”

“I should never fail.”

I mean, I know this might seem like a bit of an exaggeration, but really, clue in on your thoughts and see what you tell yourself all day. It's amazing how critical we are of ourselves. Of course, it's good to be able to take constructive criticism and become a better person, but it's extremely damaging to go into a negative mental spiral, especially when it happens day after day after day.

Recently I've read and listened to a few things that have mentioned some advice that is SO good. Get a picture of yourself when you were a little girl or maybe a high schooler. Put it

somewhere you see it often. Then, when you start to have a negative thought about yourself, look at that picture and say to yourself, "Would I say that to my younger self? Would I say that to someone else's daughter?" If you wouldn't, then don't say it to yourself. Give yourself some Grace! God does. Why can't we? Life is not perfect, and he doesn't expect us to be perfect either!

Chapter 2 *Focusing on Holy*

Sometimes I think God made me just so he could have a good laugh! -Me

Just recently I asked God what the next step was for me to get this business off the ground and reach more moms. Wow, did he get my attention! Ok, this may seem a little off track, but if you have or had little kids, did they ever grab your face between their hands? I remember when my kids were little and they couldn't get my attention, they would climb up on the couch or a chair or even scale the up onto the counter, grab my face between their tiny hands and turn my head towards them so that my eyes were looking into their eyes and there was NO WAY I couldn't be paying attention to them, and then they would tell me whatever highly important piece of information that they wanted me to know.

So, that's what God did...it was like he grabbed my face between his hands and made me look at him. He said to me, in the strongest words, "Dadgumit, Elaine, finish the book!" Maybe he thought speaking to me in my native tongue would be more effective?? (I'm a bit of a redneck.) Well, it worked!

I think God has a sense of humor. First of all, he often speaks to me with songs, which is kinda weird because I'm not a big music person. I mean, don't get me wrong, I love music, but if I was in the car by myself I would easily choose talk radio, an audio book, or a podcast over music any day. And sometimes the songs that he gives me...it's like he's just messing with me! Like when I was mad at my husband and he gave me that song by For King and Country that went, "If we fall, we will fall together. If we rise, we will rise together." I mean, at that moment I really just wanted to be mad! Or when I threw a fit because I didn't want to work at home because I was afraid of being alone and he put the song by Dua Lupa Break My Heart that goes "I should have stayed at home, cause I was doing better alone." Thanks God! Here I am crying my eyes out and you're making fun of me! (If you want to hear me actually crying my eyes out, listen to

“Pathetic Day” on my podcast Emagine Momcast!) But....God was totally right. I actually loved working from home after about 2 days!

Oh, but here’s an even better one. This one doesn't have to do with music, but God DEFINITELY got my attention! One time I got really mad at this dad and wanted to tell him off. His girls were friends with my girls, but whenever they would come over, they always had some really crazy rule their dad had that we would have to work around while they were at my house.

”I’m sorry, We can’t play cards unless they aren’t real playing cards. If it’s Uno or something like Skip Bo that’s ok, but if it’s playing cards we can’t play the game because they use those cards in gambling.”

Or “We can’t watch any movies made by Disney.”

“So what can you watch?”

“We can watch Terminator”

“So you can watch Terminator but not Peter Pan?”

“Yah, that’s right.”

And that was only a couple of examples. Let’s just say after several sleepovers and some play dates I was seriously over it.

Well, their dad was a volunteer in the kids ministry on Wednesday nights, and so was I. So I was planning to confront him that night and tell him how stupid his parenting was. Except I never got to, because I lost my voice...for one night! I’m not even joking. I couldn’t even do the story for the 4 year olds that night because as soon as I started toward church I couldn’t talk! I mean, noise came out, but it was something like an old carburetor!

In the end, God got my back. He knew I was going to make a fool of myself! But more importantly, God spoke to me. Maybe a little over the top! But he made his point!

He wants to speak to us. If there's anything we could do to bring down the temperature in our lives, whether it's feeling overwhelmed, disconnected, scattered, confused, lonely, fearful...whatever it is, hearing from God is the most powerful thing to help us.

Just remember how you hear from God and connect with him may be different from someone else. Do you remember in the bible how Jesus healed a blind man by just saying, "You're healed" and another blind man he spit on the ground and made mud and put it on his eyes and healed him. Have you ever wondered why? Why didn't he just say, "Be healed!" I think there was something significant about the mud that spoke to that man. In the same way, God speaks differently to different people. While I DO think it's important to take time to really be still and reconnect to God's Spirit, don't forget that God can speak to us any time of the day, even when we're in the middle of something.

One day, several years ago when my kids were little, I was doing the dishes when I felt like I should pop in on a friend. This gal was someone I had met fairly recently. She had several little kids like me, but I was a little older and had become somewhat of a mentor to her. She and her husband struggled financially and had moved several times, but we had gotten to know each other and were spending time together whenever we could. This was before cell phones were really popular, and because of their finances, they didn't have a phone. So we had to be kind of strategic about getting together. I hadn't seen her for a little while and for some reason it popped into my mind to go see her that day.

At that moment I was washing dishes, the house was a mess, the kids were running all over the place and everything was generally in chaos. Logically I reasoned it wasn't the best day to go. After all, I REALLY needed to clean, and trying to get all the kids rounded up, ready to go, and installed in the car sounded exhausting!

So I dismissed the idea. As I was finishing the dishes the thought came into my head again, "You should go see her." I turned around and surveyed the house and the kids...really, this wasn't the best time. Also, she didn't know I was coming. Would she even be there? I dismissed it again.

I started vacuuming. The thought came again, "You should go see her today." Uhhhhggg! I really wasn't chomping at the bit to go. "Lord, is this you?" I couldn't tell for sure, but I also couldn't get the idea out of my head.

I yelled for the kids to come get ready...did they have shoes on? Did they even have clothes on? After a hard scramble, everyone was ready. I strapped them all in the car...car seats, booster seats, seat belts--the works! We drove over.

And guess what I saw when I got there....a moving van. They were moving. They were literally packing everything up at that moment and moving forever. If I hadn't gone, I never would have known what had happened to her. I never would have gotten to talk to her again or say goodbye. I never would have gotten to pray with her one last time.

So there you go. Nothing super spiritual about it. I was just cleaning the house and herding small children, and God got my attention.

So you don't have to be super spiritual or in a super spiritual place to hear God's voice. Honestly, the way I talk to God and he talks to me on a regular basis is pretty mundane! I ask him about all kinds of normal, everyday things. "Lord, what should I prioritize today?" "Lord, should I go to Wendy's or just save my money and eat at home?" "Lord, should I stay up late and work on this project or go to bed?" Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying God has to direct EVERY single step of my day, but I DO talk to him about all kinds of things. "Lord, my daughter's upset and I'm not sure how to help her. Please give me wisdom." "Lord, I don't know if I can handle my son's friend staying at our house...two teenage boys are trying my patience! How should I handle this?" "God, you know I love my husband but I'm not doing a good job showing it right now. Please help me make him a priority." (And that was all just today!!) Thank goodness God doesn't get sick of me! (Although I do get sick of myself sometimes!!)

God wants to be with us. Taking quiet time, meditating on his word, reading the bible--basically taking time in your day to focus on God when there aren't twenty thousand distracting things going on is a minor miracle! It can definitely make your day go better, make you feel more grounded, and reinforce God's love for you. So definitely make these times a priority. But also don't beat yourself up if you don't get it in all the time! Remember, God wants to hang out with you ALL

day. He understands mouthy teenagers, dirty diapers, unhappy customers, grouchy husbands, and hormones! He's got your back, girl! You just gotta believe it!

Here are some things I like to do to keep God in the forefront of my life. Maybe one of them will spark a creative idea for you?

I listen to books and podcasts on my phone with my earbuds. Recently I've been listening to the Mitford Series books, which are about a priest in a little country church. There's lots of funny characters as well as some real serious problems that he encounters and has to figure out how to help people. I feel like it's almost a devotional! I also listen to whatever book we are currently reading for our women's bible study. And sometimes I listen to my favorite Christian music. I have Christian podcasts I like. I also like podcasts that tell stories of people building amazing businesses or telling triumphant stories. They're not specifically about God, but I feel like they help me because they increase my faith in what I can do with God's help...if this girl/guy can do it, so can I!

I run. Oftentimes while I run I pray or talk to God or listen to Toby Mac or Capital Kings or some other kind of Christian music that has a really fun beat so I don't die going up the hills!

I read a chapter or two in the bible while I'm eating breakfast.

I also feel like when I'm driving I sometimes really connect with God and have really cool ideas too. Sometimes I like to drive the kids places just so I can have time to think/pray in the car after I drop them off.

I try to read the bible to the kids too. When we homeschooled we read together almost every day. I'm not great about reading it every single day now that the kids are in school, but we do it whenever we can. It's not only great because the kids learn, but I feel like I learn as much or sometimes more, just because we can discuss it, or they ask questions that I really have to think about in order to answer. Or there's things I don't know and we look them up. Also, we sometimes read other Christian books. Like we just read a GREAT series that my husband found called Cold Case Christianity for Kids. We've also read autobiographies of Christians around the world. We just mix it up.

I'm writing this book and currently have a podcast, so both of those things are really stretching me to listen to God more so I can get ideas on how to help people. I think this falls into the category of pushing yourself to something new, which requires you to rely on God more. Of course, sometimes LIFE just pushes us...especially problems. Whether it's from the outside or the inside, all these things make us listen more intently.

I've been watching a show called, "The Chosen". I LOVE it! It's the story of Jesus, with a little fiction thrown in so that you get the back story of many of the people whose lives he changed. I HIGHLY recommend it. There's just something powerful about seeing Jesus in "real life".

I go to church.

I go to a neighborhood women's bible study. SO great. Not because the bible study is so deep, because it's fairly light, actually. We just read a chapter or two each week and talk about it. But the best part is just being able to really share what's going on in our lives with other women who will encourage us in a way that brings us closer to God. (More on that in another chapter!)

Ok, so that's some of my favorites. Here's some things other moms I know do:

Have coffee and read their bible in the morning.

Go to Oaks of Righteousness (a healing ministry offered at many churches.)

Go to a group or counselor for Theophostic Prayer (a prayer healing ministry)

Go to Celebrate Recovery (a ministry for any addictions or hang ups)

Read their bible at night in bed.

Help with prison ministry.

Teach in the children's ministry at church.

Walk and pray.

Drive and pray.

Leave the Christian radio on all day in the house.

Well, you get the idea. Don't feel like there's only one way. There's LOTS of ways to keep God's voice top of mind. Try them all, or pick one and make it part of your routine. I guarantee you'll feel more peaceful, more connected to God's Spirit, and more thankful than ever before!

Chapter 3 Get Out of the House, Girl!

Yes, sitting in your car alone in your pajamas chowing down on your favorite fast food and supersized soda while rapping along to songs about drugs and money is a completely valid and oftentimes necessary form of self care . -@marriagemartini Instagram Mom

Mommy needs a break. So unless your legs are broken and you're on fire, I'm not here. -someecards

When I was in high school they had a dance-a-thon to raise money for a charity of some kind. You had to get sponsors for each minute that you danced, and the goal was to dance all night long. I thought it sounded so fun! I got some sponsors and went out the night of the fund raiser and started dancing like crazy! For the first few hours it was really fun! 70's dancing, 80's dancing, 90's dancing...all kinds of music and everyone just grooving and making up moves. But then 2AM rolled around and suddenly dancing seemed like more of a chore than a treat. And there were still 4 more hours to go! Most of us went from dancing to barely moving just enough to stay on the dance floor. Every once in a while a good song would pop up and we would really try to cut a rug again, but we were just SO exhausted that it was NOT fun anymore. In the end I made it through. But if you had told me I was going to do it again the next day I would have gone crazy!

I mean, when you think about it, would you expect anyone to work 24 hours a day without a break? How about for days on end? But as moms, that's sometimes how it goes. And for some reason we think that's normal and to be expected. We work, we clean, we breastfeed, we run teenagers to practices, we cook...it's a LOT! Sometimes it's awesome, like dancing! But if we don't take a break, even something wonderful can become really draining.

I wish I had known that when I had little ones. If I had to do it all over again I would have taken a break from being a mom at least once a week. When you have kids and you are with them

24 hours a day, seven days a week, end on end on end, you start to have caregiver burnout. And of course, when my kids were little, I didn't even know what that was. I didn't know there was a name for it. I just knew that there were times after a couple months where my husband would come home and his normally happy, loving wife had turned into a Tasmanian devil with tears flying everywhere, saying things she normally didn't say, crying and screaming and whirling out of the house. I would totally leave him hanging with the kids, while he wondered what in the heck just happened!

But if I had to do it all over again, I would have definitely just said one night a week was my night and I was going to go out and I didn't care what happened to the kids while I was gone as long as they were alive when I got back. There's a reason why there's so many movies about men taking care of kids and things going wrong while women are out! We worry because dads don't do things the way we do them. What will happen when we're gone? But inevitably, as in every movie, when the mom gets back, everything has righted itself and it's good enough. The house might be messy or the kids might not have had the perfect night, or maybe they had an awesome night and got totally junk fooded up and got to watch TV. Who knows! But everything worked out.

The main thing is that the kids will be perfectly fine if you leave, and everything will be okay. It's so, so, so important to get a little bit of time to yourself. I would do it every single week if I had to do it over again, even if I didn't feel like I needed it, because it's just so incredibly important.

By the time my sixth baby was born, I had gotten a little wiser and started leaving once a week and going to a swim class. Of course, most of the kids were a little older, so they could stay home and just hang out with dad pretty easily at that point. But we also had a 3 month old and he was a handful because he would cry so much when I was gone. So I actually asked three of my closest friends to take turns watching him while Dad watched everyone else. All my friends at that point were done having babies, so they were happy to help. And it was just so great! I wish that I had done that all along. I think it really helped me and my whole family in the long run. Dad had got to have some special time with the kids, and my friends got to get their "baby fix"!

Here are some ideas for getting away. (For more on this, see my podcast called "Get Out of the House Girl!" on the Emagine Momcast.)

1. Leave the Kids with Dad.
2. Ask Family.
3. Swap with friends.
4. Ask different friends. Have the your kids rotate to different friends each week or do a group swap where two friends watch the kids while two friends go out.
5. Swap for something besides kids..."I'll make you a meal, paint a room, do some tutoring, etc. if you watch my kids."
6. Get a babysitter.
7. Find a Moms Day Out or Open Gym.

8. Go to a MOPS group or other moms group where they watch your kids while you have bible study or a class or some kind of time to connect.
9. Borrow a Grandparent. Lots of retired people don't have kids of their own around and would love to borrow yours! You may have neighbors, people at church, people in the community, etc. We've definitely had "adopted" grandparents over the years, especially since we do not live close to family.
10. Borrow an Aunt. Lots of women don't have little kids anymore and would love to watch yours! Same idea as above.
11. Leave the kids but take the baby. Sometimes if you just take the baby it's easier to find someone who will watch the other kids. I've done TONS of stuff like this, including going out to dinner with friends (we all brought our babies) and clothes shopping (MUCH easier with a baby than with a baby, a toddler, and 2 kids!!)
12. Separate your kids to different places. If you have lots of kids, it might be better to farm them out to more than one person.
13. Have lots of kids. No, seriously, it's SO awesome when the older kids get big enough to take care of the little kids!

What if you just can't get away completely??

1. Get out early in the morning before your husband leaves for work
2. Do something at night while the kids are in bed. You may not be gone but at least get some down time.
3. Use a baby monitor and go for a walk or run or outside to pray or read
4. Partner up with a friend. If you have little ones go somewhere like a fenced in playground, backyard, or basement play area. Somewhere you don't have to be on high alert at every minute and you and your friend can sit back, have a La Croix (or something else that sounds fancy) and just have a good ol' rant sesh so you can get everything off your chest and get remotivated to go back into battle!

What if your kids are older?

You STILL need to get away even when your kids are older. You need time to think, pray, plan, have fun, etc. Now you can take time to do more of the things you enjoy...walk, read, garden, work, go rock climbing, find cool restaurants, start a YouTube channel....whatever!

Now you can even take little trips. Plan a girls' trip or a trip with your husband. Now that my kids are older it's so weird and amazing to be able to leave for a few days. It makes me appreciate my family more when I'm gone and get a new perspective on life.

Equally as important, find some friends or spend more time with the ones you have. Some of the hardest difficulties in parenting come when kids are older. You NEED women you can confide in, pray with, and share life with!

One day during Covid my neighbor Traci asked me if I wanted to do a book study with her and maybe a few more women on our street. I said, "Sure!" What started out with just a simple question has turned into a weekly book/bible study that none of us want to miss. And it's not because there's some amazing teaching or anything. We just pick a book or bible study, discuss it a little, have a few snacks, and mostly just talk and pray about life. The amazing part is that we all get to share every week, help each other, pray for each other, and do life together! Many of us didn't even know each other before. But now, we even send texts to the group saying, "Has anyone seen my kid?" when our kids are out in the neighborhood. Thank you to Traci for starting something so cool. Maybe you should start one too!

What if you don't know what to do while you're on a break?

Sometimes we don't take a break because we don't know what to do with ourselves while we're on the break. "What do I even LIKE to do?" we ask ourselves. Well, girl, now's the time to find out! Try something new. Get on a bowling league, find a buddy and go hiking, get involved in a Prison ministry, take a bread making class, go paddle boarding...really there's a LOT of things you can try. And it's important to find things that make you, you! We give out SO much to everyone else, we need to hone in on a few things that are special to us and fill us up.

What if I know what I want to do on a break but it's lame?

Ok, maybe what you want to do on a break is sleep or read a book or watch a movie or something that doesn't really involve leaving. Honestly, sometimes it's hard for moms to say, "Honey, you watch the kids while I go read a book." If you're a mom who has NO problem saying that whatsoever, keep up the good work! It's probably keeping you sane! We are all going to pause right now and take a lesson from you! So don't be ashamed to lock yourself in the bedroom and make the kids stay away and hang out with Dad.

However, personally, even with older kids sometimes it's easier for me to get those quiet times in when I'm NOT at the house. That's where a car comes in handy. There's a LOT of things you can do in your car: Read, sleep, watch a movie, work, write, listen to music, talk to a friend, etc. And let me tell you, I'm the queen of this! So I can absolutely verify that this is a great way to get your alone time in. And really, if you just say, "Bye honey, I'm leaving for my night out!" how is anyone going to know whether you spent it rock climbing or spent it sleeping in your car?? It's your night, baby! Do whatever you want!

Chapter 4 Connecting

Everyone needs a mom friend they can text and say, "This stage of parenting might kill me. Just wanted to let you know in case I don't make it. -www.perfectpending.net

"I see you have created a tiny human. I, too, have done this." Me, trying to make mom friends. -@tragicallyhere

Texting another mom...

"I'm done. I'm selling my kid on ebay."

"Don't be silly, you made him! Sell him on Etsy." -@beckycrossfield Twitter Mom

Finding friends is a LOT like dating! You strike up a conversation (if you have the nerve!) at a school function or park or church. You keep the conversation going long enough to see if this might be someone you could connect with. "Ok, this looks promising!" you think to yourself. And while she is still talking you're trying to figure out how to exchange phone numbers without being weird! Should you ask her to go out for coffee? See if she wants to get the kids together? Maybe see if she wants to have a walking date? Jeez, this is SO hard!

But, girl, you've GOT to do it. You HAVE to connect. It's SO important. Ok, ok, I'll stop yelling at you now! But for real! Spend time with your friends! And if you don't have any, find some! You NEED them.

I remember there was a couple with 2 kids that I knew many years ago. He was a pastor and she was staying home and homeschooling the kids. She told me early on that they had made a pact that they wouldn't talk bad about each other to anyone else...that they would solve their problems together and not share them with others. Back then I admired that so much. Well, they're now divorced. Don't get me wrong, I'm not encouraging talking bad about your husband all the time, but we DO need to talk about our kids and husbands and jobs and homes and monthly period problems and extended family issues and everything else with another mom who will understand and point us closer to Jesus. We do NOT need to keep all this in. It only makes you feel alone, overwhelmed, confused, and frustrated.

One thing I did do right when the kids were young is that I started a mom's playgroup. (See, if no one will make friends with you, you just start a group and they will join before they know what they're getting into!!)

When my boys were little and I really needed more interaction, I decided that I would check with my church and see if we could start a small group playgroup for moms with little kids. At that time, we didn't have one. So as soon as I started it, there was interest already, because there were quite a few moms that really wanted an outlet to hang out with other moms and get to know other kids.

That fulfilled several needs for me. One, of course, was just to build up some friendships and for my kids to meet other kids. But as well as that, it was really good for me too, because there was a lot of planning involved. So it was some intellectual stimulation for me outside of taking care of children that was kind of a neat little side hustle in a way. I wasn't making any money, of course, but it was really fun planning and organizing. (Maybe if I had been working I would have just joined someone else's! Still a great way to meet people!)

I met one of my best friends Kate there, and we worked together to organize, plan, pray, etc. We are still great friends to this day! We still get together for coffee, call each other when we're stressed, and get together for game nights.

We met by getting involved in a project together. Which is a VERY good way to make a friend without the weirdness of trying to exchange numbers at the park. So if you struggle with just walking up to someone and talking, or even if you don't, it's a great way to get to know friends easily because you're working together for a purpose: volunteering in the kids ministry, PTA, cross country booster club, coaching kids soccer, etc. Join something that works for you or start something yourself if you're feeling ambitious! And don't feel intimidated about trying something new. Remember, you're just trying it! You can always change to something else.

My friend Laura talked me into trying a women's Wednesday night soccer league. I had never played soccer (or any other real sport) in my life. It was a 6 week commitment. Well, it's been about 5 years and I'm still there! And Laura and I are together all the time now, constantly dragging each other into one crazy adventure or another! We're nearly inseparable!

So get yourself a Kate or a Laura! Get together for shopping or coffee or paddle boarding or bull riding, or teepeeing the neighbors house!!! Whatever it is you like to do together! Or bring the kids and have a few hours at the park. Just make it happen! You need it!

One side note especially for first time stay-at-home moms. When you are at home with a baby by yourself it can be really lonely. If you have friends and family around already, wonderful! But if you are like I was, and were really on your own, don't hesitate to join a playgroup or some kind of project group. I know it seems weird with a baby...why would I go to the park or help at church with a baby in tow? Just remember, ALL of the moms you will meet at a playgroup or helping with the kids at church or at your favorite knitting group were there once too, and they will be VERY happy to have you participate, hang out, or help in whatever way you can. And they will LOVE to see the baby.

I didn't know about this when I had Daniel, my first kiddo, but thankfully I had a couple ladies "adopt" me!

Before we had kids we lived in a duplex and our neighbor was a lady that was older than us by quite a bit. She was like our grandma's age, so we called her Grandma Ginny. She was a feisty old lady and she was always funny and loved to crack a good joke and she did woodworking. She actually spent 30 years as a woodworker who decorated and lined coffins for a place that made them for funerals. So she was definitely a little bit out of the ordinary!

And after we moved out of the duplex into an apartment, it wasn't too long before I had Daniel. And luckily, since she was retired, she was always available. So at least once a week, I would take Daniel and we would go over to Grandma Ginny's house and she would make us lunch and we would sit around and visit. It was so great to have a friend and she loved it too.

We actually kept doing that through the second child and the third child. In fact, one time when the two boys were still pretty little (they were maybe three and four), we went over to her house and she gave them ice cream in an ice cream cone and they had no idea what an ice cream cone was.

I mean, I have to say of all the desserts, ice cream is not my favorite. (I know, I'm weird!) So we didn't have a whole lot of ice cream at the house. And they had never seen an ice cream cone before, so they couldn't figure out what it was. And when we were like, "Well, you can eat it." They thought that was just the coolest thing they had ever seen in their lives ! Grandma Ginny was pretty awesome. She was always trying to get them to say her name when they were little, like, "Say Grandma Ginny, say Ginny..." And then when they would actually start saying it, she would put her head in her hands and just cringe because they would say it over and over and over and over. And then she would tease them and say, "My name's not Ginny any more, it's Octavia!" And they would just laugh!

One of Daniel's favorite things to do was to go up to Grandma Ginny and play with her arm flab (she wasn't fat, just old!) He thought that was hilarious. And she had such a good humor that she just thought it was funny, too! (I've decided never to get old enough to have arm flab!...Oops, too late!)

But by the fourth child, she was getting a little overwhelmed with all the lunch guests. So we slowly phased that out, but we always appreciated Grandma Ginny and all the kids remember going over to her house.

I also had another friend that I had met through church when Daniel was a baby. She was like my mom's age. So she was older than me and her kids were already in high school and young adults. And she was so awesome. Her name is Cathy Gillespie and she is just one of those really unique people that is really funny and really easy to get along with and everyone loves her!

And she was so gracious to me. She would just have me come over to the house with Daniel and we would hang out or she'd let me do laundry because we lived in an apartment and we didn't have a washer and dryer. Or a lot of times we would go on outings. We would do a little shopping trip or we would go on hikes or different things like that. And it was just so awesome to have her there and there were so many times when I really needed some motherly advice, since my mom lived far away, it was SO helpful! So I was so blessed with two really great friends that came out of nowhere at a time when I really needed them.

One more thing I've found to be REALLY helpful is to PUT IT ON THE CALENDAR! What I mean is, schedule things you look forward to on your calendar. I'm not saying you can't call a friend at the last minute, or take a walk with a neighbor who happens to be outside. I'm just saying, sometimes we get into a kind of desert socially because life is busy...work, kids, school, homeschool, etc., or sometimes because life is NOT busy, like when your kids graduate and suddenly you're an empty nester. We can find ourselves feeling depleted because we don't

have anything special to look forward to, or any plans to see our friends. So make sure you schedule at least a few things ahead of time. If you're super social, schedule a LOT of things! That energizes you! If you don't need much social time at all, you still need a little, so schedule a few things.

But definitely plan things ahead of time. Try to get involved with other people and make sure you have a good, healthy balance of not just being by yourself all the time but also being with others and having positive events on the horizon. I promise it will make you a happier person!

Chapter 5 Getting Organized...or Not!

She believed she could, and she almost did, but then someone asked her repeatedly for a snack and she lost track of what she was doing. -www.familyfoodgarden.com

Not to brag or anything, but I can forget what I'm doing while I'm doing it. -www.suefitzmaurice.com

This section is divided into two parts: Moms who don't know when the last time they washed the sheets was and moms who have to keep a list of everything in their planner or they will explode and die. Ok moms, you know who you are! I'm starting with the sheet moms, so if you're the list type, you might want to skip down a few paragraphs!

Confessions: I'm ABSOLUTELY one of those moms who doesn't know when she washed the sheets. One time I was having all my friends out to eat for my birthday. I have no idea how this happened, but somehow they got on the topic of washing towels. They were going on about how awful it was to have musty towels and how they would NEVER leave them sitting in the washer and how they needed to clean them constantly. Hey, I'm no different, I hate musty towels too, but doesn't everyone know that if you don't wash the towels they don't get musty? No sitting in the washer! Problem solved! Then they were talking about how their kids always left things on the stairs and "Didn't Johnny know to pick that up? How could he walk past it EVERY time and not even pick it up?" I was just thinking Johnny was like me and just never even SAW it until he tripped over it and sprained his ankle. I mean, let's just say I can walk past that toy for WEEKS without noticing it!

I used to have this notion that I was a super organized person. After all, in school and college I got good grades and turned everything in on time. Then motherhood hit. Yah, when you take away all the teachers, time limits, grades, tests and REAL life starts, I'm pretty much a mess! So there's kids and house and projects and meals to take care of. Then add in homeschooling! Let's just say, with so much going on it was only so long that I could just juggle everything. I finally had to buckle down and get organized!

I started making a chart for each kid for each week with homework on it. I made meal charts and meal planning lists and chore charts and calendars. The homework charts worked. I used

them for years. The meal lists and planning and chore charts and calendars changed over time, but I kept trying different things that worked at different times. I set aside time each week to get organized.

If you're a messy person, or you have a messy mind, take the time to find a way that keeps you organized. You will feel more in control of your day, which will make you feel empowered! It won't always go like you want all the time, but having a plan will at least help you feel like you've gotten a better handle on things.

I'm constantly working on this, as it's a struggle for me. Now that I'm not homeschooling anymore, and my kids are getting older, I had to switch to a new method. Now I use a calendar app and a task app on my phone. I look at them every day (seriously, I think I'd forget my own name if I didn't have that!) And having them on my phone means they're pretty much always with me. So when I'm at the dentist and they book me another appointment, I put it in my calendar right away. If something or someone reminds me of a task I need to do, I put it on my task list immediately. So find a way to get organized:

Calendar app

Task app

List app

Planner

Wall calendar

Desk calendar

Notes app

Sticky notes

Whatever you need to help you keep it together. Oh, but there's a catch...you have to actually look at it every day! Oh, believe me, I'm the queen of trying some great new organization scheme and then not using it! Don't you act like you don't know what I'm talking about...I know you've done this! So start now...use it every day. You'll be so much happier!

Ok you control freaks, Guess what? It's your turn! You are already organized. You're already checking off the lists, matching all the socks, turning off all the lights as you leave the room (or when anyone else leaves the room!) You know who you are!

One time my kids and I spent the night with my friend and her kids. She is a really cool friend who is fun to be with, a great hostess, and also very tidy and organized. When I woke up at her house in the morning, my kids were already off and playing with her kids. I got up in the morning and went downstairs to get some breakfast (which of course she had already made). When I came back my bed was perfectly made. I laid on it to read a book or something, then went to check on the kids. When I came back the bed was re-made. I decided, since she was busy and the kids were all good, I would lay down for a bit. I got up and went to check on the kids again. When I came back the bed was perfectly made again! Wow! Now before you think

I was a bad guest for not making my bed, you have to understand this was the first time I ever stayed with her, so I wasn't sure of the protocol yet. And also, I doubt I would have made it to her specifications, so she probably would have re-made it anyway!!

If you can relate to this, I'm just telling you, it's inevitable, all your hard work and well made plans are going to get dashed at some point against the VERY hard wall of KIDS! I remember I planned a trip to camp on the beach with our family. I had it all planned out. I made lists, packed EVERYTHING we needed, and figured out where we were camping, and got it all down. And I was so excited to take them, because my kids had never seen the ocean before. It was going to be SO fun! Except that it wasn't. My teenage daughters decided to hate the trip before we even got there, one of my sons slept outside and didn't even use his tent. My husband got mad and threw away all the ingredients for the smores. There was sand in EVERYTHING, and I almost ran out naked from the bath house when a crab decided to take a shower with me!

Just saying, there's times when you have to loosen the plan, or even throw the plan out the window. Even more important is the ability to let go of your expectations for yourself sometimes.

I had a mentor who had two kids. She always shined their shoes and ironed their clothes and was on time for everything and generally had it together. Then she and her husband decided to adopt three kids (they were siblings). She literally almost had a nervous breakdown because she couldn't keep it all together with suddenly having five kids. She finally realized she had to let a LOT of things go. She went from neatly folding every sock to just having a bin for each child and letting them handle how they wanted to put their own clothes in. Talk about a departure! But everyone settled in and calmed down and she got her sanity back! She had to let go of her own expectations for herself and realize she was just as valuable and just as effective whether she was folding the socks or throwing them in the basket.

So, I'm not saying don't fold your clothes! But I do want you to remember this phrase: throw the socks in the basket. So when nothing is going like you planned or you feel like you're disappointing yourself, just remember, sometimes you need to let go and "throw the socks in the basket". Let it go. Jesus loves you. You don't have to have every single "t" crossed or "i" dotted all the time. The fact that you do most of the time is awesome! We all appreciate it and love it, but you get grace too. Sometimes you just have to give it to yourself.

Chapter 5 Unclutter

I've tried that Japanese decluttering trend where you hold each thing you own and throw anything out that doesn't bring you joy. So far I've thrown away all the vegetables and the electric bill. -cuttheclutter on Pinterest

My house looks like I'm losing a game of Jumanji. -cuttheclutter on Pinterest

I read that famous Japanese organizing book. I actually bought it. I have no idea why. I think I was desperate. In the end I thought about throwing it away, but I ended up giving it to the thrift store as a practical joke on whoever picked it up next. I remember the author talking about taking everything out of her purse at the end of the day so it could “rest”. Considering at the time I was only getting about 4 hours of sleep at night, I was wishing someone would take me out so I could rest!

Besides which, if I took everything out of my purse my kids would have run off with it in a heartbeat and every day would have been a scavenger hunt. I remember my friend's little toddler came up to her one time, shook his firetruck and said, “Ring, mommy!” and ran off. Later she realized her wedding ring wasn't in the little tray on the windowsill by the sink. She would have NEVER found it if he hadn't basically given her a clue. She had to take the whole fire truck apart to get it out!

Then there was the Japanese clothes folding. I thought rolling up the clothes was a cool idea...until the boys started launching them from their PVC pipe cannon.

The idea of “Considering my clothes feelings” was pretty low on the list considering I had 6 little people's feelings to consider, plus my husband, and by the time I had considered them all, I was considerably exhausted! And since no one was thanking me, I was NOT thanking my clothes. Enough said.

One thing I can agree with is the idea of decluttering and generally getting rid of stuff. Honestly, you don't have to be too tidy if you just don't have much. *Consider* this: You can't take it with you, and you aren't happy wading through it every day. So get rid of it. Give it a good home with a friend or acquaintance, or take it to the thrift store. Just think, you are depriving some lucky person of the joy of having that thing that you aren't even using anymore! It sits forlornly in the closet or up in the cabinet or on your counter where it collects dust, when some special person is just waiting to take it home and thank it every day for its incredible value!

Do your kids really need all those toys? Do you need all those shirts? How many whisks and spatulas do you use at a time, anyway? How often do you use those giant serving bowls? When in doubt, if you just can't bear to see it go, put the stuff you are unsure about in a box with the date on it. Put it up in a closet or storage area. If you haven't used it in a year, give it away. (And for goodness sakes, don't look at it first!! You'll talk yourself into keeping it!) Another good idea if you're going through things is to get a friend to do it with you. They won't have sentimental attachment to it and will convince you to give it away. Or they'll take it home, which is equally as good!

Once you have a LOT less stuff, keeping things clean and uncluttered is a LOT easier. It doesn't matter whether you're messy or clean generally, it still works. Even if you're messy, there's just less mess if you have less to throw around! And after all, are you really "considering your clothes' feelings" if you aren't using them? You should be ashamed of yourself! Clothes have feelings too!

Chapter 6 Gratitude and Awesomeness

I am grateful for everything that makes me happy: overpriced Starbucks coffees, overpriced Chacos sandals, overpriced Chick-fil-a salads, and portraits of Benjamin Franklin with the numbers "1-0-0" on them. -me

Ok, so this chapter is for me, since I spent the morning crying my eyes out over my horrible life. Which, by the way, is definitely NOT horrible. And when I say crying my eyes out I mean, that ugly, mascara running, catch-your-breath, wailing crying that NOBODY wants to hear. Unfortunately, I think the whole neighborhood heard it.

It's amazing how quickly our thoughts can spiral so hard that EVERYTHING seems wrong and nothing anybody else says or does can fix it. Well, sometimes when this happens it hits such a nerve that only God can heal it. And he has been speaking to me about it, even before this happened (he gave me a song, of course!) But even though I got the jist of the song, the details were definitely not clear, and for some reason I really feel like he wants me to figure this one out on my own.

But I know what part of the problem is, and that's my general lack of gratitude and awesomeness. Of course, you know what I mean by gratitude. When times get tough or our thoughts spiral out, being grateful does NOT come naturally. So I'm going to have to make it a point to do it: write it, think it, express it. It's amazing how our outlook changes when we start being grateful.

But what about awesomeness? Awesomeness has to do with winning. Everyone needs some wins, no matter who they are. And when you're a mom, wins are hard to come by. Our job is so relational, so incremental, so ambiguous at times, that it's hard to know if we're doing it right. And there's hardly ANYONE out there telling us we're doing a good job. So I recommend telling yourself! I have a journal that says, "I'm Kind of Awesome" on the cover. In it I write things I've accomplished and am proud of for the day. Anything from folding the laundry to running 4 miles. Obviously I've slacked off writing my wins. Time to get back on the horse!

As Kung Fu Panda says, "There is no charge for Awesomeness...or Gratefulness!" Ok, it's actually "attractiveness", but gratefulness sounds good too! We can't always depend on other people for this, but we can definitely start using it ourselves. So grab a notebook, phone notes, sticky notes, or your kid's arm and a sharpie and start writing! (Actually, if they're a boy

10 or under they'd probably think this was hilariously funny!) Time to track your wins and your blessings! You won't regret it!

Chapter 7 Get Movin' Girl!

Motherhood is an extreme sport. That's why we have to wear workout clothes every day.
-www.funnycleanmemes.com

Everyone knows your body changes during pregnancy, but no one warns you about what you will look like AFTER the baby is born. I mean, think about it. You carry around this giant basketball in your stomach for 9 months, pop it out, and then your body is supposed to just shrink back like one of those packing vacuums that sucks all the air out of the bag and leaves this perfectly shrink wrapped package for you to daintily store in your closet. Well, it don't work that way baby! At least not for me!

Apparently, though, there must be more super models around than I originally thought! Let me explain...

Right around the time I had my second kiddo, it just so happened we had a baby explosion at church. It seemed like everyone was having their baby and they were all within a week or two of each other. At that time it was all the rage to wear midriff shirts.

Well, I had Buckley, and excitedly brought him to church when he was just a week old or so. And everyone else had the same idea! There were tiny newborns everywhere. But instead of noticing all the cute little noses and cute little toesies, I noticed something else....there were like three new moms who had midriff shirts on. And that wasn't the worst of it...they actually looked GOOD! What the heck?? They just had a baby! How in the world did they look exactly the same as they had 10 months ago?

Where they had flat abs I had what looked like a deflated balloon with graffiti on it. Yes, not only was I still pudgy and round, but the stretch marks I got with my first son had multiplied with my second. How was that fair!

When I was reading the book *Hold on But Don't Hold Still* by Kristina Kuzmic she was talking about how when men get a scar, it's like a badge of honor. She said stretch marks should be like scars: a badge of honor! After all, we certainly earned them!! I thought that was wonderful and I would love to show mine off if it was attached to a bulging bicep or smooth forehead. But as it is, it's attached to something that resembles a jelly-filled donut. It may be a little too wobbly for public scrutiny!

But one thing that was great after pregnancy was the boobs! I went from a size A to a D right after the baby was born! The only problem is, it's painful! That's the time when you get

engorged...your breasts fill up so much with milk that it feels like they're going to explode! Why does the good stuff have to come with the small print??!! "Guess what? You're going to get big boobs! Oh, but, did I mention, it's gonna hurt like hell?"

Thankfully after that I still had bigger boobs for a while, which didn't hurt once the engorgement was gone, but of course I had a bigger stomach too. Sometimes you can't win for losing. It took me longer and longer to lose the baby weight, so that by the last baby it was probably a year and a half. And of course, when the baby weight went off, so did the boobs. And after being totally stretched from a size A to a size D and back down again, not to mention being sucked on continually for months, they ended up being more like an A- than an A. Kind of like two little deflated water balloons!

But lest you get discouraged, I promise, it was all worth it for those beautiful little hands and toes and all the first smiles and laughs (although, if you'd have given them to me as adolescents, I might have had second thoughts!)

But hold on, that's not the end of the story! All hope is not lost! It DOES get better!

In 2007 my husband got back into running, after maybe a 10 year hiatus. Personally, I had never been athletic. I was always active with the kids, going to parks and taking them in the stroller, flying kites, swimming in the summer, etc. But I had never been athletic, not even as a young person.

But my husband started saying things like, "You know, Elaine, you could run." to which I would reply, "I don't even like to walk to the mailbox!"

But then one day, after he had been running for a while, he reminded me that when he started back up, all he did was run to the end of the street (maybe a 10th of a mile). Then he ran down to the end and back. Then he ran to the end and back and then to the stop sign (another 10th) and so on. "Well, that didn't sound too bad," I thought.

So I ran to the end of the street for a couple days. Then the next day I ran to the end and back to the house, and so on.

About that same time I happened to be talking to my neighbor, and we decided we would wog (walk/job--thank you Jennifer Allwood for coining that term!) together. Jog a while, walk a while, jog, walk, etc. to the end of our country road and back, which was 3.1 miles almost exactly, which happens to be a 5k.

We started working on that and in the meantime I went to a local road race with my hubby to watch him run. When I was in line for the pancake breakfast they had after the race, I happened to be standing next to a woman who had just finished the 5k. The thing about this lady is that she didn't look like your typical runner. She was in her 40's, and didn't really look

athletic. She was fluffy around the middle and just wearing a regular pair of shorts and t-shirt...nothing that screamed "I am a professional!" First of all, let me just say that I was SUPER impressed that she just ran a 5k. I mean, just a few weeks before I couldn't even run to the mailbox! And if that wasn't cool enough, she told me she had just done a triathlon!! Wow! She told me I should sign up for the next one. I thought she was crazy!

But that idea just stuck in my brain. Like corn on the cob stuck between two teeth, I just couldn't seem to get rid of it! I finally couldn't stand it anymore, and I bit the bullet. I signed up for the triathlon.

The triathlon was a 500 meter swim, a 10 mile bike, and a 5k run. I figured if my neighbor and I could turn the wogging to jogging that would get me the 5k run. I didn't think 10 miles of biking would be too hard if I just practiced. But the swim was another story.

It's not that I was afraid to swim, I just didn't really know how. I mean, I was a self-taught swimmer. I grew up in the 80's in rural Missouri. Swimming lessons were not really on the radar for my family. A good ol' splash in a swimmin' hole with a sturdy rope swing was big fun for us! Swimming laps in a 50 meter pool wasn't even a thought.

So like any good country girl, I decided to teach myself! I signed up at a community center and once a week I checked all 5 of my kiddos into the on-site childcare, and tried to swim.

At that time I was about 32 years old. No spring chicken, considering I had never done anything athletic before IN MY LIFE! No sports as a kid, no lessons, no rec leagues, nothing. I never even owned a real pair of good tennis shoes until I got married. I didn't even know that was a thing! (Remember KEDS??)

The first time I ever hit the pool I swam the 25 meters from one end to the other and almost died of oxygen deprivation! And that was swimming with my head above the water!! Because that was the only way I knew how to swim.

Well, I didn't give up. I got a little farther each time, but it was super hard.

But then I heard there was going to be a free swim training put on by the triathlon. ONE swim training. You can bet your bottom dollar I was going to be there. And if one was all I was going to get, I was going to make the most of it!

They started it by talking to us about techniques for swimming in a triathlon, and explaining what it was like. I hung on every word.

Then they said we could get in line and when it was our turn, we could jump in, swim to the other side while one of the master swimmers watched, and at the end they would give us feedback on how to improve.

So I did. I think the first swimming mentor didn't really know what to say! It was obvious I was a newby, and I don't think she wanted to discourage me, so she just gave me some general advice. I listened carefully, but it definitely didn't seem like that was going to help me too much. When I got out of the water, I wasn't sure what to do. I looked around to see what other swimmers were doing. Some swam their lap and were headed home, but others got back in line. As soon as I saw that other people were going again, I made a beeline for the end of the line and went again. And again. And again. I was the last swimmer there.

But by the end I had learned how to swim with my head in the water, breathing out the sides. It wasn't very pretty, but at least I had got the idea of it.

After that, swimming got better. Instead of having my head above the water while swimming, essentially dragging my back end around like a dead body, I was able to swim with my head down, bringing my body up like a boat on the surface. I eventually got to 500 meters plus, swimming in the community center pool.

At the same time I was jogging and biking a few times a week. When the triathlon was a week away, they opened up the lake for people to practice. I did the whole thing just to make sure I could do it! I think I did it in about 2 ½ hours. I was so happy I could do it! And now I not only had tried it, but I knew how long it would take. Except I was wrong! I ended up doing the triathlon in 1 ½ hours! There were a 1000 women in the race, and I finished right in the middle. I was thrilled! Not only had I finished it, but I wasn't last!!

After that I realized that I loved a lot of athletic things. Since then I've done several triathlons, a mud run, crossfit, pilates, indoor women's soccer, and a smattering of indoor rock climbing, kayaking, mounting biking, and hiking. And for the first time EVER, at 44 years old, I went skiing (Talk about exhilarating and terrifying all at the same time!)

And all this is to tell you two things. First, my boobs came back! Ok, they're still a size A, but now that I exercise regularly (especially crossfit/pilates), it's helped my chest get stronger, and now instead of saggy, deflated balloons, I've got little round ones. And when you're a size A, you take what you can get!

Also, being that I'm in my 40's I may or may not have gained a little weight. Let's just say I'm fluffier than I was before! But that's also but a little extra on the old hooters. I'm not complaining! And even though I may be more curvy and have to work harder to hide that muffin top, I can honestly say I'm in the best shape of my life. I'm stronger and fitter than I was in my 20's.

Second, if I can do all this with 5 kids there is hope for everyone!! At the time I did the first triathlon my kids were 9, 8, 6, 4, and 2, and then I had our last baby two years later. I mainly exercised in the morning before everyone got up. Then as the kids got a little older and it was

easier to get away I tried some of the other things like indoor soccer, which was in the evenings. And by the way, I'm not any good at soccer. But I still have a lot of fun! When you're playing with other middle aged moms, it's competitive, but mostly just fun!

If you're totally overwhelmed with life right now, don't sweat it. Yes, exercise of any kind WILL make you feel better--emotionally as well as physically. Just doing that 15 minute YouTube workout not only increases your happy endorphins in your brain, but also makes you feel like you've accomplished something. And in the world of parenting craziness, that's a rare gift. However, everything has its season. And if there's just no way you can fit something like this in right now (like if you're a single mom working two jobs or a mom of a baby who doesn't sleep), don't despair. This season, like all seasons, will pass, and there will be time to do it later.

But assuming you're not completely overwhelmed, just remember there's lots of creative ways to fit in fitness: do it in the early morning, follow a Youtube video in your living room, sign up for a place that has childcare, or like we do at soccer, take the kids with you. (Last week there were SO many kids in the dugout they were louder than we were out on the field! We even had to stop the game because one of the little ones threw up his Skittles! But no one minded. We all got a good laugh!) Heck, you can even bench press your 2 year old if he'll hold still long enough!

So, as far as getting fit goes, you probably fall into one of four categories: Athlete, semi-athlete, non-athlete, or pre-athlete.

For the athletes, keep it up! You are an inspiration to all of us!

For the semi-athletes, you probably have an activity or two you like to do. It's not super competitive but you're staying active. Great job! Keep going! And don't be afraid to try something new!

For the non-athletes who are pretty positive you aren't into all this stuff, just make sure you stay active, even if it's walking the dog every day. Believe me, when you're 80 you'll thank me! Just remember, the difference between a dead person and a live person is only one thing: dead people don't move. So if you want to have a long, functional life, you've got to move! Even if it's vacuuming or chasing kids. Don't quit! And try to find something you can do regularly.

For the pre-athletes, this is your kick in the butt! Go try something! You never know if you'll like something until you've tried it. I've tried co-ed softball and 9 Rounds kickboxing too...not my favorite. But I tried it. So go out there and try something. I know, I know, it's scary! Sometimes when we become a mom we feel like either that time in our life is over (if we were an athlete in school), or that we should be watching our kids play sports, not play them ourselves.

Hogwash! I can't tell you how much fun my kids and I have doing stuff together. How cool is it to be 44 and skiing with my daughters, mountain biking with my sons, and rock climbing with my 9 year old and his friends?! Not to mention how awesome it is to do stuff with my husband. We just hiked to the bottom of the Grand Canyon and back!! (Ok, I almost threw up and thought I was going to die, but I MADE IT TO THE TOP!) And lets just say being in shape makes your love life a little spicier! And who wouldn't want that??

So get out there and kick some butt (probably yours!) You can do it, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise!

Chapter 8 Laugh

Sometimes I talk to myself. Then we both laugh and laugh. -funny shirt I saw

One night I was putting the kids to bed and they were brushing their teeth and generally getting ready. I was in a goofy mood and decided to get the spanking paddle down (a wooden ruler) and was swatting everyone in a playful way (not hard) and telling them to "get a move on!" We were all laughing and they were threatening to get the paddle and spank me! Suddenly I had this brilliant idea! I had just gotten a label maker and thought it would be funny to put a label on it that said, "Weapon of Mass Destruction"! I went to the kitchen drawer, pulled out the label maker, and started typing. Soon a beautiful slip of perfectly typed label slid out and I peeled off the paper and stuck it on the ruler. Only, after I'd stuck it on and finally looked at it, I realized I had forgotten to type the "M"!

Seriously, that really happened! I laughed so hard I almost cried! You just can't make this stuff up!

Ok, so why am I telling you this story? Because I want it to be a reminder to you not to take yourself too seriously! You don't have to be a perfect mom to be a good mom. Normally I wouldn't tell anyone to be average. But the truth is, when it comes to parenting, average yields perfectly good results.

One year when I was a Vacation Bible School leader, I had a group of kids, maybe 12, and in that group there was a girl who was a mess! And when I say a mess, I don't mean she was messy. I mean, she was an emotional mess. One minute she was your best buddy and the next she was throwing a fit. And she wasn't little. She was way too old to be mood swinging back and forth like a toddler. It was totally apparent that she had a problem: she was spoiled. And I don't mean the "every once in a while she gets her way" kind of spoiled. I mean she was running the whole family at about 10 years old and she didn't (obviously) know how to do that, so she seesawed back and forth between trying to be your best friend and trying to tell you the way it was gonna be. And since I was a stranger to her, she didn't know how to handle me, much less manipulate me, so it was quite a site!

I felt so sad for her. What a terrible thing to have parents that were so inept that they couldn't even handle one 10 year old.

But what it did show me is that there were 11 other kids whose parents, as flawed and imperfect as they likely were (as we all are) had all raised basically fine kids. They all knew how to follow the rules, were basically emotionally stable, got in trouble sometimes, but all in all were pretty typical kids.

And I'm sure all those parents had the same struggles we all have. I'm sure some of them had even larger struggles than the average person. But they were all raising perfectly fine kids.

So, don't guilt yourself. And whenever the mom guilt rears its ugly head, just remember this story from my Aunt Christy (who is hilarious, by the way. She's a science teacher and during the Covid shut down when the kids were all stuck at home, she dressed up her dummy skeleton in different clothes each day and posed him all around the school drinking coffee, eating lunch, playing baseball, etc and posted pictures of him for the kids!) She said there's a mom in her school district who's had multiple boyfriends and comes to the parent teacher conferences in a shirt that says, "Men are like floor tiles, lay them right the first time and you can walk all over them for years." Anytime she feels like a bad parent she just thinks of that mom!

In addition to mom guilt, there's also just mental spirals that get us down. Moms are just people (yes, it's true! They're not superhuman! Although they are sometimes amazing!) and people have serious struggles. Sometimes these struggles really take serious prayer, healing, community, and counseling. But there are times when we just get into our head TOO much and what really helps is just to laugh! Sometimes a good ol' laugh sesh (or several...possibly every day??) can really help pull us out of ourselves and start thinking positively again. So whatever makes you laugh, do more of it! Here's things that make me laugh:

My kids (One time my 3 year old was standing outside the front door, dropped his drawers, and started peeing right when the neighbor walked by walking her dog. Before I could get to him he smiled as big as could be and waved his other hand wildly--the one that wasn't occupied--to make sure she knew he was saying hi!)

My husband (He is SO goofy sometimes. One time we were all being snippy so he made us all SING everything we said to each other. Man, we were laughing SO hard! Try it sometime. There's NO WAY you can't laugh!)

My friends (It's always good to get together with some good friends. There's always something relatable to laugh about. I think of it as free counseling!)

Studio C family friendly comedy skits on YouTube

Babylon Bee (funny political and cultural memes and podcast from a conservative Christian point of view--SO funny!)

My Podcast (Emagine MomCast, available on any podcasting platform. Not all of them are funny but some are SO funny. Listen to the one called, "Ep. 2 The Girls Get Real")
Mom Memes (If you need some, I post them on Emaginemom on all the social media platforms, so just follow anywhere.)
Videos of Tim Hawkins or Chonda Pierce (both Christian comedians)

Anyway, you get the idea. Laugh as much as you can, it's good medicine.

And be careful with that label maker...it can be a tricky thing!

To do!

Before we move on to Part 2, I want you to take a quick moment and turn your reading into ACTION!

First things first, lets practice a little AWESOMENESS! I'm going to give you a list of all the things we talked about in Part 1 and I want you to write down 3 of those things that you are already doing, i.e., you're awesome at! Or at least pretty good!

Making Jesus part of my everyday life
Getting out of the house
Connecting to other moms/friends
Being organized
Uncluttering
Gratitude/Awesomeness (reminding myself of what I've done well)
Moving! (Exercise or being active)
Laughing every day

Ok, write down your top three: (i.e. I'm really great at getting rid of stuff, I exercise every day at lunch, and I go walking and have a "counseling" sesh with my best friends once a week to connect.)

Now think of three of these that you need to work on: (i.e. I definitely need to figure out a way to get out of the house once a week, I need to find some way to connect with other moms, I would really like to work on laughing more!) _____

Out of those three, what is one you will work on this month? (i.e. I think getting out of the house would really help me.)

Now write down a goal that you would like to achieve by the end of the month: (i.e. have a set day & time to get away each week and have a babysitter or list of babysitters I can use. Have a list of things I want to do while I'm out.

What is the first step you will take this week to make this happen? (i.e. I will look at my budget and see how much time I can afford and start putting out feelers for a babysitter.)

Way to go! You're on the right track! Just keep truckin'!

Part 2 Real Life

Chapter 9 Special Time with Kids

A surprise hug, a spontaneous kiss, or an unprompted "I love you" from your child has the ability to turn your whole day around...don't forget you can have the same affect on them. Our children are fueled by our love. . -@mommywhinetime, RedTricycle.com

Can I just say that I've had the most interesting interactions with people at Aldi? I guess when you've got 2 carts, one with a baby in a baby seat taking up almost the entire basket, one in the front seat grabbing everything he can touch and knocking it off the shelf or crying if he can't have it, 2 kids playing hide and seek in between the giant stacks of toilet paper, 1 kid sleeping in the other cart while you stack things around her and 1 older kid pushing the other cart, you attract a lot of attention! I've had everything from people telling me what a terrible parent I was--"You need to get a hold on your children! I've never seen such a display!" to "Wow, you

are amazing! How do you do it?" Oh yes, and the frequently asked question, "Are you going to have more kids?" Ok, just a side rant here, but why is it that people with 1 or 2 kids are NEVER asked that, as it would be intrusion of privacy, but once you've got 3 or more the WHOLE world thinks it's suddenly their business?? Oh, or this one...you won't believe how many times I've heard this..."Do you know what causes that?" One time I answered, "Heck, ya! And it's AWESOME! You should try it some time!"

I love having a big family. Everyone has someone to play with...honestly, sometimes it's even easier than having one, because they keep each other entertained, and the more you have, the more options they have to play with.

That said, when you have more than one child, sometimes it can feel like they never really get your full attention. When I had my first 4 kids, there was a LOT of attention being split! I had 4 kids under the age of 7. My second kiddo, my son Buckley, seemed to be struggling. At first I couldn't put my finger on it, but then I got the idea that maybe he just needed some one on one time.

I couldn't really just give him one on one time without giving the other ones that same. He needed it the most, I could tell. But I would have to make it fair. So I started a thing called "Special Time". Each week, one kiddo would get my undivided attention for a few hours. Dad would watch the other kids. The child could pick what they wanted to do, but it had to be free or cheap.

I still remember the first Special Time. I did the first one with Buckley, since he was struggling most. I'm not sure how we came up with the idea, but we went to the lake near our house, and took the little army guys. We played army guys together on the rocks near the shore. Gosh, I'm tearing up just thinking about it. He was SO cute and sweet and he just LOVED that he got me all to himself. And I enjoyed the heck out of it too! It was so special just being with him!

We kept up with it for quite a while and eventually it just kind of phased out. I honestly don't remember exactly why, but it could be because they got older and it was just a little easier to take one aside since they were all a little more self-sufficient. So they just didn't need it to be so official at that point. But of course there were still many times that I would have a little time with one or two of them while the others were busy. Some of them I'd cook or bake with, some I'd bike with, some I'd play with...just depended on their age and what they were into at the time.

I'm amazed, now that most of my kids are 14 or over, how much they still want that special time with me. Kids just need that. I realize now that I have adult kids, it will probably never change! I may not see them as often, but we will always value that time. Honestly, it has surprised me! I guess when your kids are little you just think how short the time is and how when they turn 18 they'll be adults and they won't need you anymore! And of course, they do get independent. But they still want to hang out and sometimes need advice. And I've

realized that it's still important to make a point to spend special time with them. Honestly, I've been amazed that often they're the ones that schedule it now!

Here's some things the kids and I do now that they're older. Daniel (21) and I like to go out to eat or watch movies together. Buckley (19) and I go out for coffee often and talk about life. Riley (18) and Genevieve (16) both like to go shopping with me and just hang out in their room and talk.

With Joe (14), we listen to music together and talk when we're on our way to one of his activities. Sometimes we watch funny videos together too. Mack (10) cooks with me, loves playing board games, and shoots baskets with me. Of course, Dad has his things he does with them, but those are some of the things I like to do with them.

So, if you're feeling like one or more of your kiddos needs some special time, do what you can to make it happen. Find something they like to do or let them pick. It will mean a lot to them. Even if you are a mom that's in a position where you feel like life is weighing on you so hard it's all you can do just to put food on the table or drop half dead into bed at night, don't despair. Your kids know you love them. Even a quick prayer for them before school or a heart to heart on the way to practice is awesome. Don't sweat it. It doesn't have to be loads of time to make it special.

Chapter 10 Let's Have Some Fun!

Being a kid is mostly moving around to whatever room of the house your mom is hiding from you in while wrestling and begging for snacks. -PerfectionPending, Redtricycle.com

When one of my girls was really little, probably about 4, she would come up to me, tug on my shirt, and say, "Mommy! Mommy! Let's pretend your the mom and I'm the little girl!" Well, I was an expert at that game! So I always said "Ok! Let's Play!"

One thing about kids, whether they are little or big, they like to have fun! I knew a family who lost a child and one thing they said was, "Say yes more often." Meaning, when your kiddo asks you to do something fun with them, say yes as often as you can.

One thing I love about my friend Lisa is that she is SO great about having fun with her kids (and mine too!) Sometimes we go stay at their house (they live 4 hours away) and she will never hesitate to play games with the kids. It doesn't matter whether it's cards, hide and seek, wiffle ball, nerf or matchbox cars. She's never one to think, "I'm an adult, I don't do that." No way! She always likes to have fun, but even more, she enjoys being with her kids in a playful way.

I enjoy that too, but I will say for most of the time we've had kids we haven't had tons of money floating around, so we've had to get a bit creative! But thankfully there's plenty of fun to be

had without too much money. So don't let that discourage you. Here is a list of some fun things my kids and I have done together. Hopefully this will inspire you with some ideas to get out and have some fun today! There's something here for all ages! (For more ideas follow Emaginemom on social media or visit my website at Emaginemom.com.)

Babies

1. Peekaboo
2. Lap songs (you put them on your lap and bump them around while you sing the song. Google "lap songs for babies".
3. Lay them on the floor and wave a sheet or blanket up and down over them. My kids LOVED this. Alternatively, you can put them in your bed while you make it and keep moving them up a layer as you add the sheets and blankets. They also LOVE this.
4. Take them outside! Haven't met a baby yet that doesn't like going outside.
5. Use a baby backpack or front carrier. Can be used anywhere and provides endless amounts of interesting things to look at, even if you're just doing chores around the house.
6. Put them in the kitchen sink. Again, haven't met a baby yet that didn't like this once they are old enough to sit up and grab things (newborns getting bathed are a different story! Some like it, some don't.) Fill the sink with soapy water and toys or scoops. You can even do dishes on one side with the baby in the other side! Toddlers love this too and may even help you with the dishes!
7. Play ball. Roll it back and forth. Adding in some kind of noises always makes them giggle, like saying "Boink!" when it hits their leg.
8. Make them "fly" by laying on your back and putting them on your feet while you hold their hands. SO fun!
9. Put little items in an empty Kleenex box and let them pull them out and put them in.
10. Cut a slit in the top of an empty oatmeal box and let them put large poker chips in it (or I used to save the ends off frozen orange juice containers. Those work well too. Anything flat and round and large enough not to choke on.)
11. Read a texture book
12. Put food coloring or those colored fizzy balls in their bath.
13. Feed them pudding and let them play with it on their high chair tray.
14. Dance. Babies LOVE music!
15. Tissue paper...they love the way it wrinkles.
16. Boxes, all sizes to climb in. Or wrap them up. They love to pull the wrapping paper off.
17. Rattle socks (available in lots of stores!) They love to shake their feet and hear the noises.
18. Bubbles!
19. Hide toys under a blanket and then say "Ta da!" as you reveal them. Repeat. This is fascinating!

Toddlers and Little Kids

1. Let them help you with the dishes. Get a chair for them to stand on, put a towel under their chair, on their chair, and by the sink for easy clean up!
2. Let them help you bake. Let them play with the dough or use cookie cutters to make shapes.
3. Get out the baby pool or just a big flat rubbermaid box with water in it and toys.
4. Body flip: hold their hands, let them walk up your body, and flip them over. Just beware, once you get this started they'll want to do this one all the time!
5. Get a big flat rubbermaid box or cardboard box and fill it with cornmeal (or rice, beans, or sand). Add toys, matchbox cars, scoops, muffin pans, etc.
6. Get a big blanket or sheet, set it on the deck, and put out playdo and playdo toys or plastic knives, cookie cutters, toothpicks, tubes to roll the playdo, etc.
7. Find a great patch of dirt and get out the matchbox cars. Create roads, parking spots, etc. Choose a lump of grass as your house or designate a bucket as your supermarket. Play town!
8. Get the chalk out and create a town on the driveway for your matchbox cars. Make roads, a police station, school, playground, gas station, etc.
9. Get chalk and make roads for your riding toys. Have someone be the police officer and give people tickets for speeding or running red lights! (That is really fun!)
10. Get the chalk out and trace each other, or draw along the sidewalk.
11. Get a kite and fly it. Older kids like this too.
12. Play in the sprinkler.
13. Make a sprinkler out of a pool noodle. Just poke holes in it and attach it to the hose with some duct tape.
14. Give them a little gardening shovel and let them dig in the garden.
15. Plant seeds or small plants/flowers together.
16. Go to the park.
17. Play tag.
18. Go swimming (ALL ages like this!)
19. Swing
 - a. when you push them, each time make an animal noise. This gets a great laugh.
 - b. Or let them yell out which animal to be and then sometimes make the wrong noise. Also funny!
 - c. Do an underdog! (run under the swing when you push it.)
 - d. Stand in front of them while they are swinging and pretend to get hit and fall over when they "kick" you with their legs.
 - e. Twist the swing so that it spins.
20. Have a tea party with real tea and sugar. SO cool! You will be mom of the year.
21. Get the dress up clothes out. This is usually enough to get their imaginations soaring!

Older Kids/Tweens/Teens

1. Have a dance party.
2. Have a Nerf gun war.

3. Make homemade pizza.
4. Bake cookies.
5. Hide and Seek. Variations: Hide and seek in the dark, Hide and seek infection (once you find someone they help you look for the other people until everyone is looking for the last person), Sardines (One person hides and everyone looks. When you find them, you hide with them until the last person is left.)
6. Dodgeball (we've used rolled up socks for this or those super rubbery little balls you get from the dollar store.)
7. Paint, or draw from a Guide on Youtube or the internet.
8. Make a Rube Goldberg machine (this is an awesome project! If you've ever watched Tom and Jerry, where Tom makes these elaborate traps to catch Jerry, that is a Rube Goldberg machine.) This one takes some time, so either set aside a day or work on it bit by bit.
9. Play legos.
10. Go out for coffee (for littler kids, get them something without the coffee! But tweens and teens love this.)
11. Go out for ice cream.
12. Go to a skate park. Younger kids can take scooters. Tweens/teens can do skateboards, scooters, or bmx sized bikes (borrow your little brothers if you don't have one!)
13. Play pickleball. There are courts popping up all over. It's MUCH easier than tennis and you can pick up a set of rackets for \$20 on Amazon. SO fun!
14. Go biking or mountain biking.
15. Read aloud from the bible or a chapter book.
16. Play board games. Our favorites are Monopoly Deal (this is a card game), Code Names, Ticket to Ride, Connect Four, and Settlers of Catan.
17. Go clothes shopping (girls like this best!)
18. Throw coins all over the floor in the basement. Have the kids start at the top of the stairs and race each other (or race you, if you only have one kid) to see who can run up and down the stairs grabbing one coin each time and putting it in a jar at the top of the stairs. Whoever gets the most money wins and gets to keep the pot. (I used this for my 16 year old's birthday and used dollar bills, with a couple twenties mixed in!)
19. Scavenger hunt (I like to go up and down the street and make a list of objects. I make a copy and give it to each team and they have to find and take pictures of each object and complete the list fastest to win. For those too young for a phone their team borrows mine.)

Hope this list inspired you! Don't forget to take a break and have some fun!

Chapter 11 Media Madness

Neighbor: Hi, Tommy. Why are you setting up your xbox in the front yard?

Tommy: Mom told me to go play outside.

-Internet Meme

Ah yes, media, the bane of every parent who has had children since the explosion of quality entertainment like the unboxing video, the pancake challenge video, and hours and hours of watching other people play video games.

In the beginning, God created Saturday morning cartoons and the Cosby Show. At least, that is what I had growing up. And that was it. If you wanted to be entertained you had to go outside and find a REAL PERSON to play with. Weird.

My brother in law pointed out that we were kids we got grounded to the house. Now kids get grounded to the outside!

When my husband and I got married we had a little black and white TV that my husband would set on his legs while he relaxed in the recliner. Yes, there was color TV then (I'm not THAT old!) but we didn't have one.

Now lest you think we were off the grid, don't let the little TV fool you; we had HIS and HERS computers in our little one bedroom apartment instead of a table. (Priorities!) And we spent many a night playing Age of Empires together until the wee hours of the morning. (You know when you can't feel the thumb on your right hand anymore from using the mouse too long that you've been playing too many video games!

One day Ron was sprawled back in the recliner with the little black and white TV propped on his legs watching a football game. He got so mad at the sports team he was watching that he threw the TV out the window! (A precursor of things to come!)

At some point in the future we got a small color TV which we had when the first kids were born. I remember the ONLY way I could get a break with Daniel when he was a baby was to put on "Baby Mozart"...a video that showed different interesting moving objects while playing Mozart in the background.

When they got toddler age they liked "Barney" the purple dinosaur. Aw yes, Barney, so many memes so little time! But I digress...

We were thinking about getting rid of the TV. The kids mostly played anyway, and it was just a distraction. Then one day, Ron was watching the Matrix on the TV and the kids were driving Little Tikes tractors through the house making a LOT of noise. This was not the first time of course, and mostly Ron didn't mind at all, but when he was trying to watch something, it was super annoying.

He finally blew his top, ripped the plug out of the wall and threw the TV over the deck. The kids were smart enough to be horrified that they weren't going to see Barney again any time soon! But, as little kids do, they got over it quickly.

And lest you think my husband is just mad all the time...actually he's pretty laid back when it comes to kids running around the house. Obviously he loves kids, as we had 6. And I remind him when they're driving us crazy that it was HIS idea to have them! Watching TV with noise in the background just happens to be one of his pet peeves. Well, problem solved!

So, we didn't have a TV when the older kids were little.

I remember one day this cable sales guy came to my door trying to sell me a cable subscription. He got about half way through his spiel when I headed him off with, "We don't have a TV." He just stopped in mid-sentence and looked at me like I was an alien species.

"You don't have a TV?"

"No."

"You mean, you don't actually own a TV?"

"That's right."

"Are you saying you don't have a TV in any room of your house?"

"Yes."

I was about to get a chalkboard out and draw pictures. How many times did I have to say, "Look, stupid! We don't have a TV!"

He just turned around towards his truck in kind of a daze, muttering to himself like he still didn't believe what he had just witnessed!

Yah, it was a little harder being a mom not having a TV to plop the kids in front of when I wanted some peace and quiet. But actually, for the most part we didn't miss it. Between all the siblings and the neighbor kids they kept each other pretty well occupied.

And not having media was all worth it when one day my 4th child, Genevieve, who was about 5 years old at the time, heard a kid talking about a toy they had seen on a commercial. She turned to me and asked, "Mommy, what's a commercial?" You should have seen me beam with pride!

Oh how the mighty have fallen.

We eventually got a TV. And then another TV. And then computers. And of course, the kids got older and wanted phones. So in high school they got phones.

And gaming got really big, and YouTube became a thing, and smartphones became common as dirt. Let's just say, raising our first kids versus raising our last kids has been crazy different. And besides that, I may or may not have gotten two decades older. Which means I may or may not have gotten two decades more tired, less creative, and more easily distracted!

And boy do I get to hear about it from my older kids. "You would NEVER have let us watch that!" "You would NEVER have let us watch TV that long." "Do you REALIZE how long your child has been on the computer?"

There's a lady who is a popular marketer and homeschools her 7 kids. I follow her videos sometimes and one day she posted that she had a great tip for keeping your kids occupied when you worked. I couldn't wait to see her secret!

Turns out she had a room that had a computer for EVERY kid. The video panned around showing her kids on their computers while she smiled happily.

Uhhhhh...ya. We all let our kids on media too much, but you don't BRAG about it! That's mom suicide! Are you just BEGGING for every mom you know to tell you what a terrible parent you are? That ranks right up there with telling your kids where the chocolate donuts are hidden. They all know you have them, but you don't go BLABBING about their location!

I used to think maybe if we moved to the middle of nowhere it would be better for our kids. There would be no TV's, no computers, no phones...just wide open prairies, sunshine, and hard work. We could be like Laura Ingalls Wilder and our children could help us build a house by hand, raise chickens, and tame wild horses.

This was my no-media fantasy until one day when I had a video call with my friend Dana. She and her husband and 3 kids had moved to Belize several years before to be missionaries and we were catching up. Dana's one of those amazing women that makes Satan say, "Oh crap, she's up." when her feet hit the floor in the morning. If she sets her mind to something, you better watch out.

And at that time, she was living in the jungle near a few towns in Belize, where she and her husband and kids had started building a camp for kids with disabilities. They also had a farm.

While she was touring me around on the video call she showed me one of the kid's rooms. And there, in her house, in the middle of NOWHERE, in the JUNGLE, huddled in a corner of the bed around an ipad were her 3 kids, trying to play video games in the 2 hours a day that they were able to connect to the internet.

And there you have it, folks. If this mama in the middle of the jungle is trying to figure out how to handle the media, then ain't no one safe!

Let's just say, we're all dealing with it. That's just the reality. So here's some tips on setting boundaries for your kids that either I've used or other moms I know have used:

Use a parental control app. These things are AWESOME! Basically you can control all your kids' devices from your phone. So even if you're away from your kids you can set and change what they have access to. You can set schedules, turn the internet on and off, see their locations, get alerts when something potentially harmful comes up in their texts or apps, turn apps on and off, etc. They usually cost a subscription fee each month, but well worth the investment!

Make them earn media time by reading, doing chores, doing homework, exercising, exhibiting good behavior, etc.

Set a specific schedule for the weekdays and weekends.

Create "technology free zones" in your house, such as "no devices in your bedroom".

Put a basket by the door and have them deposit their phone in it when they come in the house so that it is only used when they're away.

Have specific days or times that are "media free" for the kids or for the whole family.

Set a good example by not consuming it all the time yourself.

Spend time in activities that don't involve media such as team sports, gymnastics, chess club, hiking, etc.

Only allow screens when the weather is bad or they're sick.

Set up passwords so they can't get on devices without your permission.

If you need to, hide the remotes or put them in a lock box during non-media time.

Turn off the internet during non-media time.

Keep the conversation about what they're watching open so you can discuss any issues that may arise.

Check texts or turn off certain apps on their phone or computer.

Set permissions on their phone so they can't download new apps without your password.

Start them out with a flip phone.

Replace media habits with other habits, such as having them read at night instead of watching a cartoon.

Don't allow them to have a phone or device until they are a certain age.

Have no media during the week but a binge day on the weekend.

Ask them why they are getting on it so that they have to justify if it's just to veg out or if they are using it to do something productive like make a movie, learn a dance, or figure out how to do a craft.

Sometimes you have to change your approach or try something different, but it IS important to be consistent. And believe me, this is something I struggle a LOT with. But I'm working on it!

And I have to remind myself that as much as they complain about it, kids love consistency too. It makes them feel secure. So don't give up! Find a plan that works and go for it!

Chapter 12 When Child Protective Services Comes to Your Door

My job isn't to judge the social worker's character. My job is to protect my kids. -me

Unfortunately this is one chapter in the book that's definitely not humorous. But I wanted you to hear this story so that hopefully it might help you if this ever happens to you. I hope it doesn't! But with the tide of our culture turning, I'm afraid it might happen more often.

One day in the fall my husband and I were both gone. I was about an hour away at a gymnastics meet with my daughter, and my husband was also gone and not close by. The other kids were at home and my dad and oldest son (who at the time was in high school) were watching them.

I got a frantic call that my youngest son, Mack, had hurt himself on the neighbor's trampoline. He was screaming bloody murder on the couch while my oldest son and dad assessed the situation. (They had carried him home.) They couldn't tell if anything was broken. He definitely hurt his knee because he wouldn't let anyone touch it. It hurt really bad. What did they want me to have them do?

First of all, I was not there. So it was really hard for me to assess what exactly was going on, and it would be at least an hour before I got home, if I left right away. Of course, it was also a weekend, which made it harder to see a doctor. On top of that, I was dealing with two polar opposite personalities...my oldest son, who is very capable but always thinks everything is fine even if it's not, because he's just overly confident, along with my dad who doesn't get upset by too much, and then on the opposite end, my youngest son who, at that age, was a total drama king, and would milk any injury or slight as much as possible. And if that wasn't confusing enough, I had just sprained my knee a few weeks before and it hurt like HECK and I was on crutches for a couple weeks. So, given the nature of the injury, and how it hurt, and that I wasn't there, I decided they should just ice it, comfort him, let him watch TV and prop it up on the couch, and I would be home as soon as possible.

By the time I got home he wasn't crying anymore. He couldn't walk on it because it hurt, but there was nothing outwardly indicating it was broken. Based on his symptoms and my recent symptoms, I thought he had probably sprained it. And if that was the case, there really wasn't anything a doctor could do for it anyway, so I just treated it at home.

At that time Mack was about 5 years old. We didn't have any crutches that small, but that wasn't about to stop him if he could help it! It wasn't a few days before he was scooting around the house awkwardly on all 4's (one knee up.) And then we figured out, he could ride a big

wheel just fine, so we let him ride that around the house. It was close to Halloween, so I took him trick or treating in the wagon.

But after a week and a half, even though he was better, he still wasn't walking, so my husband said we really should have it looked at. So we took him to our sports medicine doctor. He didn't think it was broken, but he sent us to have it x-rayed just in case. And 2 days later, the results were...it was broken. Ugh! I really felt like mom of the year!

The doctor recommended a local group that would set the cast, but we couldn't get into them right away, so they sent us to the children's hospital in our city because you could go to a walk in clinic there that specialized in broken bones.

I took the xrays with me and took Mack and we got in the next day. The doctor explained to me that he had a fracture and it was near the knee. She said if I had brought him in right away she would have done surgery and put a metal pin in it, that's how serious it was.

Can I just interject and say, I was already feeling really crummy about the fact that it was broken, and this made me feel worse. So when she next asked me, "Why didn't you bring him in sooner?" I just really didn't know what to say. I really didn't say much. I just felt so bad.

She said, since it was already setting itself, she couldn't do surgery anymore. They would just have to set it and hope it healed fine.

So she left and I was sitting there waiting with Mack for a while, waiting for the nurse, when another lady came in the room. She said she was from DFS (Division of Family Services...that's our state's version of Child Protective Services) and could she ask me some questions?

Uh.....huh?? What in the heck was going on? Why was there a person from DFS in the doctor's office and why were they asking me questions?? Wow, talk about getting hit broadside! What was I suppose to do? Should I answer her questions? I was always taught NOT to answer questions from DFS. So, I answered her question about how many children we had and their ages (big mistake??) and after that I pretty much stopped. I started asking her, "Why am I being questioned?" She didn't really answer my questions either. But she said another DFS worker would come by my house later today. Great! Then she left me in the room.

So here I was, with a little boy with a broken leg, trying to comfort him and act like everything was fine because he was starting to get freaked out and seriously, it was all I could do to hold it together.

The nurse came in. She told me to go to another floor to have his leg set. Mack didn't even want to get in the wheelchair, but I talked him into it. I wheeled him down to the right place, the whole time about to freak out myself, trying to look like everything was fine. I still had to get

him taken care of, that was my first priority, and I felt like I was doing it in enemy territory. I had to play the part and be “one of them” until I got out of that hospital.

And then, as we were waiting for his turn, he started to panic. He didn't understand what was going to happen with his leg, or what it would be like to get this cast. He was crying, and I was trying to reassure him. A nurse came over and talked to him. I didn't know whether I wanted to thank her or knock her out of the way, race him out of the hospital, and take him someplace that felt safe! But of course I didn't. We finally convinced him it would be fine.

I wheeled him into the room where they set his cast. The guy was super nice. He helped Mack through the whole thing and I sat and made small talk. It was such a SURREAL experience. Like I was stuck in someone else's body, making small talk and laughing and making Mack feel secure while my mind was exploding with anxiety worrying about whether my kids were going to get taken away because I didn't know my son's leg was broken! I felt like throwing up.

We finally got done and I got Mack in the van and headed home. I called my husband. He freaked out. I was freaking out. He met me at the house.

We hadn't talked about it for more than 30 minutes when the doorbell rang. It was a guy from DFS. We opened the door.

He explained who he was. He said they had to do a check within 24 hours just to make sure the kids weren't in any situation that was unsafe. We told him we didn't feel comfortable letting him into the house. (Constitution 101, government agents aren't allowed into your house without a warrant.)

At that time we were homeschooling 4 of our kids and 2 were in public high school. He could see the kids behind us in the living room, watching TV. So he said, “I don't need to come in, I can see that the kids seem fine. But I need to see all of them.” We explained that the other 2 were in school. He said he would need to see them at some point.

We asked him what would happen next. He said a case was opened and they would get back to us if they needed more information, and that he would need to question the kids at some point. Then he left.

I immediately called HSLDA. This is the Homeschool Legal Defense Association. I knew a lot about them and followed their news and advice for years, but had not ever signed up for membership. If you are a member with them, they will give you legal defense if DFS ever brings a case against you for homeschooling. I signed up and paid right then, praying that they would help us, even though we just became members, and even though it didn't really have to do with homeschooling. They were so gracious and had a lawyer call us within an hour.

He said that they could talk to DFS on our behalf, but if it ever went to court, they could not represent us because it wasn't a homeschooling case. He recommended we find a local family lawyer.

Ron was acquainted with a lawyer that might help us and he called him. He ended up working with us. He told me to put together a detailed letter with everything that had happened with the trampoline and to have that ready for the DFS worker. I not only put all the details down but also phone numbers of neighbors that knew what had happened. Also, the name and number of the sports medicine doctor who had looked at him and taken the x-rays.

At that point it was a waiting game. We were *finally* able to find out that the charge was Medical Neglect. But other than that, we were waiting for the DFS worker to contact us. It was horrible. I've never been one to worry about much of anything, but I started having stomach aches and heart palpitations. I went to homeschool co-op that week and was an emotional mess. I told several moms there who were my friends and they prayed for us. One had been a social worker herself. Weeks went by while we waited.

Finally the DFS caseworker called us. I told him I had written down everything and he wanted me to go over all of it on the phone. I read through everything and was getting to the end when I mentioned that we had taken him to see the sports medicine doctor..."Wait a minute," he said, "you had already taken him to see a doctor before you took him to the children's clinic?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Well, that's all I needed to know." What?? I mean, I was glad the DFS worker felt he had the information he needed, but didn't they know I had been to another doctor? I brought the x-rays with me from the other doctor when I came to the children's hospital! What a mess! The doctor hadn't even looked at where the x-rays had come from or did any kind of checking about my kid before she called in DFS and put us through hell! All she had to do was glance at the x-rays and she would have known we had already seen another doctor and they had referred us to the clinic. On top of that, I got to thinking, it probably ended up being a GOOD thing I didn't bring Mack in right away, because she would have put a pin in his leg that he would have had to deal with for the rest of his life. As it was, he was healing up perfectly fine without it. I wasn't scared anymore, I was mad!

On top of that, they weren't done. The social worker then told my husband that he still wanted to question the kids and that he still had to see the other two that had not been there the day he came.

Now, maybe you are different, be for me and my husband, we did NOT want anyone questioning our kids. It's not because we have anything to hide, it's because it's wrong. The

charge was medical neglect and we proved that the charge was bogus. There was no need to question the other kids. At that point, it's like a witch hunt...what other things can we find out about this family that might show they are in some other way bad parents?

And you might say, "If you're good parents, why are you worried? You don't have anything to hide." But unfortunately, that's not always the way it works. I had heard WAY too many stories of parents whose kids were taken away erroneously by social workers or hospitals who had an agenda. Don't give me wrong, I have several friends who are or were social workers. A lot of them are amazing people. But not all of them. And my job isn't to judge the social worker's character. My job is to protect my kids.

So the lawyer helped us. Can I just say that I've never loved lawyers more than in that moment!! He sent them a letter and that was enough for them to say they wouldn't question the kids that were homeschooled. HOWEVER, they threatened that they would go to the school and question our other two kids because there was nothing we could do about it while they were at public school!! The lawyer stepped in again and they relented and said that if they just layed eyes on the other two, that's all they would need.

So my husband took them down to the DFS office, presented them to the caseworker, who was none too happy to see us, and they left. But we still had to wait several more weeks for them to officially close the case.

One thing the lawyer from HSLDA told me was that as members, if DFS ever came to us again, we should call them right away and they would talk to DFS on our behalf. So if you are a homeschooler, I would ABSOLUTELY recommend you pay the membership and keep the HSLDA card in your wallet. We continued our membership after that until we stopped homeschooling. Now I keep the local lawyer's card in my purse, just in case.

It was one of the worst experiences of my life. I hope you never go through it. If DFS comes to your door, you should handle it however you think best, but just remember, you have options. And you aren't alone!

Unfortunately, parental rights are coming under attack more than ever in the last 20 years, especially in the areas of education, medical choice, and families making decisions for their children with disabilities. Thankfully there are amazing groups working to protect families from overreach of government agencies, schools, hospitals, etc. One I follow regularly is ParentalRights.org. I would urge everyone to look into this group. They have been working for several years to get a new constitutional amendment passed so that parents' rights are protected, while still protecting children who are abused. They have been able to help with several states passing this in their state's constitutions, but they are still working to get this on the federal level. I have to confess, I did not really appreciate the Constitution until I needed it to protect me and my family! It's so important for all parents, no matter what race, religion,

beliefs, political persuasion, etc. to have a constitutional amendment that protects their families.

Now...on to something a little happier!

Chapter 13 Food

Dad walks in and sees mom fainted on the floor.

Dad: "What happened to mom?"

6 Kids: "We don't know. We just said we all liked her dinner and down she went."

-me

Moms are so closely associated with food sometimes I think they should just combine the words...maybe we should be called Foms? Or Moods? Actually, that last one would cover a lot of ground!

Moms actually pump food OUT OF THEIR BODIES for babies! And that's just the beginning! Then they provide the first solid foods, then all the snacks, then all the meals. (Unless they have the glorious blessing of a husband that cooks!). Moms have to think about food all the time from the first little cry. And at first, we are SO diligent about it!

I remember taking copious detailed notes on when my first child ate, how far apart his feedings were, and if he had any solid foods. Thank goodness I had more kids so I didn't have time to micromanage all this anymore!

I remember with my 4th child pouring soda into a sippy cup on a special occasion and my sister saying, "Really, Elaine? Two babies ago you would never have done that!" And boy was she right!

Ya know, you start out with really good intentions! But after a few kids you can't stop the older ones from discovering sugar forever. And once they do, it's all downhill! And when the little ones come along and see what the big kids are getting, there's no way on earth you're going to be able to give the big kids something and not the little kids! You'll have a mutiny on your hands! Hence, for better or for worse, soda in the sippy cup.

I have a love/hate relationship with food. Well, maybe a love relationship with food. OK, actually I LOVE food. I love food WAAAAAY too much. As a general rule, I think about it a lot. I might love it more than my husband....Ok, that's ridiculous! Of course I don't love it more than my husband! Hmmm....except brownies, brownies might be an exception. And maybe Starbuck's mochas...and then there's also Cane's chicken....Did I mention I also love fast food?

I come by this love of food naturally, as my family, including my extended family, loved food. No, I did not come from one of those big Italian or Greek families. Actually it's worse (or better?) I came from a Southern Baptist farming family. Well, my parents weren't farmers but my grandparents were, and they lived right down the road. My cousins and aunts and uncles lived just across the field. So family dinners were liable to pop up about any day of the week. And if even one family was getting together with another, then everyone was invited!

My grandma could cook for an army and no one was going away hungry...green beans and bacon, rolls, fried chicken or pork, corn, mashed potatoes and gravy, and any dessert that happened to be on hand.

And if no one was in the mood to cook, then we all went out to eat. And let me tell you, going out to eat is a rural family's favorite pastime. Where my husband's family liked to drink, mine liked to eat.

When I had a family of my own, they got pretty spoiled because I was home, and I like variety. So there was none of this cereal for breakfast, PB&J for lunch, and the same 5 dinners repeated every week. Did I mention I like variety? We might have waffles or eggs and muffins for breakfast, or maybe biscuits and gravy. Dinners of spaghetti or Chicken Tikka Masala or White Chicken Chili for dinner, and grilled sandwiches or leftovers for lunch. Variety can be a good thing...until you start adding in complications:

Pleasing my husband, who isn't picky but does like healthier fare.

Pleasing my kids, which ended up being 6, so trying to please any of them was a chore, and of course they mostly don't like healthy fare!

Add in that my love for food ruined my digestion, causing me to have to cut way down on gluten, sugar, and dairy.

Then I started working.

I just can't give enough praise to moms who work and then come home and cook. A drive thru sounds good on a normal day, but when you're dead tired at 5 o'clock and all you want to do is collapse on the couch and binge watch Vampire Diaries, a drive thru looks like the gates of heaven with angels singing and heavenly lights beaming down on the order window!

Also, the kids started going to school, and who has time to make breakfast at 6:30 in the morning? And of course, it's easier to let them make their own lunch. I DO remember to ask them AT LEAST once a week if they threw a fruit in with their sandwich and goldfish!

So basically now it's, "I hope the kids found something to eat for breakfast and lunch! Oh, and actually, they may have to scrounge dinner as well!"

I find myself buying more and more convenience food. There are certain members of my household, who shall remain nameless, who are wonderfully health conscious. Which is awesome! Except when they train their attention towards me! And remind me that I need to feed the younger kids better. (My youngest are now 14 and 10.) They like to point out things like, "The 14 year old has been eating taquitos for 5 days straight for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and maybe I should stop buying them!" Or "The 10 year old has gotten sick several times this year and it's probably because I'm not feeding him right!" (Of course it has NOTHING to do with the fact that he's been homeschooled his whole life up until last year, so he was probably not exposed to much until now!)

I think next time I will remind them that, in point of fact, I am the healthiest person in this house. I hardly EVER get sick. And I am certain that is due to the fact that I was a formula fed baby, and that I grew up in the 80's when dinner consisted of tuna casserole, hamburger helper, or a jar of spaghetti sauce and a box of noodles. In point of fact, I have an IRON stomach. I NEVER get the stomach flu, and I can eat a McDonald's cheeseburger and then go straight to soccer, play for an hour, and feel like a million bucks. So there! HA! All that "unhealthy" food just made my immune system rise to the challenge at an early age. Have you ever thought maybe all this whole grain and organic crap might actually be the death of us???!!!

And that brings me to another question, what is "healthy"? Organic? Whole grain? Gluten free? Extra pasteurized? Raw? Sugar free? Dairy free? Fat free? Carb free? This is a question that has kept me up at night trying to figure out what is the "right" thing to feed my tribe.

Well, you may have a very strong opinion on this. For me, several chiropractors and naturopaths later, I've settled on less gluten and less sugar and more veggies and fruit and call it good. I seriously dislike cooking something separate for myself and the rest of the family. So this is my compromise that we can all live with.

One thing about cooking for my family, there's great job security! The downside is, I can never get fired! But, for better or worse, I still have to feed my family, and most likely (unless you are one of those EXTREMELY lucky women who has a husband who cooks), you do too. So here are my best tips after 25 years of cooking:

- Keep a master list of meals you like to serve on your phone, computer, or on paper....wherever is most convenient. Add to it as you find meals you like. This way you have an easy reference when you need ideas. (If you want to be more detailed, list the ingredients under each meal.)
- If you really get stumped on what to prepare for meals, assign each member of the household a day of the week and let them pick the meal for that day. This takes the pressure off you to figure out all the meals and lets everyone have a day that includes something they like.

- Alternatively, assign a meat for each day: Chicken Mondays, Pork Tuesdays, Beef Wednesdays, Shrimp Thursdays, Veggie Friday, and leave the weekend for leftovers.
- Keep a grocery list handy so you can add things when you think of them. I like to use my phone because I always have it with me, but a list on the fridge is good as well.
- Pick one day a week to be your shopping day.
- Keep a master list of items you buy frequently on your phone, computer, or paper. Or if you shop online you can do it there. Put it in the order of the store you frequent.
- On shopping day do an inventory of what's in the house and using your master list, mark anything you need and add to the end whatever special items aren't on the list.
- Keep a Pinterest board of meals you want to make.
- Use a gas grill as often as you can. It's super easy to use and even easier to clean up. Plus it tastes great! Mine is right outside the kitchen door on our deck and I use it at least once a week.

Chapter 14 When Moms Get Sick

Being sick as a mom gives you a glimpse into how your family would survive without you. Listen to me, they will not make it. -@myquestionablelife on Instagram

This is my best advice for moms: Don't Get Sick! That's it. That's my only advice. When my whole house was sick and I was perfectly fine my kids would say, "How come you never get sick, mom?" And I would answer, "I don't have time for that crap!" Because you know who takes care of mom when she's sick? No one. That's right. She takes care of everyone else. If you are one of those lucky women who has a husband who takes care of you when you're sick, you need to COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS!!!

One of the rare times I got sick was this year. And boy was I sick. But now my kids are older and they can DO THINGS FOR ME! I literally laid on the couch in the same position for a week while the kids brought me drinks and food and did all the chores. I think they were about to bring chalk over and outline my body because I literally didn't move! And might I say, it was glorious! The first time in 20 years that I got to lay around and binge watch movies while everyone else did my jobs. Awesome!

So don't get sick! Unless your kids are 21, 19, 18, 16, 13, and 9. Then you can lay around on the couch for a week and pretend you're on vacation! I give you my permission!

Chapter 15 Homeschooling, Private School, Public School

Friend: "Why are you talking to yourself?"

Homeschool Mom: "I'm having a parent/teacher conference." -internet meme

So, we've done homeschooling, private school, and public school. The last two years I had four still at home, two in public high school and two in a private Christian school. The two years before that I had four homeschooling and two in public high school. I also had a couple

that took classes at the private school while they were homeschooled. And before that, all 6 were homeschooled.

Let's just say, we've tried it all! Now, I know some people have one way they like to do things, and that's fine. And, of course, what you choose often comes down to how much money is in your wallet! But, I'm just going to assume, for the sake of this discussion, that all options are on the table.

So you're not going to find it surprising that my advice is to do what's best for your kiddos and your family. And it's TOTALLY fine to do different things for different kids. Also, something I really got tripped up about, which I hope you don't, is the idea that once you choose, you're locked into it forever (or at least a year). And that's just not true. You can change curriculums, you can change schools, you can go from homeschooling to school or vice versa. If something's not working, and you have the power to change it, do it!

I'm going to give you my two cents about what I liked and disliked about the three options. Hopefully this will give you some insight into what would work best for your kiddo or your family.

Also remember, some of these can be mixed together. When we were homeschooling we took classes at homeschool co-op, as well as private school. I know other families who homeschooled half day and did public school or private school half day, or took classes at the public or private school a couple times a week. It depends on the state you are in and the public school in your area, so check around. There's also private schools and homeschool co-ops that are a hybrid. They meet 3 times a week in class and then families homeschool on the other 2 days.

I spent 15 years homeschooling, so that's the one I know the best.

Here's the things I loved about homeschooling:

- I got to spend every day with my kids.
- I got to tailor the curriculum to their learning style. And if something wasn't working, I could throw it out and try something else.
- We got to have a lot of fun playing PE games together. Several days a week we would go outside and play games: tag, dodgeball, gladiator, bike races, obstacle courses, etc.
- My kids got to spend every day with each other.
- I got to pick what we learned about. Instead of general science we might spend a whole year just studying Galileo and astronomy. We might even spend a few weeks learning and performing a play. We got to learn about some really cool stuff like world cultures and geography, including making food from different countries. And I could pick literature for the older kids to read that went along with it, like books of people from all over the world that had encounters with God or were missionaries.

- Real life counted towards school, like going to gymnastics could be a PE credit or reading National Geographic counted toward science.
- I had time to read aloud to them from the bible several days a week.
- I also had time to read aloud to them from fiction books and historical fiction books, as well as history and science.
- We got to stay up late and get up late.
- I had time to make a big breakfast almost every morning. The kids would filter in while I was cooking and watch a cartoon. Then we would eat and read the bible and another book. Nice and leisurely.
- No homework (most of the time, anyway!)
- We could wear our pj's all day and the kids had the whole house to pick a spot to do homework.
- We could go on as many field trips as we wanted. We could tailor the field trips to what we were studying too.
- We could drop everything if needed to take advantage of an opportunity such as a field trip or going to do something with friends. Or we could shift our schedule around. We could also shift our schedule around to help out a family member or friend.
- We got to go to homeschool co-op once a week. Awesome place to see friends and do a lot of project and group learning such as science labs, drama, choir, Taekwondo, etc.
- There was always an older kid to keep a younger kid busy if I needed to concentrate on helping a specific child.
- My kids were used to being around a lot of different ages of kids, plus used to being around a lot of different adults, so it taught them how to interact with lots of different ages.
- They avoided a LOT of drama not being at school.
- All my kids graduated at the head of their class!

Things I didn't like about homeschooling

- It's hard being their mom and their teacher. You don't ever get to be mad at their teacher, since it's you, and they get tired of being talked to about school work all the time instead of just being their mom.
- If you have more than one and they're basically close in age, you end up teaching some subjects like Spanish, history, or science to everyone at the same time. This is actually pretty fun, but the downside is you still end up "teaching to the middle" as they do in school, since you have more than one age and ability.
- You have to work harder to find opportunities for them to make friends their own age.
- You're the only teacher, so they don't get a variety of personalities or perspectives like they do in school.
- When you're tired, depressed or unmotivated their school work is generally affected.

- There's no one to tell you if you're doing a good job or not. You're always second guessing yourself, wondering if you're doing the right thing. (When you get more experienced at it, this feeling sometimes does get less, though, which is good.)
- You're the teacher, administrator, and principle (well, sometimes dad helps with that!) So if they aren't cooperating it's on you to make them get their work done. And boy, have I dealt with a lot of whiny kids! Put a piece of paper in front of a ten year old boy and tell him to write something and you'd think you'd asked him to cut off his own arm! He'd rather walk on glass than write a single syllable!!
- Which brings me to, your kids are always worse for you than they are for a teacher and they know EXACTLY how to push your buttons and wear you down! There were whole subjects (not essential ones, but whole subjects none-the-less) that got pushed overboard because, by 3 o'clock, we were ALL done. I remember having what I called the public school daydream, "If I went up to the school and enrolled them RIGHT NOW I could have them starting tomorrow morning!"
- If you have several kids, you often feel like there's always one or the other that's not getting all the school help they need. (I'm sure public and private school teachers feel this way too!)
- It's easy to slack since there's not as much accountability. (Although I will say most moms I know feel an inner pressure to make sure their kids succeed.)
- You have to work harder to find opportunities for your high schooler, such as dances, internships, clubs, sports, social events, etc.
- Your kids are not exposed to as many different world views, relationship problems, worldly ideas. Although this is great in some ways, it's detrimental in others and doesn't give you as much opportunity to talk about these things before they leave home.

Things I Like about Private Christian School (Ok, these may be a little specific, because I'm sure it depends on the school. But here's my experience.)

- It's smaller than public school so they can cater more to each child.
- Because it's small they get to know each child really well.
- I'm not the teacher, so I get to just be the mom. So when they come home and have a bad day or a problem they need to talk through, I can just help them without worrying about the educating part.
- I can partner with the teacher to help my child learn, and since my kiddo wants to please the teacher more than they want to please me (or at least they don't want to look bad in front of their friends) it's easier to motivate them to get their work done.
- Similar to above, my kiddo is responsible to someone else, which is nice and takes pressure off me.
- I get to be mad at the teacher sometimes! I get to be the GOOD guy and empathize with my kid's perspective. (Don't worry, teachers! I do teach them to be respectful and get the work done, in spite of the disagreements!)

- They have more exposure to other personalities, and sometimes problems, and this gives us the opportunity to talk them through or for them to learn to deal with them.
- They share a lot of truth with the kids as well as a ton of grace, and are always teaching with Jesus in mind.
- They get to meet and be with friends in their age group every day.
- There are opportunities to be on a sports team through the school (although they don't offer as many as a bigger school would.)
- They have chapel every week, religion class, and also memorize the bible.
- They are learning to think about the world from a biblical perspective.
- If there are behavior problems, we can partner with the administration to deal with them.
- Sometimes when my child is struggling, it's nice for them to have another trusted adult to talk with and honestly, especially as kids get older, sometimes they will listen to another adult more than they will listen to you.
- There are different teachers with different personalities and teaching styles.
- They do some fun things I never would have thought of, or wouldn't be able to do homeschooling. For example, they did a huge all-school dance to this cool Jewish song and videoed it using a drone camera looking down and swooping in and out of the dancers.

What I like about Public High School (OK, so this is where there's a gap... I never had any in public elementary school. But many of the things I like about private school would apply, see above.)

- There are more opportunities for sports, clubs, dances, theater, etc.
- If you get involved with one of the items listed above, it's a great way to make friends and also try new things to give you an idea of what you like or what you'd like to do for a living.
- There are more varieties of classes. Things like broadcasting, debate, business, intro to engineering, etc.
- There is exposure to many different world views while they are still at home and you can talk about it together.
- You have the chance in classes to discuss your differing opinions too, such as in socratic seminars, debates, or class discussion.
- You can get college credit while in high school.
- You can meet new friends.
- There are opportunities such as a program they have where you go off campus to class at a business or hospital.
- You can compete at higher levels in sports, band, choir, debate, etc.
- The school puts your transcript together and helps you plan your classes (when I graduated my second son from homeschool, I had to do all this.)

Things I don't like about public and private school

- They sometimes get bullied.
- They get exposed to things you wish they weren't. Definitely more drama and more temptation.
- They spend all their day with people their own age, which, when you think about life in general, is not reality. When you get older you RARELY spend time with people your own age. It's good to know how to deal with different ages and also not to be pressured with the artificial environment that is created when you put a bunch of kids together all day every day that are the same age.
- I don't have control over what they're taught.
- I don't see them very much.
- I don't know what's going on at school unless they or the school tells me.
- We have to follow the school schedule.
- Our mornings are rushed.
- They have homework. (OK, I don't mind this so much for the older kids, as I think they should have homework. But for the younger kids, dealing with homework at night is no fun.)
- I have to make more of a point to spend time with them.
- They teach you to follow the status quo.

So there you go, that's my two cents. I hope it gives you some insight as you travel this educational journey!

Chapter 15 Discipline

I see your toddler tantrum and raise you a teenager that just got their phone taken away. -internet meme

I don't know what this is...my kids are perfect. They do everything I say exactly when I say it. Oh....sorry....I was dreaming for a minute there.

I have been blessed with 6 very strong-willed children. I blame it ALL on my husband! I was a SAINT when I was a kid. Ok, maybe not a saint exactly. I did get spanked a couple times when I was little, and I may or may not have been a bully in elementary school, but after that, I swear I was a saint!

And that's exactly how my kids have been. They either get you coming or going; either they were hard toddlers and easy teenagers, or easy toddlers and hard teenagers. I NEVER had a kid that would go in time out willingly. You know how some parents tell their child to go sit on the bottom step for 2 minutes, or go to their room for 10 minutes, or stand in the corner for as many minutes as their age. My kids were WAY too smart for that. They weren't going into time out unless you could catch them first! And once you caught them, it was like fighting a tiger, or a slick pig. Only this one had claws and teeth! So, in order to avoid being mamed, you

had to literally throw them onto their bed in their room and RUN to get the door shut before they could get to you. Then you had to sit in front of the door while they tried to kick it down, until they finally ran out of steam. Which could be anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour! Let's just say, our doors took such a beating, Dad had to fix them several times! Oh, there was none of this "go sit in the corner" crap. If they were getting in trouble, YOU were GETTING trouble!

And if they weren't like that as toddlers, then you got the bull AND the horns as adolescents or teenagers, which is INFINITELY harder! Having a 12 year old throw a tantrum and refuse to get out of the car for 2 hours or a 16 year old in your face telling you how stupid you are and following you around the house screaming at you is enough to make you throw a kid off the deck! Well, we never did that, but we have dragged a few out of the house hoping they would run away and join the circus for a while and maybe come back a little more grateful! Well, no one has joined the circus yet, and no one has gotten thrown off the deck. But in the heat of the moment with a kid, it's SO hard!

The best advice I've gotten with older kids is to walk away. They think you are being weak, but the truth is, you've got to keep your temper in check. So walking away is often the mature thing to do. You can always exact punishment later after you're calmed down. I became best friends with the AT&T guy. Shutting off a phone is such a great way to get a teenager's attention!

With toddlers and little kids, it's easier because you can pick them up and move them to a crib or time out room. But harder because you can't walk away. You have to deal with it. Sometimes getting them into a safe place where they can bawl it out is all you can do.

Thankfully many kids don't require that level of punishment. Some kids you barely look at sideways and they start crying. Others you can put in NORMAL time out for a few minutes. Others do great with spankings. I have a friend whose kids would actually bend over for a spanking and take the "lashes" like a man--lashes meaning a firm swat with the hand with their underwear still on! And they would feel sad for their crime! Do these kids actually exist? My kids would have laughed and ran off to do it again!

I do have one kid who has never thrown a fit. Instead, he would wait until you were distracted and do it when you were not looking! And if he did get caught, he would take his punishment willingly, then wait until you weren't looking and do it again! No rest for the weary!

One trick I've used to try to head off a toddler tantrum is the old, "give them two options you are ok with," idea. For example, "You can eat peanut butter and jelly or ham and cheese before dessert, which would you like?" Another great one is DISTRACTION! "Mommy, I want that purple dinosaur! Whaaaaaaa!"

"Look Billy, a helicopter just flew into the grocery store!"

"Where mommy?"

"I think it went to the next aisle, let's run over and look!"

Unfortunately that little trick doesn't work when they get a little older and wiser. Although sometimes the offer of a gas station soda or Starbucks coffee still gets the job done once in a while! I'm definitely not above bribery when the situation calls for it!

Don't worry mom, you're not alone. Just remember, this too shall pass. If you have a really hard case you need help with, listening to *The Total Transformation Program*® by James Lehman really helped me. He shoots straight and gives some really practical advice for hard situations with kids and teenagers. You can sign up for the program at EmpoweringParents.com. There is a monthly subscription fee. He has a lot of other teachers and resources in that program I have not used, so I can't say about that, but I do know his teaching is REALLY great. I loved it because he talked about real life situations and really hard problems that come up with kids. I felt like it was one of the rare places I could hear practical parenting advice for tough situations.

So check that out if you need it. But for now, here are some creative discipline ideas that might be useful. And when in doubt, try to find another mom in your situation, preferably a little bit ahead of you, and see what worked for them.

Creative Discipline ideas:

Toddlers/Little Kids:

Redirection- when they're about to pitch a fit, redirect them to a different activity or interest (also called, distraction!)

Get rid of the problem- if there's a toy that keeps getting fought over or a special chair that everyone wants, remove it. Put it out of sight and out of mind. And make the house as kid proof/kid friendly as possible. If you're constantly worried they'll break your favorite vase, just put it up for a while until they get bigger. Or put it on a high shelf where it won't be disturbed.

Give appropriate control- toddlers want to be THE BOSS. Make them feel like the boss by giving them options that are ok with you. That way they can choose but both choices are within the boundaries that you set.

Set routines/expectations- toddlers love repetition. They will fall in line easier if they know what to expect in a given situation, like a bedtime routine, a dinner routine, or a buckle up in the car routine. If you always do the same thing in the same order it helps prevent fits and also decreases the options so they know not to expect having a choice in the situation.

Make it fun- if there's one thing toddlers LOVE, it's FUN! Make up songs for getting dressed or going potty, or play peek-a-boo when making the bed together. Pretend you are on a train

when going to the car (make the “Choo Choo” sound and move your arms like a train wheel). Anything along those lines helps toddlers be more cooperative and happy.

Be Stern- sometimes when a tantrum is starting, just a very stern voice and look can get a toddler to stop and take notice and chill out.

Be Quiet- alternatively, some children respond better to an almost whisper. They have to strain to concentrate on what you’re saying, it’s different from your regular voice, and it’s also calming. It’s also a much better alternative in a public place...if it works!

Throw a tantrum- yes, sometimes laying on the floor and crying and flailing your hands and feet is just what a toddler or little kid needs to get their attention and realize how silly it all is. If you’re lucky, you’ll both get a good laugh!

A swift swat- some kids respond really well to a swift swat on the butt. It gets their attention and helps them reset their attitude quickly. Especially if you can administer it right after the offense or right before a tantrum really gets going. It’s also sometimes about the only thing you can do in some situations (which I talk about later in the book) such as when your little one won’t stay in their bed at night.

Find a safe place- sometimes no matter what you do you can’t prevent a tantrum. Get them to a safe place as soon as you can. If you’re out, this could mean getting them to the car, or at home it could be their room or a playroom, a crib...someplace they can cry it out without hurting themselves, someone else, or annoying people to death! If you are in an airplane, God help you! You might have to use the bathroom! One idea I used at home a few times was given to me by another mom. If you have one that is just completely out of control and you’re afraid they will hurt themselves, put the booster seat (the whole seat type, not the one that only goes under their bum) in the house and strap them in it. They can’t get out so it gives them a safe place to calm down. (Until they figure out how to wiggle out of the straps!!) They won’t like it but it will keep them safe.

Reinforce- make sure to tell them when they did something well. “You did a great job, Timmy, I’m SO proud of you!” This will help them want to do the good behavior more. Also, model what this good behavior is. Teach them to apologize, share, help, etc. I had a neighbor once who, when confronted with her child’s bad behavior would just say, “Kids will be kids!” But if you don’t show them what good behavior looks like when they’re young, when will they learn it?

Tongue to knees- if they’re squabbling or being obnoxious, make little kids touch their tongue to their knees for a whole minute or two so that they will chill out! This will definitely get their attention!

Squabblers- put them together in an extra large t-shirt so they have to do everything together. Or make them clean the opposite sides of a window while they make ugly faces at each other. This is a guaranteed laugh!

Charts- sometimes sticker charts or charts of any kind can make it clear for kids what they need to accomplish. Make a reward at the end like play time, tablet time, or a small candy.

Bigger Kids/Teens:

Take away the media- hide the remotes, block the phones, password protect the computer, etc. Welcome to the new age! Kids love their media so this really hits them hard sometimes.

Take away what they love- I know kids/families who aren't really into media, or they've already taken that away and it's still not working. You might have to take away the books, the piano lessons, the baseball...I would definitely not do this as the first line of defense, but if NOTHING is working, then sometimes you have to resort to drastic measures. I've known moms who took everything out of their room or took the door of their room off the hinges! If privacy is what they value, then get your screwdriver out!

Ground them- grounding from seeing friends or doing fun activities can be very effective, especially if you ground them from their phones at the same time.

Ground them to the outside- My brother in law once said, "When we were kids, we got grounded to the house. Now we ground our kids to the outside!" So true! As Greg says in *Diary of the Wimpy Kid*, his dad made him go outside and "frolic"! You might have to make them go outside and frolic for a few hours!

Exercise- my friend Laura makes her kids do laps or burpees when they're in trouble. Two for one! They get punished and get in shape at the same time!

A pinch or an ear- a swift pinch can work wonders. There was a while when my kids kept saying mean things to each other. The punishment was a pinch. It wasn't long before they got the idea! Another thing that works great for a disrespectful kid, especially a boy, is the age old "drag them by the ear" approach. You've probably seen this on old movies or TV shows. It really works!

Stop helping them- The generally generous and helpful mom that I usually am shuts the faucet off when my kids start getting whiny, disrespectful, or generally acting entitled. No more making them food, giving them money to go to the convenience store, arranging time to hang out with friends, etc. Also, sometimes I ham it up by acting like them. When they ask me for something I say, "You know what, I don't FEEL like doing that right now. No, I don't think I will." That usually hits home quite nicely.

Walk away- if you've got a kid in your face and it's all you can do not to knock them out, it's time to walk away! I've walked outside where they won't follow because they don't want the neighbors to see, locked myself in my room or bathroom, and even driven away in the car. Sometimes it's just better to get away, let things cool off, and exact punishment later.

Make them do chores- Again, a great two for one! They have to do something they don't like and you can strike that chore off your list! Sometimes I ASK them to please get in trouble so I can give them some more chores to do! Let me tell you, they're good as gold after that!

Make them do homework- Oh ya, they LOVE this! Who doesn't like extra math problems or more writing assignments?

Make them do each other's chores, or help the other person in some way- If they're squabbling, having to do things for each other helps squelch this.

Make your discipline time specific- don't just take away something indefinitely. Disciplines should be time specific or results specific. For example, "You're grounded for two weeks" or "You can have your tablet back when you have successfully completed your homework without being asked for 5 days". If you make discipline open ended, it's defeating for the kid and will not reap the results you want in changed behavior. It will just make everyone more frustrated.

Lists- lists are great to make it clear what you need them to accomplish. Have a reward at the end like media time or gas money.

Set a timer- for your foot dragger, this can set definite expectations for what you are wanting. Have a reward if they finish or a punishment if they don't. (Also good for littler kids.)

Re-do it- if their chores or homework aren't done right, make them re-do it. They'll hate it and hopefully do it better next time.

Don't pay them- if they are getting paid for a chore or job, don't pay them until it's right.

Rewards- reward them for doing good on chores or grades or babysitting siblings or whatever you want them to do. Money, convenience store drinks, time with friends, Starbucks, or cleaning their room for them...there's lots of things you can do to reward them for a job well done!

Don't save them- if they forget their coat and freeze, they probably won't do it again. Don't bring it to them. This is great for repeated behaviors, such as forgetting their lunch or continually locking themselves out of their cars. Let them face the consequences, such as having to pay a locksmith.

Forget where it is- if your kiddo won't put something away, put it away for them...in a place that's hard to find! Then make them find it if they want it. They won't forget again!

Reduce the options- my kids wouldn't hang up their towels and I always had a TON of towels to wash, so I got rid of them all and only gave them one towel each. Now if they forget their towel on the floor of their room they have to drip dry. Good way to remember to put it back!

Make them wash their own clothes- I got so tired of washing clothes that were thrown on the floor so I started making them wash their own. It's awesome! Even my 10 year old washes his own clothes!

Play a song they hate- If you want your boys to quit being obnoxious or you want your kids to vacate the area, play a song they hate on full blast. Works like a charm.

Get Creative- one dad got tired of his kiddo not picking up the dog poop properly, so he made his son run barefoot through the yard each time he finished. Worked great! One mom would spread all her daughters' clothes over the lawn, bushes, and trees if they didn't keep them picked up off their floor. Worked like a charm! Another dad put alarms on all the doors and windows so he would know if his daughter was sneaking out! One mom took away her son's bed because he wouldn't quit lying. It took a few months but he finally quit.

Keep the lines of communication open- sometimes frustrating behaviors with your kids can be helped by just taking time to understand what they're thinking. Or even just spending special time with them can reduce their frustration and help their behavior get better. One great thing about older kids and teens is that they can communicate their feelings and thoughts better than little kids, so take advantage of this! Also, as kids get older they have more freedoms and quite frankly, can do things behind your back more easily without you knowing. Keep the communication open as much as you can so that they feel they have a safe place to talk about any issues that come up.

What about a teen that's seriously out of control? PRAY, and GET SUPPORT! Teens get to a stage when, if they are DETERMINED to do the wrong thing, it can be very overwhelming. One thing I've been told by many moms who were rebellious during their teen years, is that their parents basically gave up on them, and that really hurt them in the long run. Now that we are parents, it's easy to see why this happens. You can get so worn out as a parent that it feels like you just can't handle it anymore. You need real people to PRAY for you and real friends and mentors to talk to and ask for advice to help you stay in the game. Sometimes I think of it like being a boxer. You need those coaches in your corner to talk you up again so that you will get back in the ring. Do the best you can. You're not perfect. You're not going to know how to handle things sometimes, but just remember, your teen might act like they want total freedom, but the truth is that they want the security of having a parent who cares. Even if they continue to make bad choices, the fact that you enacted rules, punishments, or consequences will mean

a lot to them later, when they finally grow up and hopefully come to their senses. So don't give up!

Chapter 16 The Monthly Curse

Husband: Are you on your period again???

Wife: You know what, you're right. I'll just cancel my subscription.

-internet meme

Have you ever wondered why God gave women periods? I mean, what's the deal? Isn't there ANY other way a baby could have been created? And why don't men have periods? And also, why is it that men are SO dumb about periods? No matter how much you explain it to them they just don't get it.

On the flip side, they are sometimes the brunt of a lot of unfair treatment when that week rolls around. I remember one Sunday when I really gave my husband a run for his money!

I woke up at 7 in the morning, hit the floor, and doubled over in pain as the cramps squeezed me in half. I already knew this was going to be a bad day!

I limped to the kitchen to retrieve the bottle of ibuprofen and downed a couple of life saving, marriage saving, family saving pills.

After that I started to feel better. Everything was looking up.

It was a beautiful, quiet morning. The birds were singing, the windows were open, and I was making a nice breakfast--for myself. Everyone else could scrounge, right? I sat down to a steaming hot cup of tea and 3 glorious gluten-free chocolate chip blueberry pancakes. I was just taking my first bite of melt-in-your-mouth goodness when it happened...

PEOPLE. GOT. UP.

Ugh! Why can't people just sleep for 24 hours the first day of my period?? Couldn't the whole world just fall into a nice, comfy coma for just a few measly hours!??

Suddenly SpongeBob was blaring, teenage girls were banging around in the laundry room trying to find clothes for church, and my annoyingly chipper husband came bounding into the kitchen ready to cuddle everyone in sight. One look at my face and he made a reverse turn.

Needless to say, by 10 AM I had barked at everyone in the house, banged around the kitchen, and generally scared everyone to their rooms or outside. I was sitting at the table making a list when I spied my sweet husband sneaking stealthily out the garage door with bible and notebook in hand.

"Where are YOU going?" I demanded as he stopped like a kid caught in the cookie jar.

"Well, you seemed like you really didn't want to go to church today, so I thought I'd just head over to the trails and read my bible there."

"Then WHO'S going to take the kids to church? You're going to leave ME here by myself and make ME take everyone?"

"Really, Elaine, I don't think the little boys care if we stay home for one day."

"No, but the GIRLS care, and they are already getting ready!" I said as my face turned red and steam started coming out my ears.

"I tell you what, why don't I take the kids to church and you go take a relaxing nap."

"I don't NEED a nap...well, maybe I'll just lay down for 30 minutes, and then we'll leave for church." I said as I stomped off to my room.

I turned on the fan, laid my head on the pillow, pulled over the covers and ZZZZZZZZZ.....

3 HOURS LATER

I opened one eye to my smiling husband sitting on the side of the bed.

"Hey baby, church was great!"

And so was this nap! Wow! I felt great. I felt like a new woman! My wonderful husband had taken care of everything, and I had had a wonderful sleep.

I bounded out of bed, headed for the kitchen, and started tackling the dishes.

"What's on your agenda today?" my husband asked.

"I have to take Gen to camp this afternoon."

"Why isn't she going on the church bus?"

"She's going by herself to this camp...blah blah blah..." I tried to explain the whole thing in about 3 sentences.

"You mean you're going to have to spend all the time and gas driving her to camp? Did you factor that in when you signed her up?"

"Of COURSE I DID! I mean, NO, I DIDN'T! I DON'T REMEMBER! But I've already signed her up and WE ARE GOING! You're such a JERK! DON'T EVER TALK TO ME AGAIN!" I stormed toward my purse and keys. "GEN! Are you ready?? LET'S GO!" I ran out to the car in tears. My husband looked at me in bewilderment.

We left. I cried. I forgot about it. 3 hours in the car and I came back a new woman...for about 30 minutes. My poor husband endured some more emotional whiplash until I finally put everyone out of their misery by going to bed.

The next morning my normal, peaceful self had returned. Good thing, because my husband came back for lunch completely out of his mind from having to deal with a terrible situation at work. I had to talk him off the ledge, so to speak.

I often think, thank goodness we don't usually have a bad day at the same time, or I think it might set off Armageddon!

Having a period every month sucks! That's one great thing about having so many kids in a row...10 years nearly period free!

And lucky me, now I'm in my 40's and going through perimenopause. So not only do I have all the regular fun stuff that comes with periods, but I get to have hot flashes, sleepless nights, and extra mood swings. My poor husband!!

- My best advice for periods is to give yourself some grace and if possible, time to rest--or at least sit down more and take a load off! This is not the time to be Supermom. This is the time to sit down and watch a movie! Even if it's watching one with the kids! Or better yet, use this as an excuse to binge watch Netflix!
- Ibuprofen is your friend. I hardly ever take medicine if I can help it, but my period is the exception!! Why make myself miserable? That just makes everyone else miserable. If you're really opposed to ibuprofen and you have a more natural thing you can take that works for you, do it!
- Wear comfortable clothes.
- Remind yourself you'll be 3 pounds lighter when your period is over!
- Blogilates (my favorite pilates videos!) has a great short workout to help you when you're bloated. You can search for it on YouTube.
- Get out the ol' heat pad.
- Use essential oils to help relieve the pain.
- And last but not least, spend more time with your girlfriends, your daughters, your mom, or your grandma! There's just something comforting about being around other girls during your period.

To do!

Ok ya'll, this you're gonna like this one! No additional homework, I promise! Before we move on to Part 3, I just want you to take a quick moment and remind yourself of your accomplishments, laugh a little, and have some fun!

Below is a list of the chapter topics in this section. Look them over as a refresher and answer the following three questions:

- Special Time with Kids
- Fun
- Media rules
- Dealing with unexpected problems like CPS
- Food
- Sickness
- Homeschool/Private School/Public school choices
- Discipline
- Monthly Curse

Write down three thing related to this list that you've accomplished or that's awesome about you that makes you proud: (i.e., I'm a great cook, I am amazing under pressure so if DFS came to my door I'd know exactly what to do, I'm really creative and love having fun with my kids.)

Now think of one funny thing that happened in relation to one of these things: (i.e. I put my son in time out in my bedroom but I forgot I hid the oreos under the bed. No wonder it was so quiet in there!)

Last one, name one thing you did with your kids recently that was really fun: (i.e. we played four square in the driveway)

Now pat yourself on the back! You're a great mom! And don't you forget it!

Part 3 The Early Days

If you're a mom getting ready to have a baby or working on a subsequent baby, this part of the book is full of all the advice and information I wish I had when I was starting out. For the moms who are past the baby stages, you should definitely still read these chapters! They will remind you of your baby days and I think you'll have fun reminiscing! Besides, many of the stories are funny and totally relatable! So I hope it helps newer moms avoid some pitfalls that I fell into! And if you have any questions you can join my Facebook group at Emaginemom. And the rest of you all join my Facebook group to talk about your crazy journey's with your kiddos and teens, and drop your own pearls of wisdom for those new moms out there!

Chapter 17 Before the Big Bang

I'm pregnant. This morning I told my husband to put the Oreos somewhere I couldn't reach them....He put them on the floor. -boredpanda.com

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Seize the Day! If you are pregnant for the first time, do yourself a favor...HAVE FUN! Assuming you're not stuck in bed throwing up all day (if you are, I'm SO sorry!), try to do as many things as you can while you're still kid-less. Don't get me wrong, you're going to love being a mom, but there are just some things that are easier to do without kids. Go TRAVEL! Go somewhere you've never been. Spend special time with your husband. Read a book you've always wanted to read. Go mountain biking, hiking, or fishing. If you're starting a family late and have already finished your bucket list, awesome! If you're starting your family early, do as much as you can before the baby comes...and don't worry. Kids grow up SO FAST! So anything on that list you can't do with kids, you can do later, after they're bigger. Believe me, it will go by fast. But for now, SEIZE THE MOMENT! In 9 short months, life is guaranteed to change!

Chapter 18 Worshipping at the Porcelain Throne

Morning sickness was morning, noon, and sickness. Nothing helped. Doctor said it was all in my head. I tried so hard to throw up on his shoes. -Aunt Christy

I'm not sure about curing morning sickness, but I hear abstinence can prevent it! Although I've never been successful at maintaining it long term, so for me it's just hear say. -My friend Laura Lepich

If you started out your pregnancy worshipping at the porcelain throne (throwing up), then you're not alone! Morning sickness is common as dirt. And tastes about the same! (Maybe worse!)

When I was in my early twenties, before we had kids, I got sent to New York City for a business conference. We stayed in Manhattan, went to Little Italy, China town, and oh, ya, got in some conference time as well ;) The trip was great! Except that I wasn't feeling well. I kept thinking it was the food. I remember sitting in a little cafe on the ground floor of our hotel, eating a scrumptious piece of cheesecake, while looking out the window watching all of the fascinating people walk by. My stomach was not having any of it. I kept it down, but just barely.

Needless to say, it finally dawned on me, while we were on the flight home, that I might be pregnant! Ding, ding, ding...tell her what she's won, Johnny! I WAS pregnant. And the morning sickness didn't end there.

A few weeks later I was on a trip to San Francisco with my husband. Back then, when you picked a hotel, it was a little more of a shot in the dark than it is now--not much internet back then. Turned out our hotel was a long way from downtown San Francisco. I wasn't feeling too great but my hubby wanted to wait until we got to our destination to eat. Being a newby at pregnancy, I figured that would be alright. Well, let's just say, the people in downtown San Francisco would have preferred I had eaten, because while we were driving through downtown, I rolled down the window and threw up on the street!

Morning sickness sucks! Thankfully, it WILL pass. Most people only have it the first 3 months (or less). But even if you have it all 9 months (God bless you!), it WILL end, I promise!

But here are some practical tips from moms that have endured it:

- Anything peppermint--candy, tea, essential oils
- Frequent snacks
- Crackers
- Small glass of orange juice with Sprite mixed in
- Anything with ginger-- tea, soda, cookies, candies, etc.
- Something sour--candy, lemonade, etc.
- Vitamin B6
- Exercise--if you are not an avid athlete already, try something lighter like walking, swimming, or yoga
- Resting, getting out of bed slowly
- Fresh Air
- Sea-band wristlets--available at drugstores or online put pressure on the wrist which can help reduce nausea

- Acupressure or acupuncture

Chapter 19 Emotions Gone Haywire

***Find a safe place to talk about your negative emotions and scary thoughts.
-postpartemstress.com***

When I was pregnant with Joe, 5th kiddo, the first trimester was really rough, and not because of morning sickness. Everything was going wrong. The kids were not doing well, and they were driving me crazy. Homeschooling was a disaster. My relationship with my husband was on the rocks. I wasn't sick, but I felt awful. I didn't want to get out of bed. Everything was on the downhill slide. And then....

At almost exactly the end of the 3rd month of pregnancy, I woke up, and everything was GREAT! The birds were singing, the kids were happy, homeschooling was fun again, and my husband was the best thing that ever happened to me. Literally it was like a switch flipped. I realized at that moment that I had been DEPRESSED. And it was mainly due to HORMONES! It was like postpartum depression, but more like prepartum. Nothing on the outside was different as far as everyone else, but in my head everything was wrong. It's amazing how the brain can take a tailspin, and since it's your own brain, you can't see the forest for the trees.

So, turns out, prepartem is a THING! Sure wish I had known that before I had it! I think if had been aware of it, I might have realized that it wasn't everything around me that was off, it was me, and I would have tried to get help. But I didn't even realize what was happening until it went away.

I don't want that to happen to you! Listen to this from the website VeryWellFamily.com:

“Prenatal depression is depression experienced by women during pregnancy. Like postpartum depression, prenatal (or perinatal) depression isn't just a feeling of sadness—mothers who experience this mental health disorder may also feel anxious and angry.

You've likely heard of postpartum depression—and that's a good thing. The more that postpartum depression is talked about and understood, the more mothers will seek the help they need so that they can feel better and live full and healthy lives as new moms.

But prenatal depression is a maternal mood disorder that hasn't gotten nearly as much attention as it should. While prenatal depression can be treated, many expecting mothers don't even know that it's a “thing” and therefore don't seek treatment for it.”

They go on to suggest the following treatments:

Exercise

Support Groups

Talking with friends or family

Doing something you enjoy like a hobby or reading a good book

Therapy

Medication

I would add women's prayer or bible study groups. In addition to friends and family, telling women you trust what is going on will help to make sure you feel understood and that you have people looking out for you, making sure you're doing ok.

So keep on the lookout for this! Hopefully you never experience it. But if you do, don't be afraid to reach out! Pregnancy is hard enough without adding this to it! You don't have to handle this all by yourself, and you're not alone! Lots of women have gone through this! So talk to your husband, your friend, your mom, the MOPS group...whoever you trust. Don't go it alone!

Chapter 20 Doctors vs. Midwives

The doctor who delivered my boys was wonderful. But he made the nurse deliver the placenta. He was so grossed out by the sight of it that he had to leave the room. Oh the irony! -me

Dr. Smith was my doctor with my first two kids (that really is her name, not making it up!) With the third child--Riley-- we had a midwife (for reasons I'll get to later). A few months after Riley was born I was due for a pap. My midwife did not do paps, so I went back to Dr. Smith. I brought Riley with me. While I was there she talked as if she had delivered her. She asked how we were doing and hoped I was doing well since the birth and talked to the baby like she had been there when she was born. But then she got to checking my chart...and realized there was nothing on it about a birth. "Where have you been the last year???" she asked. Knowing this was probably not going to go over well (midwives were illegal in our state at that time), I reluctantly told her I had given birth to my daughter with the help of a midwife. Needless to say, she was not happy. She finished the visit but then promptly sent me a letter firing me as her patient.

So, getting fired as a patient was a new one for me! But I'm not telling you this story for the punch line...I'm telling you to show you the difference between my doctor and my midwife. Both of them were great....Dr. Smith was very experienced, did a good job, had a nice bedside

manner, and actually was very well known in my city. But my midwife would have NEVER thought she had delivered my baby when she hadn't. She spent SO much time with me, there's NO WAY she would have gotten confused about that.

But when you only see your doctor for 15 minutes at a time, get shuffled around to the other doctors in the practice, and don't even have your own doctor for the delivery (I didn't), it's not surprising Dr. Smith mistakenly thought she had delivered my 3rd child.

And that's just the starting point. Not only did my midwife spend HOURS with me compared to my doctor, she could have run circles around any doctor with the birthing knowledge she had. By the time I met her she had 20 years of experience and was still constantly reading and learning. Also, the way she did things and the way she helped women give birth was VERY different from traditional medicine. Just the whole way of thinking, the differences in birthing style, the differences in nutrition, and even the differences in the way I was treated as a patient were just 180 degrees different from the medical setting.

Learning all this new information from her...it made total sense and made my husband and I wonder why more doctors didn't follow this line of thinking. (My niece is studying nursing/midwifery at college now and it seems the medical community is finally catching up and teaching these things that she was telling us 15 years ago! Very cool. So you might be able to find a midwifery-type doctor now!)

So obviously I'm partial to midwives, mainly just because I had an amazing one! However, no matter whether you choose a doctor or a midwife, there is one thing that is really important to remember, and that is to do your research about the person before you pick them. With my doctor, I did not know to do that. However, she was referred by my primary doctor, which was the only way I could get into her, because she was so popular she wasn't taking new patients. So that turned out to be good sign.

With my midwife, I had to be referred as well, by a friend who had used her. But the amazing thing about my midwife was that when we asked for references, she just gave us her entire client list and said, "Call whoever you want!" And we did! And they all raved about her.

Just remember, someone calling themselves a doctor or midwife may have the credentials, but that doesn't mean they're good at their job. Make sure to do some homework before you decide.

And just because my experience with a midwife was great, doesn't mean yours will be. Not all midwives are the same, just as all doctors are not the same. The point is, find one that you feel good about. Someone with lots of experience. Someone who's patients have good things to say about them. Someone who has a good bedside manner and shares any ideas you may have about the birth. And if there's several doctors and any one of them could deliver your baby, find out about them too. Ask other moms who have already used this group how their

experience was. Basically do some research, and choose what would make you and your husband feel best about the birth.

Chapter 21 Let's Have a Baby

I'm ashamed to say my sister is in labor and already dilated to a 6 but we talked the nurse into not checking her from 7-9 so we could watch the bachelor -@xkatiexnicole Twitter

My first baby, our son Daniel, was born at the hospital. Before the birth we had birthing classes taught by a nurse named Elizabeth. I liked her immediately. She was one of those humorous, tough nurses that could have told a sailor where to get off and he probably wouldn't even have realized it because she was so funny. Also, he would have done whatever she told him to!

And I ended up being the luckiest mom in the world because, guess who ended up being my nurse during delivery? Elizabeth! She was exactly what I needed when I needed it, especially as a new mom. I needed someone who was going to tell me exactly what to do to get that baby out. I needed a kind and compassionate DRILL SERGEANT!! And she was! I was so thankful for her.

Have you ever heard of a doula (pronounced doo-la)? I didn't even know what a doula was back then. It's a person who helps you through labor and delivery, and also with newborns, breastfeeding, and emotional support after the baby is born. What a great idea! Especially for new moms! There are doulas available in many areas. If this is something you're interested in, do a quick search in your area and make some calls. If ever moms needed help, this would be it!

With my first baby I didn't have any drugs (now, before you give me sainthood status, it was a very short labor.) With my second, I decided I would do any IV drug. I had the SWEETEST doctor--Dr. Nuygen. I got lucky enough in the doctor rotation that he actually delivered my first baby and my second. He was just such a nice guy. But after I got the drugs....well, let's just say this baby came out pretty quick too. Now, don't think I was just sitting playing Go Fish with my husband while the baby just daintily slid right out into the doctor's hands-- there was plenty of screaming and sweating and swearing (and probably pooping--ya it happens) going on. It's just that the baby came fast enough that I didn't even get the benefit of the drugs (hence the swearing). So, after the main event was over, the doctor was standing there trying to talk to me and I felt like I had just been spun around in one of those tea cups at the amusement park. Because that's right about the time the drugs kicked in! I have no idea what I said to the doctor in response to his questions. Probably something like, "Yahhh, goosemada gobidogami....litovoten." Thank goodness there were no cell phones, no social media, and not

a whole lot of video taping births back then! If there had been a video, it probably would have gone viral!

After the second baby we started our own business, so we didn't have maternity insurance. Just in case you hadn't heard, having a baby is EXPENSIVE! So that's why we looked into getting a midwife instead. Ya, there was not a great naturalistic motive, like we wanted to go all granola and have a home birth. At the time, it was straight economics. I had talked to moms from other states who had used midwives, and I had heard nothing but rave reviews. So, my husband and I figured it was at least worth looking into.

Now, at that time, in our state, midwives were illegal. So finding one was not that easy. You had to really ask around, and even when you could get the name of one, getting them to contact you was a whole other obstacle. I think I got the names of two, but one seemed to keep popping up over the other. I finally got her number, but she wouldn't call me until my friend, who had been her patient, called her and told her I was on the up and up. "Hey Frankie, yuz know that girl Elaine? Yah, the one that has your number? Yah, that's the one! She's ok. She's respectable. She's on the books. Give her a call." Ok, so maybe it went something like that?? I don't know, but after that, we were off to the races!

My husband and I met with her. She spent two hours with us, just answering all our questions. She definitely seemed experienced, and as I said before, she gave us her whole client list for references. Her price was amazing, and the care seemed over the top, so we jumped.

Each month I would go over to her house to her basement office. She had tons of toys and I would just bring the kids and they would play while she checked my urine, listened to the heartbeat, and we talked about everything significant for that month as well as the thousands of questions I had about homebirth, and maybe another hour or two of just chit chat because, she was just so awesome to talk to!

As the birth got closer, the visits got more frequent. She was 45 minutes away, so it was a bit of a drive, but since I could bring the other kids, it was fine. Afterwards, we would sometimes stop at Burger King near her house for lunch. I may or may not have been seen climbing through those plastic play area tubes while 8 months pregnant! Hey, moms want to have fun too!

As the time got closer, she started coming to our house for checkups. She believed in water births, which are much easier on the mom and the baby. She had a sterilized stock tank she would bring over if you needed it, but he had a large bathtub, which she deemed would work great.

The baby was due the first of April. I was sure the baby wouldn't be there by then, so I had this idea that on April first, I would call all my relatives and tell them, "We had a girl!" And while

they were all oohing and ahing (since our first two were boys) I would shout, "April fools!" For some reason, I just had it in my head that since we had two boys, we would surely have another one.

Well, my daughter Riley got the last laugh, because she came in the middle of the night on March 31st.

And the rest is history. We had three more babies with our midwife. All of them were different. Two were born in the middle of the night, one was born in the middle of the day, and the last was born right about 10pm.

So, as with all births, you have to figure out what you're going to do with your kids when the baby is born. With any birth, unless it's scheduled, this is usually a bit of a trick, since you don't know when the baby is coming. But at least with a hospital birth, you can have a friend or relative stay at your house with your other kids while you're gone.

With homebirth, what in the heck do you do with your kids?? Especially since we didn't have any family around? Well, we got lucky with the 3rd child (first home birth). It was in the middle of the night, so the other kids just slept through it. With the 4th child, it was more like a party!

My water broke in the morning so lots of friends and family (my mom in law lived about an hour and a half away--the closest family we had) stopped by during the day to check on me. The midwife came up, and we all just hung out, knowing that the baby would be coming, probably at least some time in the next 24 hours.

Our daughter Genevieve ended up coming in the afternoon. My kids were sitting with my friend Kathy, glued to her portable TV/DVD player watching Mary Poppins in the other room (we didn't have a TV at that time, so they were totally content! They were also really little, so they didn't really know what was going on.)

With the 3rd home birth it was also in the middle of the night, so they slept through it. But with the 4th birth...well, it was a little more crazy. Our last came about 10PM. Of course, not knowing when exactly the baby would come, we were waffling between sending the kids to the neighbors or just putting them to bed. We opted to put them to bed. Probably not the best decision...as they were a bit older by that time and TOTALLY did not go to sleep. Hearing me screaming, "Get this baby out of me!" at the top of my lungs probably wasn't the best thing?? I just hope my girls aren't scarred for life! I really want grandchildren!

Chapter 22 Dadwife

I moonlight as an OB. -my husband

Now, before we get too far ahead, did I also mention my labors were pretty fast? And did I mention that the midwife was 45 minutes away? Did I also mention that my husband delivered our 5th child?

Ok, so, actually, my labor with Joe (he is our 5th) was actually really long. I had contractions all day. The problem was, I had a LOT of preterm labor. Which means, I had a lot of contractions, almost daily during the last few weeks. When you're chasing around kids (at that time all my kids were 7 and under) you don't get a break. There's none of this "make sure to rest in your last trimester" or "don't pick up anything over 20 pounds when you're pregnant". There's toddlers to corral and kids to feed, not to mention all the neighbor kids that come over. It's an all out slam from morning until dropping in bed at night like a 180lb sack of potatoes.

So, having contractions all day was not alarming to me. I mean, maybe slightly. But honestly, I really didn't know "today was the day".

In fact, I took the kids to get hair cuts that day. I remember sitting at the hairdressers talking to the lady cutting one of the kid's hair. She asked me when my baby was due. When I said, "Oh, it was due a couple days ago." her eyes almost popped out of her head. I'm sure she was thinking, "What in the world are you doing here?" And to be honest, right at that moment I was having contractions. But, for me, that was just par for the course, so I didn't really think anything of it.

And at 10 or so that night, I went to bed, as usual.

But at 2 AM, I bolted upright in bed. I felt like a vice was squeezing me in half about every minute. My husband, who is a night owl, was downstairs in his office. I hobbled over to the stairs and yelled for him. He bolted up and I said, "This is it." He raced to the phone to call the midwife and get her on the road.

I hobbled to the bathroom and Ron followed me. He started getting the bathtub ready, and then I said, "I need you." I put my arms around him and he just stood there hugging me, while I fought through the contractions.

With women, and labor, sometimes all you want to do is curse your man and throw him across the room. And it's true, they don't know what you're going through and seriously, you're kind of out of your mind. But I have to say, at that moment, the only person I wanted to be with in the whole universe was Ron. It was one of those rare moments when I felt so incredibly close to him. It was such a comfort to me to have him hold me and be with me.

And then all hell broke loose.

You've never seen a pregnant woman move so fast. I threw my clothes off and jumped into the water. I wasn't even thinking. It was all instinct. I KNEW that baby was coming and coming

NOW. I was pushing and grunting and screaming and at the same time Ron went into auto pilot! He called the midwife and was holding the phone between his shoulder and ear and had his hands in the water trying to figure out if the baby was coming. The midwife coached him through it. She was 15 minutes away.

I have to admit, I was not worried. Maybe it's just because I didn't really have time to think about it, I don't know. Honestly, I know my husband doesn't have any training, but when the rubber meets the road, he's the guy you want in your corner. Maybe that's why I wasn't worried, I'm not sure. But I just thought everything was going to be ok. And Joe came out fine.

We did get a little alarmed after he came out though. He was purple and he wasn't crying. She asked us some questions, and then said that he should be fine, just to rub him all over to get the circulation flowing. We did, and he got some good color and started to cry, and he was fine.

Honestly, in hindsight, I think he was asleep! I mean, who can sleep through that?? But it was SO like Joe to come out different from all the other kids. He broke the mold then and has been doing it ever since!

She got there after that and helped us. She told us later that whenever a baby comes that fast, it usually means everything, as far as the birth is concerned, is fine, otherwise it wouldn't happen so fast. That was encouraging. And, Ron got to brag to everyone that he moonlighted as an OBGYN.

Let's just say, that was his first and last time to deliver a baby. With the next birth, the midwife came 3 times before the real thing. Three times she sat at our house and we had to send her home due to false alarms. Ron wasn't taking any chances!

Chapter 23 Hospital Vs. Homebirth

What, you don't like hospital food? Girl, after you've cooked day and night for years, any food that is cooked by someone else and served to you in bed is a culinary masterpiece! -me

Nowadays you can have your birth at home, in the hospital, or even at a birthing center. All of those can be great places. You've got options.

I just hope you don't have the experience of a Malaysian woman who was assisted by some labor and delivery nurses from our nearby hospital, who happened to be on the same airplane as her on the way to Hawaii! Not knowing she was pregnant, she went to the bathroom in the airplane and a baby came out! The baby was about 26 weeks. Everything turned out fine, but talk about a shock!! Please don't add "airplane" to your list of possible birthing options! You

might end up with some great nurses on board, as this lady did, but the chances are pretty slim!

You might be thinking, “Of course you had home births...your babies came out fast. Only people with short deliveries can have home births!” Well, just so you know, another mom who just lives across town from me had the same midwife as I did. She’s got 4 kids and all the births were at least 30 hours (yes, some day she will have a special place in heaven!!) So, you can definitely have a home birth no matter how long your labor is. A skilled midwife can also deliver twins, breeches, and v-backs (a vaginal birth after having c-sections.) My midwife did all these things.

On the other hand, you may be thinking, “No way in heck I’m going to have a baby at home! I’d be terrified!” or “I’m planning on a pain-free birth! Who in their right mind would go through the pain of childbirth when they can have an epidural?? For that matter, give me 3 or 4! I’ll take all you got!” And if that’s you, go for it! The main thing is that you do what makes you feel most comfortable and that you and the baby come out fine. Ignore your friends and family if they don’t agree with you. Figure out what you want to do, and do it!

(If you want to know more about my experience with homebirth, check out my podcast “Born in a Bathtub” on the EmagineMomCast at Emaginemom.com or on any podcasting platform.)

Chapter 24 Newborns (0-3 Months)

Asked to switch seats on a plane because I was sitting next to a crying baby. Apparently, that’s not allowed if the baby is yours. -@mommysshorts Twitter

But the real fun begins AFTER the birth. What in the heck do you do with this little human being?

Can we all agree that newborns are kind of like an alien species? I mean, they only speak one language...crying. And somehow each cry means something different and we have to figure out what it means. Have you ever watched the Avengers movies? It’s like having your own personal Groot...

”Are you gassy?”

“I am Groot”

“Do you have a wet diaper?”

“I am Groot”

“Are you hungry?”

“I am Groot”

At least with the real Groot there were some facial expressions! The teenage snarky “I am Groot”, the Adult compassionate “I am Groot.” With babies it’s just this awful, high pitched cry, grimace face...I mean, it’s enough to make you cry yourself! Especially in the middle of the night when you’ve only gotten 2 hours of sleep!

Don’t get me wrong, I have 6 kids, so as you can see, I got better at interpreting the cries...kind of like Rocket knows what Groot’s saying even though no one else does! But that first newborn was like baptism by fire!

I remember being at the hospital and thinking, “What in the heck??!! They’re going to let me take this baby home and MAKE SURE IT LIVES TO SEE ADULTHOOD! I know NOTHING about babies! What are they thinking? I’m going to have to stay awake 24 hours a day to make sure it doesn’t die of SIDS in it’s sleep! I have nothing to feed it except my boob, and I don’t even know what I’m doing! This is CRAZY!”

How is it that it takes 8 years and hundreds of thousands of dollars to become a doctor, but they’ll just let any ol’ person walk out of a hospital with a HUMAN BEING and expect everything to go just peachy??!!

When we got home from the hospital my sister and brother-in-law had come up to see us and stay the night. I was sitting in the bedroom with my sister and the baby. I had put in a nightlight so I could see at night to nurse. My wonderful hubby walked in and said, “Jimmy (bro-in-law) says nightlights cause nearsightedness.” and proceeded to take it out of the wall and walk out the bedroom door. That just about pushed me over the edge! I’m trying to figure out how to keep this kid alive, and you’re worried about his EYE SIGHT?? Good ol’ sister to the rescue. She went and put the night light back in and told me to ignore the guys. Sanity restored...momentarily.

Let’s just say the first newborn was not a cake walk. God bless my first born son! Daniel ate every hour and a half day and night. I don’t think I hardly ever put him down...if I did he certainly wasn’t happy about it! He also had digestive issues.

When he was about 8 weeks old my hubby and I volunteered to be counselors at the winter youth retreat. Not sure why in the world I thought I could be a counselor and take care of a newborn! I will say ALL the girls at camp thought it was great! He got passed around like a puppy. (Amazingly he didn’t get sick...all that good breast milk I guess!) But the camp food I was eating was turning him inside out! He couldn’t sleep from the gas, poor thing, and of course neither did I. Needless to say, I think my junior helper did more counseling than I did that weekend!

Did I also mention he had reflux? One time at church I was holding him upright against my shoulder. The people behind us were making funny faces and playing with him, when all of a

sudden he projectile vomited right in their lap! I almost broke down laughing right in the middle of the sermon...they didn't think it was so funny!

It took me a few weeks, well, maybe months, but I figured out what he wanted and what the cries meant, for the most part. And then we got along swimmingly.

So you'll probably fall into one of two camps: the mom who LOVES newborns, or the mom that would LOVE to get past this stage! Either way, it usually takes a few weeks to really get to know your baby, his/her personality, and how this new little person fits into your life. So give yourself some grace. You'll also be healing your body at the same time, still having some crazy hormones, and trying to sleep. Just remember, by week 6-8 things usually settle down...well, at least the part of getting used to your baby and your baby getting used to the world.

Chapter 25 Sleep

I don't want to sleep like a baby, I just want to sleep like my husband. - internet meme

Speaking of babies sleeping, let me just remove some guilt from you. I know moms who would never put their baby in bed with them and would have them on a schedule as soon as possible, to moms who had their kiddo in bed with them until they were 5 (or older!) Guess what? All these kids turned out fine, and all the parents did too. What does this mean, you may ask? You can do whatever the heck works for your family! Also, going back to the "babies are always changing" idea, something that works for a while might not work anymore and you have to change. Maybe you get to stay home from work for 3 months and then go back to work. Obviously you're not going to get to nap with the baby anymore, so you feel you need to get him on a schedule so that you can make sure to get some decent sleep for work. Or conversely, you had the baby on a great schedule and then after work got going, he got sick or started teething, and now it's better to have him with you in bed so you can actually get some sleep. Guess what? It's OK!!! You can go back to working out a great schedule once the baby gets better. Or keep him in bed with you, if you find that works better.

The main person you have to please in this situation is yourself, and your husband. Of course this can be an interesting interaction in itself!

When the babies were born, my hubby and I made an arrangement that worked for both of us. The baby and I got our bed and hubby would make a "super duper bed" with the little boys, by putting their twin beds together, and he would sleep with them for the first couple months while I took care of the newborn. The little boys LOVED it! They thought it was SO cool having a "super duper bed" and getting to sleep with dad! I got our room to myself with the baby, so I could get up in the night, sit in the rocker, turn on the light...whatever I wanted without worrying about waking up dad. It made everything a lot easier for me.

Once the baby turned about 2 or 3 months or so I put them in the crib next to our bed and hubby came back to our room. At about 6-9 months I moved the crib into the other kids' room (depending on boy or girl). But about a year the fun began....

So, I'm really empathetic. I can walk into a room and instantly start reading people's emotional states. And I was born to make people happy. So when a baby cries, it's like Spiderman watching MJ get carried off by that Lizard guy...what was his name?? The alarm bells are going off in Spiderman's brain! His Spidy sense is going into overdrive! Spiderman is GOING to help her! No matter what!

But what if, secretly, MJ has the anti-venom to change Lizard guy back into a regular human being? What if she's just luring Lizard guy back to OsCorp so she can grab the secret syringe she's got stashed under his desk so she can get him back to normal? If Spiderman intervenes, Lizard guy will be stuck as a lizard forever!

So in this scenario, I'm Spiderman and my husband is MJ. He knows that the kiddo is 1 year old, perfectly healthy, and has his mom wrapped around his finger. Hubby knows that there is absolutely no reason at this point that this kiddo can't sleep through the night. Truth be told, Spiderman knows this too, but just doesn't want to admit it. So while the cute, tiny toddler is screaming his head off in the crib next door, hubby firmly places his hand across my chest so that I CAN'T put the fire out. I silently whimper, and about 20 or 30 minutes later everything gets quiet again. Of course, not being able to sleep for worry, another 30 minutes later Spiderman silently peaks into the door of the kids' room and makes out a quietly sleeping form in the crib. Stealthily covering him up, she realizes he's perfectly fine, and heads back to bed. A few nights of this and no more baby crying, just sleeping. Good job MJ.

That's all to say, just do what works for you and your husband, and it will all work out ok.

All babies are different...I know mine certainly were! Some slept well and others hardly slept at all. After the initial torture of the first child, who woke up every hour and a half, the next 2 slept for at least 3 hours at a time. And let me tell you, when that happened, we didn't even know what to do with ourselves.

Our second child, Buckley, threw us totally for a loop! We would put him in his crib at night....and he SLEPT.

"Is that a thing??" we thought.

Babies sleep??

Who knew? He slept for at least 3 hours straight, which was a dad-bloomin miracle as far as I was concerned! I could have been on a tropical beach, I was so happy! And so did our next one.

The last 3...honestly I can't remember (I think I blocked it out??) But I do remember that the 5th child slept in the swing the first few weeks. It was the only way I could get him to sleep. And when you've got 4 other kids under the age of 8, you do whatever it takes!! (Did I mention, he's an amazing dancer? Maybe all that swinging really worked!)

I've heard there are babies that sleep through the night, but I think it's just an urban myth.

The main thing to remember is that babies aren't the only ones who need to sleep...parents need to sleep too! And there's always more than one way to skin the cat.

Some people sleep with their babies, some put them in cribs, some do both. There were times my newborns were much happier sleeping in the car seat, set on the floor, because it swaddled them more than being laid flat in a crib.

Some babies sleep much better on their tummies (or laid sideways between 2 infant foam blocks). My friend suffered from sleep deprivation for months before she finally tried putting her baby on her tummy, and the baby slept like a dream after that! (Her doctor had told her not to put the baby on her tummy...after that, she told the doctor where to get off!) Just make sure if they're on their tummy that they aren't on something fluffy like a comforter, which could be dangerous. It needs to be something flat.

Some babies will only sleep with white noise, like a fan or dryer sound. Back in the day, before there were noise boxes that made sounds like rain or fan sounds, I know a mom who burned out several vacuums running them all night because that's the ONLY way her colicky twins would sleep.

All this is to say, there is no one-size-fits all method to get a baby to sleep. I'm not telling you this to overwhelm you with choices, I'm just saying, try something and see if it works. And remember, sometimes you have to try something more than once to know for sure. If it works, stick with it. If it doesn't, don't be afraid or feel judged to try something new.

One thing to remember, newborns need a lot of physical affection. There are books that say to let your baby cry it out. I think this is a good idea when your baby is a little bit older. But when they are newborns, you honestly cannot spoil them. Even if you have to sleep in the living room recliner with them on your chest (I have done this many times), they will only benefit by being close to you. As long as you're both getting sleep, and you feel that it's safe (not worried about squishing them) then do it. If you really feel you need to get them on a routine as soon as possible, either for your own sanity or other reasons such as returning to work, you can try letting them cry it out. Some babies will take to this quickly, and some won't have it at all! Try it for a few nights. If it works, or you can see that it's working, then that's great! You're well on your way to getting them into a happy routine. But if they just keep crying, please pick them up!! They are not ready. Every baby's personality is different, and some just need more TLC

than others. Wait until they are a little older, then try again. When you've gotten to a point where you know your baby well, you know their cues, you know that they are basically fine (diaper changed, fed, loved, no other problems) then crying it out is fine at that point. Personally, I think after 6 months, unless they have some kind of medical problem, at that point even if it takes a LOT of crying, they should be self sufficient enough to cry it out. At that point, it's more about whether you can handle the crying!

One exception, if you have a colicky newborn, you HAVE to put the baby down and just let them cry sometimes. This situation is different, because obviously, you've tried everything. At that point, the main goal is to just keep your sanity. And you HAVE to have a break. Try to get friends or family to help you as much as you can. If at all possible, get out of the house for a while. If nothing else, put the baby down and let him cry. You've done all you can. He'll be ok. Nobody remembers when they were a baby. He won't remember it. YOUR A GOOD MOM! He's obviously loved, just take a break.

Chapter 26 Feeding Your Little Bundle

Baby: I saw Dad with Mom last night. I think he was stealing my milk.

-Cakematernity.com

Breastfeeding. Because you can eat 500 calories worth of Oreos. Every day.

-Someecards Cakematernity.com

Second child, I thought I was an expert at breastfeeding. The first time around was pretty tough. I'm very light skinned, and getting my nips sucked on every hour and a half around the clock made for some extreme pain. But I got referred right away to some lactation nurses and that really helped me get through. God bless 'em! But the first kiddo wasn't too great at sucking, so it was more about trying to teach him how to suck (he would never take a pacifier...although I sometimes held one in his mouth for a bit just to get a break!) and get through all the breast trauma, which went ok and the breastfeeding got better.

The second time around I birthed out a tiny baby vacuum cleaner! Seriously, I could hold a pacifier out in front of him and he would suck it from my hand, THROUGH THE AIR into his mouth! So combine the fact that he had major suction, AND I actually was totally doing it wrong (his bottom lip was curled in, unbeknownst to me--shouldn't I have known this? Wasn't I an expert, after all?) and you have a catastrophe in the making. My breasts got so bad they were bleeding, crusting...basically an open wound.

I finally got the bright idea to call the lactation nurse. She told me to come to the support group, which I practically raced to, I was so desperate. They showed me what I was doing wrong and got me on the road to better health (Again, God bless 'em!) But even more than that, one of the nurses looked at me and said, "Have you thought about giving him a bottle once in a while?" It was like the heavens opened and angels started singing at that moment.

“I can give him a bottle?” It had never even crossed my mind. I didn’t even know that was a thing! I mean, of course I knew about bottles, but I just figured, if you had decided to breastfeed, then you were going to breastfeed, and that was it. Or if you chose to bottle feed, then that was that. I had NO IDEA you could do both!

At that moment, a huge weight just lifted off my shoulders. “I can give him a bottle!!!” “WOOO HOOO!” I felt so relieved.

And honestly, I didn’t end up hardly giving him any bottles, but just the thought that I COULD if I wanted to just took so much anxiety out of it. And the breast feeding got better and then was fine.

And lest you think the breast feeding got better with subsequent babies, think again! On top of terribly painful and sore nipples at the beginning, I had mastitis with the 4th and 6th babies. Wow, that’s painful! But I got through it! And didn’t sweat using a bottle now and then.

Every mom and every baby is different, and what works for one might not work for another. If you prefer bottles or that works better for your situation, then do that. Sometimes it’s easier because dad or other family members can help. Or you might not produce enough milk or have one that really has such difficulty latching, that it just works better to have a bottle. I’ve also talked to moms of multiples who breastfeed one and bottle fed the other so that they could eat at the same time. There’s other moms who pump and use that to feed them in the bottle. Or moms do a combination of breastfeeding, pumping, and bottles. Then there are the babies who won’t take bottles at all, but will eventually take a sippy cup.

If there’s anything you could get out of these stories, it’s that, with babies, nothing is cut and dried! Sometimes you just gotta do what you gotta do to get through the next few weeks/months to survive!

Just remember, everything changes quickly with babies. A problem you can’t seem to solve for a month will suddenly disappear when they reach the next stage. (Usually to be replaced by a different challenge!) With our firstborn, he never liked sleeping. We would finally get him into a routine and then we would go see my family for a weekend and come back and totally have to start over again. We’d get back into a routine, FINALLY, and then he would start teething, or have gas, or who knows what. It was like riding a roller coaster. And when you’re in the middle of the struggle, it seems like you’ll NEVER GET OUT. Like the movie Ground Hog Day, you keep trying different things but you feel like you’re never going to see tomorrow! And just like that, it all changes again, and you do see tomorrow, because babies DON’T STAY THE SAME! They grow! And what was driving you crazy at 5 months (won’t sleep) is a totally new problem at 8 months (sleeping fine, but won’t eat solid food!)

I know this may seem depressing, but it's actually fabulous! It means, don't despair, this too shall pass! I promise, you will not have a colicky 1 year old. They WILL get past this! It may be overwhelming for a while, but it won't last forever!

Tips:

- For breastfeeding, get help from a lactation nurse, doula, midwife, or breastfeeding support group to help you through the first few weeks.
- If your nipples are getting raw, have your doctor, midwife, or lactation nurse prescribe you a special cream (for the 6th child I was able to get a cream that was specially mixed with antibiotics, anti-fungal, and other ointments to put on after breastfeeding. It was like a miracle!)
- If you develop mastitis, keep breastfeeding if at all possible (even though it hurts.) and take ibuprofen. It's a life saver! Rest as much as you can. A doctor may prescribe antibiotics too. I never had them and I got better fine, but take them if it helps. Ask your midwife, doctor, or other moms for anything else they might recommend.
- Get a really good pump or borrow one for pumping milk.
- If you are having trouble getting your baby to bottle feed, try different types of bottles with different nipple shapes.
- For babies who don't do well with regular formula, try one that has a non-lactose base.
- If your baby won't take a bottle, try letting someone else feed him. Sometimes he just wants you more than the bottle, so taking you out of the equation can help.
- There's lots of great gadgets for bottle feeding such as bottle warmers, special baskets to wash bottles in the dishwasher, and formula dispensers for diaper bags.
- Freeze pumped milk for later use.

Chapter 27 Get Help

I don't need a big, fancy vacation. I'd be happy with a trip to the bathroom by myself.
-Your Ecards

If you're a mom of a newborn, get some help...preferably before the baby is born, try to line up some assistance. Even if you are an old hat at this, having help the first weeks takes off so much pressure. Here are some ideas:

Have Dinner Delivered! If you have a good friend or family member who can organize a meal train for you, do it. (Yes, there's actually a website called MealTrain.com where a person can easily send out an email to your friends and they can sign up to bring you meals.) Otherwise,

check with your playgroup, your church, your work, or any group you're involved with to see if they ever organize meals. If they do, great! If they haven't, ask sweetly if they would consider organizing a few meals for you for your first couple of weeks. Even a meal every other day for two weeks is a life saver. You can usually eat the leftovers on the off day.

If your husband cooks, wonderful! You've got this in the bag! Don't let that dissuade you from having meals brought in by others, though. He might like a break too!

If you have money, order in for a couple weeks.

Another idea is to make a bunch of freezer meals and store them before the baby is born. It's awesome to just open the freezer and thaw something for later or pop a casserole in the oven.

Get help from your other kids. If you have older kids, have them do the cooking, cleaning, or babysitting--don't be afraid to ask or even make them do this. You need a break, and after all you've done for them, they can help out extra for a little while. Just don't expect perfection! And let them know how much you appreciate it!

Ask a parent, aunt, single cousin...someone who can take some time off and help you with your other kids for a week or more. They can help with the kids, cooking, cleaning, running errands, taking kids to practices, etc. Or split the difference...when I had my 3rd kiddo, I asked my friends if they'd help me with cleaning the first few weeks. They took turns coming and it was amazing. At the same time my mom came for a few days to help with the kids and cook, and I think my dad came for a few days later. Lots of help is good!

Hire Cleaning! With my 5th kiddo, in desperation, I hired my neighbor to clean my house. It was a life saver! I had organized a TON of help...knowing that I would need it (all my other kids were 7 and under!). Meals, family to stay over, cleaning, help with the kids...and it ALL FELL THROUGH. The lady that organized meals at the church, her husband had a heart attack! My dad couldn't come. My aunt couldn't come. Two of my friends who were going to help got sick. Etc. etc. Needless to say I went into postpartum depression. That neighbor cleaning my house was a the lifeline that pulled me out of it. It's amazing what a little help can do!

Which leads me to the next point, what if you don't have any help? What if you can't get any help? IT'S OK!! I honestly believe, when we had that 5th child, if I had steeled myself to be ok if I didn't have any help, I would have been a lot better off mentally. If I had told myself, "You've got lots of experience. It will get better after a few weeks. Everybody is ok and we don't have to have a clean house or 3 meals for a while. We can all live on peanut butter and jelly for a few days and we'll be fine." or whatever I needed to know so I could just get through it on my own, I don't think I would have spiralled into postpartum depression. (And please know, I'm not saying all postpartum depression is caused by this. This was just my personal experience.)

Just remember, YOU CAN DO THIS! God made you to be a mom! If you can get help, do it! Don't be afraid to reach out! Let me say it again, DON'T BE AFRAID to reach out! Especially if you just really feel overwhelmed or that something is just really wrong. Call your doctor or midwife too. My midwife was the one that convinced me to hire my neighbor to help me with cleaning. If they don't know the answer, they can direct you to resources. If you can't get help with your home/kids but you can just get in some social time, do that! Spend time with friends, go to a breastfeeding support group, whatever you need. Do what you can to keep your mental health up. Let the kids watch tv all day, eat frozen pizzas, don't overstress about the cleaning, and remember, you WILL get past the first few weeks and it will be ok! Even if you have to do it without much help!

Chapter 28 Ask Dr. Mom

First child eats dirt. Parent calls doctor.

Second child eats dirt. Parent cleans out mouth.

Third child eats dirt. Parent wonders if she really needs to feed him lunch.

-Someecards InspiringLifeDreams.com

When in doubt, ask someone who's been there what they did. These days, if you don't actually know someone you can join a Facebook group and ask questions there. (Mine is Emaginemom if you want to join and ask a question...there's lots of experienced moms in there!)

But what about reading a book? Couldn't you read a book and get the answer?

Let's just say I have a Love/Hate relationship with parenting books. Did I say Love/Hate? I mean mostly Hate. (Which is ironic since this is kind of a parenting book??) Every time I read a parenting book when my kids were little, namely when they were babies, I would read the book, try to follow what they said for a few weeks, quit, then spend three months feeling guilty for not doing what they said. Seriously, why can't any author get the idea that all situations are different? That babies are all different? That all moms are different? That some moms stay home, some moms work, some moms have helpful husbands, some moms have husbands that don't even know where the diapers are!

Some books are more guilt ridden than others. After my 4th baby I got up the courage to read this book that many of my most organized friends had read. You know, those moms who have clean kitchens and schedule their babies by the hour (if you are one, I SO admire you! Keep up the good work!) I honestly can't even remember the name of the book. Thank goodness, because I wouldn't want you to go read it just for curiosity's sake! It's horrible. The name is something like, "The Perfect Way to Raise a Perfect Baby". No, just kidding, I actually have no idea what it was called, but it was that obnoxious.

I thought for sure, by baby number 4, that I had been missing something by not reading this book. After all, many of my friends had followed it. So of course, I read it. And tried to follow it for about a second, felt guilty for 3 months as usual, then threw it in the trash. Feeling guilty, that maybe I shouldn't have thrown it away, I read some reviews on it on the internet...maybe I had missed something? I had not! There were actually people in these posts that had followed the book perfectly and their children ended up with MENTAL PROBLEMS! No joke! Turns out, after further investigation, none of my friends actually did follow it exactly. They followed the parts they liked...and then "cheated" by giving their kids pacifiers, holding them while they slept, not always following the schedule, etc. Well that would have been nice to know 3 months ago!! Not to mention all the first time moms that read that book thinking it was the RIGHT WAY TO RAISE A BABY! Scary!

I'm just saying, when in doubt, follow your gut! Sometimes people give bad advice! Even books!

The only baby book I really liked was "Secrets of the Baby Whisperer" by Tracy Hogg. I thought she had some really practical tips on how to understand your baby. Also, she doesn't lump all babies into one category. She categorizes them into different personalities. I felt like this was more helpful in reading a baby, especially a newborn, and adjusting your parenting style to work with that unique little person, with your unique family situation.

My recommendation if you need help, is to ask other moms. Make sure to ask several so you get more than one opinion. I think advice from moms is the best because it's from someone who's been in the trenches. Then once you get several perspectives, you can decide which one you like best, and try it.

Chapter 29 Babies (3 -12 Months)

***Babies are ok if you're into alarm clocks that poop. -@thecatwhisprer
Scarymommy.com***

I know some moms love the newborn stage. And I'm just as much of a sucker for a tiny baby as anyone. But to me, once they get into the BABY stage, it's GAME ON! Now they really start to show their personality, and everyone has adjusted at least in good part, to having a new person in the house. (Although I do recall my firstborn, who was about 1 and a half when his little brother was born. He looked at that little baby like it was a lamp that we were gonna take back at some point. When he finally realized his little bro was here to stay, boy was that a bad day! Talk about a tantrum! Thankfully that was the end of it. Now they're 20 and 19 and still roommates!!!)

With babies the changes happen so fast, you don't want to miss any of it. The little smiles when they get to 3 months, turning over at about 6 months, crawling, and then walking around a year. Let's just say we took a LOT of pictures and video of our firstborn. Seriously, we probably have his first year practically documented to the minute! Of course, as more kids came, there was less and less documentation. I used to think, "Poor kid, we never took very many pictures of that one." But my friend Kate set me straight...it wasn't that we didn't take enough pictures of the younger ones, it's that we took WAY TOO MANY pictures of the first ones!! I mean, seriously, how many videos of the baby trying to crack a smile does one person need?? It's like taking video of kids opening Christmas presents...does anyone really want to watch an hour of that 20 years later? A couple quick pics would be plenty!

But one thing about all the changes that babies speed through in the first year is that all the stuff that drives you crazy changes too!

Like feeding a baby. Something that worked for one might not work for another. Or something that worked for a while suddenly doesn't work anymore and you have to switch. Thankfully there are only about 20 different ways to do it! You can breast feed, or formula feed, you can pump your milk and feed it in a bottle, you can mix all those up. You can add formula to the breast milk, you can add cereal to the milk once they get older so hopefully they sleep better. You can start giving them solid food at about 6 months, or earlier, especially if you have grandparents involved! When we would visit my mom she would always be trying to feed them anything she happened to have handy...ice cream, cake, gravy, mashed potatoes, spaghetti...you name it, she would feed it to them. I didn't really get a say!

When my second was about 5 months old I gave him his first oatmeal. Previous to that, while breastfeeding, he only pooped once a week. Let's just say, after that oatmeal he emptied out everything he'd been saving up for the last 5 months!

I guess it didn't phase him though, because when he turned about 6 months, we were sitting at dinner and my hubby and I and his toddler brother were eating lasagna. I looked at my 6 month old in the high chair and he was looking at that lasagna and grabbing for it like it was the best thing he had ever seen in his life! I really didn't want to give him any. I was worried it would upset his stomach and we'd have a long night! But he wanted some so bad, I finally gave in! He loved it and was perfectly fine, and to this day he loves spicy food.

One thing about babies, is keeping them entertained is a full time job! It's AMAZING how much STUFF it takes to keep a baby happy...swings, bouncers, jumpers, boppies, walkers, exersaucers, front carriers, back carriers, etc. Going on a trip was like taking enough luggage for 10 people! And if you had to pair down to fit it all, it was like being 007 visiting Q to see what kind of gadgets he had, and then trying to decide which ones would be best to help defeat the baby boredom for the weekend!

My personal go-to was usually the baby backpack. I used it around the house, outside, at church...babies love to see what's going on and be near mom, and it kept my hands free to do other stuff. And that is no little thing when you have a baby! Having one hand, or no hands, is not exactly productive! And considering how much babies like to be held, that's usually the way it is! So the backpack was perfect.

Babies have this stage that they go through where they can't really crawl yet. They're still rolling around, or they're sitting up, but they can't really get to where they want to go that well. It's kind of like a little hippo that can't walk, except they have hands, and are super curious...so I guess more like a baby hippo scientist that can't walk! And at some point they've played with their own toys so many times that they're just sick of them. And as a mom, it's all you can do to just find something for the kid to play with.

You're scrounging all around the house to find anything. Something with a different texture that's not plastic because most of the toys are plastic, so something wood, or something that's shaped different, or something that's cloth. I mean, you get so desperate, you nearly give them a box of matches and some cigarettes because you're ready to give them just about anything that will keep them occupied for a little while, so that they're happy, and you can help another kid or get something done.

And then after you've finally reached the end of your rope, right about that time when you just can't find anything else for them to play with that will keep them happy, they decide they're going to start crawling or walking. And they turn from baby hippos to tiny looters, looking for anything at all that they can pull down, open up, or take apart. Everything in the house now has to be barricaded. The stairs have to be barricaded. The cabinet doors have to be barricaded. All the cleaners have to be put up. The kids have to make sure that their Legos aren't on the floor. Nothing is safe and nothing is sacred! And you go from trying to find them something to do to trying to keep them out of things! So before that happens...

First Kid...Don't forget to Relax!

When I had my first baby, I did get some good advice given to me by other people. Things like, "Well, you know make sure you just watch a lot of movies and hang out, take naps and enjoy yourself."

But of course, with the first baby, I felt guilty all the time because it was so weird to not be working. And so I felt like I needed to always be busy. And I wished in hindsight that I had taken their advice because of course you don't realize until you have the second child that once you have the second child you CANNOT sit down. There is no relaxing. There are no movies. There are no reading books or taking naps. It's balls to the wall. So I wish that when I'd had my first one I had just really taken advantage of that because you don't ever get it again. You won't ever have another time when you can just sit (or even stand up and sway) with a baby and kind of just chill. So take advantage of it!

Chapter 30 Toddlers

There should be an energy drink named 6 AM Toddler. -@simoncholland, Redtricycle.com

Welcome to the wonderful world of toddlers. Okay, I just have to say that I think one-year-old is the best age. They're even cute when they're throwing a tantrum. They're so cute. It's like seeing that baby Yoda from the Madelorian...it doesn't matter whether it's on a t-shirt or a billboard, you just want to pick it up and hug it! There's just nothing they can do that isn't adorable.

When you see a one-year-old walking it's SO adorable. I remember one time I was standing outside my front door and I looked down the street and there was this teeny tiny person walking next to an adult and it had to be a one-year-old...they were so tiny and so cute!

As you see babies grow and toddlers grow it blows your mind the amount of information and learning that they take in and how darned smart they are! And watching a little one-year-old, like a little bitty person, learning how to walk, and learning how to talk, and just learning...it's like having a little Einstein in your midst (and the hair is the same too!) How they discover so many things in life is fascinating!

You know how you give them a present, and just the whole event of unwrapping the present is just amazing to them? And of course, there's the old stereotype, which is always true that they just want to play with the box. So why not just give them the box, right? And they love the wrapping paper. The whole experience is so fun. I've seen so many times where little one-year-olds would get tired of opening presents because, well, they'd already done that and they figured it out so it wasn't interesting anymore! But have no fear, there's still more to discover, like finding Easter eggs or getting candy at the neighbor's house for Halloween. Just everything about life is a discovery at one. And they're just so adorable. (Have I said that, already?)

And at two, it still just carries over. They are just so interested in life and they're still pretty cute and small. Especially the first half of two, they're still pretty babyish, but as they get older and older, they start to get that bossiness. I've always heard this saying that I thought was so true--

It's easier to negotiate with a terrorist than a toddler!

They always have to have it their own way. They have to have the red socks. They have to have the peanut butter sandwich cut with a certain knife or cut in a certain way. They have to have the pink dress. The one with the ruffles, not the one with the lace. They have to have the same exact piece of cookie that their sibling had. They have to have this shoe on and that shoe off, or they have to be half naked or the world is coming to an end!

That is just how toddlers are. And if anybody says to you, "The terrible twos," they are lying. It is not the terrible twos. It's absolutely, unequivocally, the terrible threes. You thought King Kong was bad? You ain't seen nothin' yet!

Chapter 31 Terrible Threes

Sorry I'm late. Had to watch my child go through the 5 stages of grief before putting on a pair of pants. -coffee.mom.repeat RedTricycle.com

I remember when my first born Daniel hit three, it was like a switch went off and somebody replaced my cute little toddler with this crazy person that I never met before and didn't have any idea about what to do with. He would throw these ginormous tantrums and in the most unlikely times and places.

When Daniel was three we had been getting visits from a group called, "Parents as Teachers." It's something you can sign up for in our state for children 4 and under (other states may have something similar.) They come to your house at different ages and they just check the child's development. They do some little activities with them to see where they're at in their development timeline, and give you little tips on how to help them get better if your little one needs help in any area, or let you know if they are advanced in any area. They also answer any parenting questions you might have.

I always just loved it. We always had really good Parents as Teachers representatives.

One of the things they did was kindergarten screening. Even though Daniel was three, they suggested that I take him to the kindergarten screening, because they would test his development and it might just be nice to see where he was at. Well, of course, being a fairly new mother, I did what they told me to do and I took him.

At that time I also had Buckley, who was one and a half. I was also super pregnant with our third at that point. So like any naive parent, I innocently walked into the building where they had the screening....not knowing I was headed to my doom!

So the plan was that you go into this building and then they call your child, and your child goes in the room with the Parents as Teachers representative. And each room in this little building has different activities that they do just to see where they're at in various kinds of development.

So I was sitting in the foyer with Daniel and Buckley, and every once in a while a representative comes in and they call a child's name, and that sweet little four or five-year-old just goes right back with them, no problem, does everything that needs to be done, and comes obediently back to their parent in the foyer.

But when they came in and called Daniel's name, he refused to go. So we went back and forth a little bit, and the lady finally said, "Well, you can come with him."

So I went in there with him and brought Buckley along. The lady was trying to do activities with him like stack these blocks, or have him tell her the letter, or what have you. He looked at her like she had three heads! He was not having any of it. He was not going to do anything she said, because he was three. He had a mind of his own and he was not going to cooperate. But we didn't want to give up right away, so we kept trying different things. I kept trying to encourage him to do it and she kept trying to encourage him to do it and finally, he had a meltdown like no other. He started kicking, and screaming, and throwing himself around and there was NOTHING we tried made a difference. So she picked up Buckley, and I had a hold of Daniel who was screaming and crying and kicking me like I was a kidnapper (did I mention I was eight months pregnant?) while we file passed every single person in the building to get to the car. It was glorious.

So a couple of weeks later, I had an appointment with the nurse practitioner at the health department. That's where I was going to take the kids to get their well-child checkups because it was free. I didn't really love it, but I just put up with it because being a new mom, everyone said you had to have these well-child visits, so I thought it was the right thing to do. In hindsight, going to them was really a bad idea.

They would ask you everything under the sun like, do you give your child milk? How many cups? Do you give your child juice? How many glasses? Do you have guns? Are they separated from the ammunition? Do you keep them in a gun closet? Do you have this in your house? Do you have that in your house? Where is it? How far away is it from your child? Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. It was extremely invasive.

Can I just insert right here that, if anyone is ever that nosy, your mom antenna should be going up! Because they probably don't have your best interest at heart...more like their OWN interest (or agenda.)

On top of all that the nurse practitioner was of the opinion that you shouldn't spank your child. Well, okay, so maybe I would have believed that a year before, when my kids were normal human beings. But my first born had now turned three and had been replaced by an alien who spoke only screaming and crying except for when he was telling ME the way it was going to be. And I had tried the "We come in Peace" bit...now it was all out war and survival! And spanking was sounding better all the time!

Well one of the problems that we had started to encounter was that he was too big to stay in a crib, but he wouldn't stay in his bed at night. So that was the one time where he would get a spanking, so that he would stay in his bed. The alternative was to put a lock on his door, which seemed really scary to me, as I would have worried that he had somehow found something to put in his mouth that he might choke on. Also, his little brother was in there, so that worried me too. That didn't seem like a better alternative.

Honestly, I really was looking for all the good advice I could get. So I asked the nurse practitioner how to handle him because when we went to see her, he didn't want to cooperate

with her either. He was going to have nothing to do with her trying to probe him, or talk to him, or mess with him in any way, and she was getting really frustrated.

So I said, "Well, ever since he turned three, I am just not quite sure how to handle him. He really has a mind of his own and he just does not want to cooperate." And I said, "When he gets out of his bed at night, I have to give him a spanking so that he'll stay in his bed." And she said, "Oh, you shouldn't spank him. That's not a good idea. That's not a good way to discipline kids." And I said, "Oh, well, what do you think I should do?" I mean, I was being really sincere. I really felt totally out of my league and wanted to get some good advice. Unfortunately, she had no thoughts on the matter, which was extremely unhelpful, and made me realize that she had some very high opinions but no practical advice whatsoever.

Daniel was not the only one who had some extraordinary events happen at the age of three! One time we (our whole family) were down at the baseball field watching one of the boys play. While Ron and I were watching the game the other kids were playing in an empty field. And little Genevieve, at age three, came over crying her eyes out because they had found something (I think it was a cardboard tube). And the older kids took it from her. So she was having a major meltdown. And there was nothing we could do to get her to calm down.

Finally, my husband put her over his shoulder and was going to take her to the minivan so that she wouldn't disrupt all the other people who were trying to watch the baseball game. But when he got to the van, it was full of bicycles because we had taken the bikes out for a ride that day. Well, we don't live far from the baseball field. In fact, we live just up the hill. So, he decided he would just keep her over his shoulder and walk her home. Well, she was screaming bloody murder and kicking and hitting and throwing a humongous tantrum. And so as he walked up the hill, someone called the cops on him because they thought that he was abducting her!

When the cops came, he was totally caught off guard and got totally freaked out, but he handled it really well. And when the cops realized that it was really his daughter, they said, "You really need to take her home and give her a spanking." So it worked out after all! And I'm telling you, when that cop came and tried to take her away from her dad, she clammed up right away because she was NOT letting any stranger take her! And that was the end of that tantrum.

Another time, I was with all the kids at a mall. We had parked near a totally different building and walked across a skywalk to get from one building to the other. And it's quite a ways. Once you park and then walk through the first building and go across the skywalk and get into the second building and then get into the mall, you're talking probably a quarter of a mile.

So we were having a really great time. I had the double stroller. Genevieve was sitting in it, her little brother, Joe was there and the three older kids were all bopping along next to me. And we went and got something to eat. And we looked at the toy store and there was a play area. And we just had a really nice time. And then something happened. I don't even remember what

happened, but Genevieve decided that she didn't get whatever it is that she wanted. And that was the end of it. She threw a HUGE fit right in the middle of the mall. And I was nowhere near the van. I was all the way on the other side of the mall with a huge tantrum-throwing three-year-old and three other kids, plus a little one in the front of the stroller. And I was trying everything I could to get her to calm down. Nothing was working. So I finally just started moving as fast as I could through the mall to the skywalk to get to my car. All along the way, people were stopping me and asking me if they could help me, and I said, "Well, I don't really think there's anything you can do." And so we went through the entire quarter-mile walk with her screaming, trying to keep her strapped in to the stroller, having to keep strapping her in the stroller when she wiggled out of the straps and just keep her contained until we got to the van. It was awful.

Needless to say, sometimes you can't negotiate with a toddler. You just have to let them get over themselves. Thankfully, if you can catch them early, before it really gets going, sometimes you can head it off with distraction, or a firm voice, or negotiation, or bribery! But there's just times there is nothing you can do except contain, until it blows over. Thankfully, this too shall pass! They all grow out of it eventually! Hopefully sooner than later!

Chapter 32 Potty Training

I gave my 3-year-old candy for using the potty, and she told me, "Good Job." Now I'm not sure if I'm training her or she's training me. -@XplodingUnicorn, Twitter

As all moms I started out potty training with the greatest of enthusiasm! I was like Julie Andrews in the *Sound of Music*, flitting about, ever the optimist, believing full well everything would go swimmingly, and my 2 year old would be potty trained before you could say, "Mommy, can I go to the bathroom?" And of course it went perfectly! Just as expected! And my nose is growing while I write this because of course it didn't go like I expected it to at all! With my first I started when he was 2, and he wasn't fully potty trained until well into 3.

With the second I thought, "Surely this time will be better!" I put on my Julie Andrews countenance and my rosier glasses and went into the process fully committed! Julie was soon found sobbing in a field of drooping daisies, as, once again, her wonderfully planned expectations dissolved before her very eyes!

Ok, third child. This one is a girl! Maybe this one will be easier!

Let's just say, by kid 6, Julie Andrews had morphed into something more like Shrek...a realistic pessimist. The way I figured it, if I did nothing at all, surely by 5 or 6 the kid would have trained himself! Well, my oldest daughter and husband kept badgering me to potty train the now 3 year old. I told them, if they wanted him potty trained, THEY could do the job! So, my 6th child was potty trained by my 11 year old daughter. Personally, I feel like patting myself on the back for such incredible delegating skills!

So what's the point of the story, you may ask? Just that, your kiddo will actually sort of "train himself" if you just wait til he's a little older. I mean, have you ever seen a kindergartner in a diaper? Eventually they will want to be like everyone else and ditch the diapers.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not saying don't potty train your kid. Yes, potty train your kid. Try all the methods and find one that works. Every kid's different, so you kinda just have to take your ideas and "throw it on the wall and see what sticks" (the ideas I mean, not the poop!) Just don't start at one and a half, or right at 2. Ok, ok, there ARE kids out there that will potty train at that age. And if you try it and it works like a charm, wonderful! Just don't beat your head against the wall trying to train a kid that's not ready. It takes WAY too much time and energy. Wait til they're way into their 3's and I bet it will go a lot faster!

Just one more exception I'd like to address. Some kids have peeing and pooping issues way into their adolescence. I've had it with some of my kids and I know many parents who have dealt with it. Some kids wet the bed, some hate to poop so they will hold it until it gets in their pants or clogs the toilet, some are terrible about wiping. I'm just giving you a heads up in case this happens with your kiddo. It sucks, but it's normal. There are many ways to address these problems, and eventually they do go away. I promise, they will get better....at least by high school! LOL

Potty Training Tips:

- Let them help you pick out some new "big girl" panties or "big boy" underwear. If you don't already have a potty seat, let them help pick that out too.
- Read a book to them while they're on the pot.
- For boys, put cheerios in the potty for them to aim at.
- Sing a song together while they go. Make up a "Potty Song".
- Let them run around naked as much as you can. This will help them realize more easily when they need to go.
- Have them go to the potty with you or Dad (which they probably already do anyway!) and show them how fun and easy it is. Or have them go with a sibling. Sometimes they want to do whatever big brother or sister is doing.
- M&M's or small candy is always a good incentive. Keep it on hand and give them a few pieces for a job well done. Just don't be surprised if they suddenly want to go potty all the time!
- Ok, here's one I've never tried but saw in a magazine recently that I thought was brilliant: put toilet cleaner or dish soap in the potty. When they pee, the cleaner will turn from blue to green. Or alternatively, the dish soap will make bubbles.

To Do:

You know the routine! Now that you've read Part 3, let's do a little exercise. Here is a list of the topics in this section. Look them over and then answer the following questions:

Making the most of time before babies

Morning sickness

Prepartem

Doctors vs. midwives

Birth

Dads and birth

Hospitals vs. Homebirths

Newborns

Sleep

Feeding

Getting help

Asking for advice from other moms

Babies

Toddlers

Terrible Threes

Potty training

Name three things you did that were awesome or that worked great for you related to one of these topics: (i.e. I lined up meals and lots of help when my baby was born which made it easier on me and everyone in the family, I figured out an amazing way to potty train, or I made the most of my time before my first baby and took a trip to Spain!)

Name one thing you started out doing but realized it wasn't working and switched. And if you need to, ditch the mom guilt about it! (i.e. I started out breastfeeding but it wasn't working out so I switched to formula)

Write down one thing that is driving you crazy right now and tell yourself, "This too shall pass!" (i.e. my kid keeps putting his hands in the toilet!)

Now, take 3 deep breaths, remind yourself you're not the only one going through this, that there are other moms who feel your pain! And thank God for this beautiful child (or children) he's blessed you with!

Chapter 33 Jesus in the Middle

If you want to get closer to God drive in the passenger seat with a teenage driver. You'll be reciting prayers you haven't said in years. -Raisingteenstoday.com

When I was a kid I had a wonderful childhood. My mom was so fun. When we were little she let my sister and I strip down to our underwear and skate around the kitchen on shaving cream that she had generously sprayed all over the linoleum. That was just one example of a lot of creative fun we had. She always worked but it was always something that had a flexible schedule, like cleaning houses or selling real estate, or taking care of our rental properties. So she was home and available a lot.

My dad worked a lot and was more strict than mom (every blue moon mom would let us just stay home from school for the fun of it. I'm guessing dad never knew!) but he was also very loving. One of my favorite memories from childhood was the time he took my sister and I to the creek and let us float our barbies through the big culverts that ran under the low water bridge. As I got older my dad and I became very close.

My grandparents lived 2 miles away on a farm. I spent the majority of every summer sleeping over at their house. Grandma was always home, and my cousins and aunts and uncles lived across the field from her house, so there was always more going on at her house than ours, since we lived farther out in the country. And I always wanted to be where the action was! Plus I loved hanging out with Grandma and Grandpa. Grandma ran the house and Grandpa ran the farm. So there was always some cooking, or gardening or getting eggs or feeding cows to help with.

My grandparents raised pigs and there were little houses scattered around the field for the pigs to sleep in. One time my cousin Michelle and I wanted to use one of the pig houses for a play house. It was close to the farmhouse and hadn't been used for a while. We BEGGED Grandma to clean it out for us so we could use it. "I'm not going to waste a day cleaning that thing...I know you won't end up playing in it, or you'll play in it for a day and forget about it!" But we begged and begged. Finally she gave in. She spent all afternoon cleaning it. Guess how much we used it? None. Awe, the words of the wise!

I loved going to feed the cows with Grandpa. He had an eagle eye and would spot all kinds of critters as we drove out to the field. When we got there we put out hay bales and salt blocks, but we also got to stand in the back of the truck and feed them slices of day old bread from the local bread company that my uncle worked for. If you were brave, you would wait for them to amble over to you and eat it out of your hand with their big blue tongues!

My grandparents believed in Jesus and they went to a Baptist church every Sunday. My parents weren't so keen on religion, so we never went. And that bothered my grandma. So when I got around school age, she started taking me to church with her and Grandpa.

I went along with it for a while but I didn't like the Sunday School teacher. She was snippy and kinda made you feel like you were always doing something wrong. And since I didn't HAVE to go to church, I decided I wasn't gonna! Well, Grandma didn't give up. She would call every week to see if I was going to go. I just kept telling her no. But boy did I wrestle with my conscience! It was hard to disappoint her, even if I DIDN'T like the teacher! But eventually she gave up, when I just wouldn't budge.

A few years later my cousin begged me to go to the Baptist church camp with her. I really didn't want to go. I was about 10 or so, and I didn't like the idea of being away from home for a week. But she was persistent. Plus, my grandma was the cook, so the fact that she was there made me feel better. So I went.

I ended up loving it. I made a good friend named Tamarin, and our trademark was to wear our shoes without putting our heels in. The back was smooshed down. All along they had chapel every day, but for some reason one particular chapel really affected me. I don't remember who the speaker was or what exactly he said, I just remember he talked about Jesus loving us and being our savior, if we accepted him into our lives. And I knew right then that I wanted that. That I believed Jesus had died for me and I wanted to know him. So at the end, when he asked people to come up if they wanted to accept Jesus as their savior, I did. My camp counselor took me aside and we prayed together.

So that week I became addicted to two things: camp, and Jesus.

When I got back home, at the tender age of 10, I decided, come hell or high water (preferably not hell!!) I was going to find a church to go to every week. I didn't want to go to Grandma's church...just in case that cranky ol' Sunday School teacher was still there! And the only other person I knew who went to church was my cousin, so I decided I would start there. I asked my aunt if I could go with her. My parents took me to her house on Sunday morning and I went with my aunt and cousins to church. I loved it. The Sunday School teacher was really nice. I don't even remember who she was now, but there were only two of us in the class, and she was very kind and tried to answer all our questions. So I kept going every week.

A few weeks later the pastor, Don, asked me if I wanted to be baptized. I had seen people baptized at my Grandma's church, so I knew basically what it was, I just didn't know why people did it. He explained it to me and I knew that I wanted to be baptized. Whatever it took to follow Jesus, I wanted it. So we decided together that a couple weeks later I would be baptized at the church.

When I got in the van with my aunt and cousins after church, I started crying. My aunt was alarmed! But I wasn't sad, I was happy. At the time, I don't think I really understood why I would cry when I was happy! But in hindsight, I think the Holy Spirit had just come on me because I was going to be baptized, and I knew that it was the right thing to do.

A few weeks later I got baptized, and being a little country church, they all came up one by one afterwards and shook my hand and told me how happy they were for me.

And that's how God got ahold of me, and in the process gave me a whole other family to help raise me. My parents raised me, my grandparents raised me, and my church raised me. I stayed at that church until I went to college. I went every Sunday morning, every Sunday night, and every Wednesday night. My parents would drop me off, or I would hitch a ride with my aunt or the pastor. But somehow I always made it there.

Over the years they all became my family. One of the older ladies taught me to sing parts with the piano, and one of the youth leaders taught me bible verses. I went to VBS in the summers, and then when I got bigger I volunteered and helped. Almost every week I would sneak up behind old Arthur Paul and snap his suspenders. He would act alarmed and then we'd both have a good laugh! The pastor became my friend and he took all of us youth to all kinds of events when we got to be in middle and high school. And when I got older I got to lead music on Sunday nights. In the summer after we went to camp, I would always come back excited to teach the whole church all the cool songs we learned, actions and all! And they would humor me and try their best, just because they were kind and they cared about me (even though they probably really thought it was silly!)

The second week I attended church I met two girls a year younger than me. They were twins, Amy and Beth. We became fast friends. We were close all the way through school, along with a few other girls (and guys) that were close to our age. I did like to tease them sometimes about their boyfriends. When we were young they would say, "I'm going out with so-and-so," and I would say, "Where are you going? The PLAYGROUND?" And laugh hysterically. They went to a different school than me which was smaller, so when they got older, I would tease them that all they did was trade boyfriends, since there were only a few girls and a few boys in a class!!

When I was young I may or may not have still been bullying my younger cousin, even at church! Let's just say, I had some maturing to do! My poor aunt, she put up with a lot!

I had a few good friends at church, but not really any at school. Then one day, in 7th grade, I got the courage to switch to a different table and see if I could find any friends. If you've ever been in middle school, you'll know that switching tables is a BIG deal. It was one of the best decisions of my young life. I might as well have been deciding to walk straight into a den of tigers with a pack of hyenas sitting behind me watching, laughing all the way at my impending doom!

Luckily, it turned out great. I met Emily, who would become my best friend for the rest of Jr. High and High School. She loved Jesus and it was so cool to have a friend who was so deep.

One of the things we did together was start attending Youth for Christ. I loved the speakers, and the kids I met, and Emily and I got to sit in on some special prayer meetings and pray for people. That was a cool growing experience. Aside from that, the other awesome thing about YFC was the games! Middle school and junior high students will play ANYTHING! And I mean ANYTHING! I remember having soda chugging contests, and food eating competitions (some of them blindfolded, so that you didn't know what you were eating!) But my favorite was raw chicken football. We would actually play football with a raw chicken. The game was over when the chicken fell apart! I'm pretty sure no modern youth leader would be caught dead leading a game of raw chicken football! They'd probably be sued! But hey, that was the 80's!

When I was 16 my parents divorced. It was rough. I remember one day I was at my grandma and grandpa's and I just couldn't stop crying. After a couple hours my pastor came by because he was supposed to pick me up for the Sunday evening service. He could tell I was having a really rough time, so when we got to church he offered to let me use his office so I could have some time to myself while he went and got the service ready. I remember standing in his office and just praying, "Lord, just help me remember, no matter what, that you're with me."

A few months later, at school, I kept hearing these stories about a guy named Jeremy who was leading other students to Christ. Evidently he had been a real rebel, and God totally got ahold of him and changed his life, and now he was leading people to Christ. Then a girl I had gotten to know who was an exchange student, told me about how he had shared about Jesus with her and it had changed her life.

I thought to myself, "I gotta meet this guy!" It turned out my cousin had met him, and she said she'd introduce me. At the time they had just started a really cool event for high school and college students at a church in town called Friday Night Live. She had met him there, so the next time I went with her. Well, I met Jeremy, and with him was his best friend--this guy named Ron. Wow, was he cute! But he was in college, so I didn't think much of it.

But after the event, I wanted to walk around and talk to people, because there were some people there I knew, and Ron offered to go with me! I wasn't sure what to think!

A couple weeks later I was at a concert at a church and Ron happened to be there with Jeremy. During intermission I went over with my friends and we talked. I was really happy to see him, but again, I didn't think he was in my league! Unbeknownst to me, he told Jeremy that day, "I'm gonna marry that girl." Well, he was right! Four years later we were married.

Fast forward a couple more years and we started having kids. We never really said, "We want to have 6 kids." We just had one and then looked at each other one day and said, "Hey, do you want to have another one?" and then the other person would say, "Cool, yah, let's do it." And that was about how each one of them came about!

When the first one, Daniel, got to school age, I thought it might be neat to homeschool. I figured, I'd taught them everything they knew so far, so why not keep going? So that's what we did.

During the years we homeschooled we would read the bible plus some kind of chapter book/novel in the mornings after breakfast. Every morning, inevitably, Daniel and Riley would fight about who got the couch. Daniel is the oldest boy and Riley is the oldest girl. Of course, being the oldest, Daniel thought he was in charge. But Riley, being the oldest girl, was sure she was the boss as soon as she came out of the womb! And that's how two tweenagers, on a huge 7 seater sectional, picked a fight EVERY DAY about who got the couch. Because it wasn't enough just to sit on the couch, proper like. They had to have their blanket, and stretch out, and if anyone's toes accidentally strayed past the other person's boundary, the war was on!

And so, one day I innocently started reading the bible. All the kids were gathered in the living room after breakfast, curled up at 9 in the morning in their blankets and pj's (because, hey, we're homeschoolers, so why not??) And everything was going good for once! And that day I was reading something serious...the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. And of course, like any parent, I hoped that this important story would resonate with my beloved offspring. Well, I got more than I bargained for! Because Daniel and Riley started up their age old rivalry, and it got so bad that the other kids got into it too. Well, I may or may not have raised my voice a few octaves. One or two of the kids got so mad at each other that they stomped off. So I had to chase them down. I may or may not have raised my voice another few octaves!

By the time I got them all settled again, I really didn't know if I should keep reading! I mean, let's just say the aura in the room wasn't exactly godly!!! How could I read the bible when we all still had steam coming out our ears! And so I blurted out, "And now you can see why we all need Jesus!" Let's just say, if we didn't think we needed Jesus before, it was now abundantly apparent!

Thank goodness Jesus loves me, even though I'm a knucklehead. If you haven't watched the show "The Chosen", you need to watch it! It shows Jesus in real life living with and teaching his 12 knuckleheads...I mean, disciples! He's so real, so full of grace, and even funny! Yet he is also so pointed in his approach to healing people, not just physically, but emotionally. He gets right to the root of the matter, and people change. They are set free.

That's what I want for you--to know the incredible love, power, and freedom of God. When I was 10 God gave me this as a gift when he saved me. I still don't comprehend it, and I have to

work every day to believe it! Sometimes it's so hard to believe! But I pray that you believe it, and know how incredible his love is! This is the prayer I pray for my kids, and this is the prayer I pray for you (from Ephesians chapter 3 in the Bible):

“14-15 When I think of the wisdom and scope of his plan, I fall down on my knees and pray to the Father of all the great family of God—some of them already in heaven and some down here on earth— **16** that out of his glorious, unlimited resources he will give you the mighty inner strengthening of his Holy Spirit. **17** And I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your hearts, living within you as you trust in him. May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love; **18-19** and may you be able to feel and understand, as all God's children should, how long, how wide, how deep, and how high his love really is; and to experience this love for yourselves, though it is so great that you will never see the end of it or fully know or understand it. And so at last you will be filled up with God himself.

20 Now glory be to God, who by his mighty power at work within us is able to do far more than we would ever dare to ask or even dream of—infinately beyond our highest prayers, desires, thoughts, or hopes. **21** May he be given glory forever and ever through endless ages because of his master plan of salvation for the Church through Jesus Christ.”

You are a mom, yes, but you are also God's daughter. He loves you SO much, and wants the best for you! And one thing he promises, no matter how crazy and unexpected motherhood becomes, he is with you. "He will never leave you or forsake you." Deuteronomy 31:8.

The End.

***After all this parenting I think I'll become a hostage negotiator. Seems less stressful.
-phoebeholmes.com***

I hope this book made you feel understood, related to, less stressed, encouraged, and possibly even inspired. If so, I did my job! I'll tell you one thing, I had fun writing it, so at least one person got a good laugh!

I hope you loved this book so much you buy one for your friend (or maybe twenty friends??) Ok, that's my shameless plug!

Laugh more, have more fun, be careful with the label maker, and don't carry your screaming child home over your shoulder! It could be disastrous!

And Don't Forget!

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