Confessions of an Imperfect Mom

Julie Barnhill
Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.


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My children have an impatient, quirky, hardworking, verbose, affectionate, opinionated, forgiving, occasionally cranky, and ever-so-slightly neurotic mom who loves them madly. A neurotic mother who over the gamut of her mothering experience (twenty-two years, five months, twenty-eight days, seven hours, seventeen minutes, and sixteen seconds) has often belabored the minutiae of mothering life. Trust me—no trivial detail has escaped the proclivities of my maternal angst.

It officially started in January 1988 as I pored over pregnancy and medical reference books, hoping to discern if the formation of my first child had in any manner been compromised due to my consuming celebratory glasses (yes, plural) of Asti Spumante approximately six hours prior to her, um…rather unexpected conception. (We shall always consider Kristen to be our honeymoon souvenir gift.)

A few weeks afterward (it seems), I was slathering coconut butter on my ever-expanding belly and courageously attempting to swallow
prenatal vitamins roughly the size of a man’s big toe each morning before eating breakfast and leaving for work.

I was absolutely determined to do everything right with my pregnancy and as a mother.

That’s why I began the first of many conversations with my baby when she approximated the size and shape of a small lima bean. An article in Perfect Mother magazine had convinced me that any hope of a successful nurturing of the mother-child bond depended on the baby’s ability to hear and recognize my voice. Hence my daily conversational ramblings.

I talked and talked and talked. Actually, I haven’t stopped talking since.

And she was an excellent listener—back then.

Yes, I was determined to do everything right. I cut back—way back—on my daily consumption of Pepsi, refused to walk (or breathe) within a hundred-yard radius of a cat litter box, and carefully measured the width between slats before settling on a beautiful, safe cherrywood crib. In addition, having read The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding, I began “preparing” those womanly mammary glands for active duty. (It involved sandpaper and sure-grip pliers—we’ll leave it at that.)

I read other books as well. Magazines too—a lot of them. Over the course of nine months I purchased, borrowed, and inhaled reams of written material. What information I couldn’t find there, I asked of other mothers.

Was it normal for hair to grow exponentially on one’s belly while pregnant?

Could the baby sense when I was worried, fearful, or enjoying sex? (The possibility of the latter really freaked me out.)

Should I have a water birth, sit on a birthing stool, or strap my legs into stirrups?
Was it bad to want as many pain-numbing drugs as possible—during the seventh month of pregnancy?

Would the fact that I never qualified for National Honor Society hold my child back intellectually?

In light of said academic reality, should I purchase the *Baby Einstein* encyclopedia set with annotated appendixes for the low cost of $15,397.22—a mere $6.89 less than my entire teaching salary for the year, but sure to guarantee that lima-bean baby would qualify for the ranks of MENSA?

Were ankles roughly the size of Babar the elephant’s a positive or negative indicator regarding pregnancy weight gain?

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**What I’ve Done Right**

I kept my family together and taught my children the value of honoring a commitment.

—Janice, age 41

And how would I ever be able to determine when I was in real labor? (Okay, I was slightly neurotic and altogether clueless!)

I had the minutiae of anticipatory maternal neurosis down to a science. By the second trimester I had considered (obsessed over) the following:

Would I be able to interpret my baby’s cries?

Would I bump her head into the doorknob while carrying her in my arms?

Would my milk come in?

And more troublesome still—upon careful examination and comparison of two-dimensional breast-feeding diagrams with actual breasts (mine)—how on earth were my now monstrous-sized...
mammary attachments going to fit within the minuscule circumference of a newborn baby’s mouth?

These were the things that kept me up at night! As well as the even more basic worries that haunted me throughout those early months.

What if my baby didn’t like me?
What if I didn’t like her?
What if I did it all wrong?

A View of Guiltmore

And that, of course, was just the beginning. It was my first glimpse of the mountainous terrain that looms over every mother’s life. My first view of the familiar and foreboding range of peaks I’ve come to call Guiltmore National Park.

You won’t be able to locate Guiltmore on a Rand McNally travel atlas. Nor will a list of websites appear after you enter certain keywords in Google. But it’s there—this mountainous range of regret, second-guessing, and doubt that can only be seen, observed, trekked, and experienced from a mother’s backyard.

It’s a familiar sight where most of us live. And it still looms for me, even though my lima-bean baby is now in adulthood with her brothers close behind her. And many days I still find myself trekking the rocky slopes of Guiltmore, pondering questions that range from the mundane to the momentous:

• Was this cavity the result of too many juice boxes when he was little?
• Should we have let her quit piano?
• Was I wrong not to have purchased him drums sooner?
• Did going to public school (instead of the very expensive Christian school or continued homeschooling) hurt our children’s chances for college?