



How to HAVE A KID and a Life

A Survival Guide

ERICKA SÓUTER

CONTENTS

Introduction

A Reintroduction to Motherhood: The Baby
Isn't the Only Newborn in Your House . . . 1

One

The Myth of Modern Motherhood . . . 9

Two

The Motherhood Penalty:
How to Keep Your Career on Track . . . 27

Three

It Takes a Village . . . for You . . . 49

Four

The Real Mommy War . . . 77

Five

No Kidding: Why Your Child-Free
Friends Think You Are a Jerk . . . 91

Six

Post-Kid Marriage: It's a Thin
Line Between Love and Hate . . . 111

Seven

Who Needs the "I Have a Headache"
Excuse When You Have Kids? . . . 133

Eight

Not Every Woman Has the Mom Gene . . . 149

Nine

The Single-Minded . . . 169

Ten

It's Mommy's Turn to Wine . . . 181

Eleven

Motherhood May Not Be Enough . . . 199

Parent Resources . . . 219

Acknowledgments . . . 223

Notes . . . 227

About the Author . . . 245

Introduction

A Reintroduction to Motherhood: The Baby Isn't the Only Newborn in Your House

I don't think I have the mom gene," I used to tell friends with a laugh after a particularly tough day of being chauffeur, chef, hairstylist, laundress, maid, boo-boo healer, referee, mediator, homework helper, birthday organizer, and everything else motherhood entails. While I passed it off as a joke, I really did wonder if I was cut out for this. Was it *this* hard for everyone? Other women seemed so much more together. I couldn't figure out how to manage it all—work, marriage, kids, breathing room. I felt lost. So when I came across research suggesting that there was an actual mom gene, I became obsessed with the idea. Then an editor at CafeMom, I wrote an essay asking if the discovery of a mom gene could be the reason some of us find motherhood so hard. Could it be that some of us are better at it because of biology? It really resonated with readers. So many had been struggling. Many more than I realized. It sparked conversations, not just about being maternal but also about all the other unspoken challenges of motherhood. That is when I knew I wanted to write this book.

Like so many first-time moms, I was under the naïve impression that living with a newborn would be the hardest adjustment to parenthood. After all, as soon as you announce that you are expecting, everyone who has ever been within five feet of a baby bombards you with warnings about sleep schedules, colic, and my personal fave, never being able to pee in peace again. It's all well-meaning, of course, but it's far from the complete truth. In those first several months, you will learn that the turbulence of life with a baby is not actually the toughest part of your newly minted mommy status.

I have had the great fortune to spend hundreds of hours talking to mothers across the country from different racial, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Some longed to be moms their entire lives. Others debated whether it was something they wanted up until the day they found themselves staring at those two lines on a pregnancy test. No matter their path to parenthood, they all shared one universal truth: what they desperately wanted and could not find were real, meaningful discussions about the confidence-shaking, anxiety-causing, what-the-hell-happened-to-me, and why-doesn't-anyone-see-me-anymore reality of becoming a mother.

Before our blessed bundles arrive, our lives are filled with complications from work, romance, friendships, self-image, and much more. These issues become even more complex once kids are in the picture. New moms deal with everything from a sudden friction in their marriages to grown-up mean girls to navigating full-time careers alongside more-than-full-time motherhood. Perhaps Adrienne Rich captured it best in *Of Woman Born*:

No one mentions that psychic crisis of bearing a first child, the excitation of long-buried feelings about one's own mother, the sense of confused power and powerlessness, or being taken over on the one hand and of touching new physical and psychic potentialities on the other, a heightened sensibility which can be exhilarating, bewildering and exhausting.¹

It's enough to push you to the brink, but I'm here to tell you it doesn't have to. We just need to change the way we think and talk about motherhood. You see, when you become a mom, you are not just giving birth to a baby. A new you emerges as well. And it can feel like a seismic change. In fact, back in 1973 medical anthropologist Dana Raphael (who coined the term *doula*) named this life shift *matrescence*. Sounds like *adolescence*, and that's not by accident. According to Raphael, matrescence is like experiencing puberty all over again.

I turned to Dr. Aurélie Athan, a reproductive psychologist and Columbia University professor who has dedicated her life's work to this subject, for a deeper understanding. She was looking at the psychology of women over a life span, which meant taking a look at how life-welcoming events like having a child affect us. "Women were telling me about the good, the bad, the ugly, and the beautiful," she effused. "And they were telling me a lot about growth experiences, in the way they were stretched and deepened. They were telling me this was the most crippling and rewarding experience, both at the

same time.” It was apparent that motherhood was two sides of the same coin. One superb, one savage.

We have been conditioned to think a woman becomes a mother as soon as she gives birth. Of course, that’s biologically true, but it’s nowhere near as simple as that. Shifting from autonomous human to mom is more akin to a journey rather than one signifying event. And like puberty, it can be awkward, ugly, and uncomfortable. Your body changes, you get pimples and stretch marks. You are moody, emotional, and easily irritated. It even mimics the relationships of adolescence in the sense that social dynamics change, people drop out of your life, and loyalties realign. Sounds fun, right? Don’t worry, you will survive. In fact, you will love it if you know what to expect.

This transition to motherhood is different for every woman, according to Dr. Athan. In that sense, there is no exact beginning and no exact end point. The start for each of us is what she calls the “oh shit moment.” It’s the point when motherhood becomes real for you. For some, it could be the moment that all ten of those pregnancy tests you’ve peed on say positive or the first time you feel those quickening flutters in your pregnant belly. For Connecticut mom of two Natalie, it happened the second after her first baby was born. “I felt for the first time in my life I was in the right place,” gushed the writer, who blogs about motherhood and mental health at NatsNextAdventure.com. “It felt so peaceful. I was her mom.” That feeling doesn’t always happen right away. It didn’t hit Tomika, a single mom from Virginia, until weeks after her son was placed in her arms. Her parents had been

with her in the beginning, and this helped smooth the start of motherhood, but when they left, it dawned on her that this was real. Her life would never be the same. She and only she was responsible for this baby's survival.

What follows for each of us is a roller coaster in the truest sense. There are times you will be fraught but then rebound only to find yourself completely crazed again. This is the reason we can feel so much disorientation in those early days. And this process gets reawakened with every child and at every developmental stage because mothering a newborn requires a different set of skills than dealing with a preteen or a young adult. We are constantly evolving, learning, and getting little shell shocks along the way. When I explain the concept of matrescence to moms, the first question is usually, "How do I avoid it?" Sorry. No escaping this one, but being aware of what's ahead will make you feel a lot less crazy. Trust me.

One of the most common ways we respond to the ups and downs of motherhood is by giving more of ourselves—more time, more attention, more involvement, more, more, and more. Many of us forego our own passions and interests, our own friends, our own lives. And this, we are told, is the way it's supposed to be. Even for those of us who return to work outside the home.

When we do appear to be coming apart at the seams, those around us love to encourage "me time," as if a thirty-minute mani-pedi or SoulCycle class is the cure for what ails us. The truth is, the requirements of modern motherhood can leave us feeling swallowed up whole, wondering, *Where did I go?* It's fair to say that we are all

well aware that motherhood will be hard. We just didn't realize it would be *this* hard. The important question to ask is, What are we going to do about it? How do we move past talking or complaining and make meaningful change in our own lives?

I do think it's possible to ease the transition to motherhood by truly understanding the changes that can and will occur in every aspect of our lives. And I don't mean remedying that yucky cradle cap peeling off your baby's scalp or the horrors of potty-training a three-year-old (the nightmare I am enduring as I write this). So much about our world becomes gnarled, from our sex lives to career paths and even our relationships with other women.

Why aren't we talking about that?

If we start looking at motherhood as a time of change and development for us too, perhaps moms can start getting the care and attention they need as well. Think of it this way: when there is a speed bump ahead in the road, you adjust your speed so you can maneuver it more smoothly. Why can't we prep for the pitfalls of parent life the same way? My greatest hope is that this short tome helps make that possible. I hope it teaches you three things:

1. It's high time we all got authentic about what mothers go through beyond the day-to-day rigors of childcare.
2. Not loving every minute of family time does not make you a terrible person. Yes, this may be something you dreamed of and planned for, but real life brims with as many moments of joy as frustration.

You have the right to feel however you feel about it, and you don't need to apologize for that.

3. Though going forward you will forever be known as so-and-so's mom, your existence is not defined only by the fact you have children. There will inevitably be a tug-of-war between our family's needs and our own. It's okay to win some of those rounds. Our happiness matters too.