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What No One Tells You About Early Motherhood

By Denise Schipani

Why don't we tell each other the truth about how hard it is in the first six weeks?

Different Than Expected

Scrooge Mom

I adore my son. At 18 months old, he's my boyfriend, my little bit on the side. What I feel for him sometimes borders on rapture, especially when we're making each other laugh by rubbing noses, or when I nuzzle his neck -- that secret chubby spot at the back that stays warm the longest after a nap. One flash of his grin, and I'm all aflutter. I'm in school again, writing his name over and over like a crush.

It was not always thus. Once the adrenaline rush of giving birth to Daniel faded, I set about Feeling Mother Love, and lo and behold, it didn't happen. I didn't love him. Truth be told, in those early weeks, I had to muster enough emotion to even like him.

My husband would come home and declare how he'd missed Daniel all day long. I looked at the boy and thought, "Him? You missed him?" I couldn't fathom what there was to miss. He hadn't done a thing all day, unless you count peeing in my face when I removed his diaper, or crying for three hours straight for no discernable reason.

Love him? Miss him? Bah, humbug. I was a Scrooge mom.

The Nitty-Gritty of Early Weeks

At six weeks, I took him with me to my ob-gyn's office for my checkup. The way she and her nurse were oohing and ahing over him ("He's so cuddly!" "Look at those eyes!") gave me pangs. My doctor, bless her, must have noticed the look of fear and panic in my eyes.

"This is the bottom, I promise," she said. "This week, or next week maybe, he'll smile and it'll all be worthwhile."

Now, what you might be expecting me to say here is that he did smile, and that I melted and never looked back. But that would be only partly right. I melted, but I always look back. I am determined to remember how I felt in those early weeks, to share with other women the nitty-gritty of how awful it was. Not because I enjoy being a purveyor of doom-and-gloom tales, but because I care enough to be honest.

Yes, I will say to anyone who will listen, there were days I wanted to pop my screaming baby out onto the fire escape and forget he ever existed. Yes, there were times I asked my husband, in all seriousness, whose brilliant idea it had been to have a baby (uh, mine).

What are we doing, as women, when we don't tell each other the truth? Why do we gloss over it? It's not possible that we fully forget. Is

it some sort of benign neglect? Or is it the mothering instinct itself kicking in? Just as we want to shield our children from the scary monsters of the world, perhaps we also want to shield other women from the utter horror show that life with a newborn baby can be.

The Truth

So here goes, ladies. It is really, really bad. You do not sleep. You think you're eating, but you're really not (I would find half-consumed sandwiches hours after lunchtime, perched on the arm of the couch where they were abandoned during one disastrous nursing session or another).

Your husband offers to take over on the fourth hour of trying to soothe your crying baby, and you think you've let him until you realize that you're still standing there, unable to lie down. You long, literally long, to do a normal task like paying a bill or folding a towel.

And the worst is in the middle of the night, when you're rocking, rocking, rocking, and pacing, pacing, pacing, staring out the window at other quiet, dark houses and thinking, "Everyone out there is sleeping." Those are the fire-escape moments.

When Daniel was just a few weeks old, we took him to a family party, and a young, childless woman, someone I don't know very well, came up to me and asked me that loaded question: "So, how does it feel to be a mother?" I studied her closely. Did she really want to know? I almost said, "Oh, it's just great." The lie would have been so simple, so soothing to us both, and that may well be why it's told so often. But I rallied. I didn't tell the lie.

I said, "You know, I can't really say. I just feel tired." I puzzled the heck out of the poor girl, a newlywed who probably had quaint visions of motherhood in her head. Forget it, sister. It sucks. And then it gets better. And then it gets even better. Just ask my boyfriend.

Denise Schipani just had her second son. She lives in Huntington, New York.

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