

Rise is a magazine by and for parents involved in the child welfare system. Its mission is to help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

Rise

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BY AND FOR
PARENTS IN THE
CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Caring for Your Baby

Babies bring great joy but also great stress to families, and many parents don't realize how much support they'll need to care for an infant or toddler. While many states now offer family support services, one-third of children who enter foster care nationwide are 3 years old or younger. In this issue of *Rise*, parents write about how they learned to care for their little ones, and where they turned for support.



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True Stories by Teens

Breaking the Chain

Building a calm, safe home for my son.

BY EVELYN SALAZAR

Translated from Spanish.

When my son Dylan was 2, his father and I separated. I had to confront the reality that we weren't coming together as parents, but instead were arguing and screaming at each other. At times he would even shove me or grab me by the arm.

It was very hard to make a decision to leave. I knew it would be sad for Dylan not to live with his father. But I also didn't want him to grow up watching us fight. I thought, "Is this the example I want to give him?"

Finding Support

I found a therapist, hoping she could help keep Dylan's father and me together, or help us communicate if we split up. But he wouldn't go.

After we split up, I decided to keep going to the therapist, Liza, at the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park.

I knew that it would help me to get someone's support and have a place where I could unburden myself at a time when I was feeling so alone.

At that time, Dylan spoke only a little. He was very restless and seemed frustrated, I think because he wanted to express something that he couldn't say, or because it was hard for me to know what he wanted.

Liza suggested he go to a special school where he could get help with controlling his restlessness and anger, as well as other things he didn't feel comfortable doing, like painting and playing with sticky things (because he didn't like to get himself dirty or wet).

Really, I didn't think it was a big problem, but in the few months Dylan went to the school – Wow! I noticed that he was no longer so restless and didn't get angry over every little thing, and I could see his curiosity growing.

He was maturing. It was very satisfying to see how he learned and grew.

Now Dylan is 4 years old, and he has distinguished himself as a very curious and playful child who likes to be amused and to get a lot of attention. He has a great imagination and is also very intelligent – he took that from me, ha ha ha.

Tender Moments

Sometimes Dylan is so tender, like when he comes home after being with his father. He opens the door and says, "Mami, I have a surprise for you! Close your eyes!"

When I open them he says, "I have a rose for you, the prettiest mother in the world, so you'll never be sad."

This fills me with tears and I throw myself down in front of his little body. (Other times, he says that *he's* my surprise!)

Sometimes Dylan asks me questions that I don't know the answers to, and couldn't imagine existed in his little head. He asks me what he was like when he was a baby, what it was like when he was in my stomach, how he was born, what his body was like then, what he could do and what he couldn't do.

He also asks things like, "Why do the leaves fall from the trees? Why is it cloudy?" Wow! I have to turn into a meteorologist to give him a satisfying answer.

Being Playful

Dylan especially likes to play pretend. He says to me, "Mami, we're going to play that you're Dora and I'm Boots, OK?"
"OK."
"Hello, Dora."
"Hello, Boots."
"What are you doing, Dora?"
"Nothing, Boots. I am walking home. And you, Boots?"
"Me too, Dora," and we go from there.

The funniest is when he says to me, "Mami, we're going have a conversation, OK?"
"Have a conversation about what?"
"About you, about me, everything, Mommy. Everything, OK?"
"OK."
"Start, Mami."
"You start!" and then we start to chat about whatever thing.

Putting Him First

At times things aren't easy because I'm tired and he wants to play. I say, "Play by yourself and later I'll play with you," but hardly five minutes will go by before he comes back to me.

Sometimes at night I want to go directly to bed but I have to put him to bed first, reading him a story and the whole procedure before he'll go to sleep. There are times when I'm reading his story and I fall asleep and he nudges me, saying, "Mami, wake up! Mami, don't sleep!"

I try to skip pages so we can get through it more quickly, but he'll catch me and say, "Oh, no, Mami, that's not how it goes, this is how..." and make me go back.

Dealing With Tantrums

Dylan also has a very strong character, like his father and me. If he doesn't get a lot of attention, he gets angry. When things don't go his way, he can throw tremendous tantrums. He cries furiously and has a very strong voice, so over his crying you can hear him screaming and screaming, and sometimes knocking things down. It's overwhelming.

I don't always know what reaction to have. It used to be that one of us would shout, and the other would shout back, and then we'd keep shouting, like a chain. I know now that I have to break that chain.

When things don't go his way, he can throw tremendous tantrums. It's overwhelming.

It's not easy. At times I feel a sense of desperation, but I try to keep communication going. I say, "Dylan, if you don't scream, I can understand you better. I know you're mad, but let's calmly try to resolve this situation."

When he has a tantrum in public, I just try not to feel ashamed if he makes a scene. I talk to him, or I fill myself with strength and count, "Two, three, four" minutes until he calms down.

I Try to Be Firm

I know that he needs to learn that when his mother says no, she means it. I don't want him thinking, "Oh, Mami says that but she'll change her mind." Although it's difficult to not give in to him, and to not be able to give him everything he wants, I try not to give in to his demands too much.

Sometimes when we're playing a game and I win, he gets mad and messes up the game, or he wants to play it again so he can win. If I won't play again, he cries and screams.

I try to be firm and to speak clearly,

without starting to scream myself, saying, "Dylan, look at me, listen to me. I know you wanted to win, but one person can't always win. There's going to be times when it's your turn to lose. It's not a problem. You don't have to get angry."

Sometimes he keeps crying and I leave him. I say, "When you feel better, you tell me what you want." That works well. I don't give a lot of attention to his tantrum, and he calms down and talks to me.

A Stable Home

In the past two years, Dylan and I have learned a lot together. I pay more attention to him, and he does the same to me.

Although we don't live with his father, he sees him two days each week and every other weekend. Dylan has told me that he would like for all three of us to be together. I had to explain to him, "Papi has his house, and Mami has her own. But the important thing is that although we're separate, we're content."

Now Dylan has security and stability at home. When his father and I were together we had an unstable relationship, with one person running one way and the other running in the opposite direction. I think Dylan saw

that and didn't know what to think, or just got sad seeing his parents disoriented and upset.

Dylan's father is a friend to me now. We're both striving to stay calm and do the best for our child.

My Great Satisfaction

Becoming a mother has given me more responsibility and I have matured. I've had to analyze who I am and how to get the results that I want for myself and my son.

If I get mad or frustrated, I try to understand why I'm reacting that way and to ask myself, "What's the best way I can handle this situation?" In the past I responded like a lion, or I just wanted to run away. Now I respond like a cat, and I stay and find a solution.

It's a great feeling of satisfaction to look at my son and see him growing. When he achieves something, I know that I am a big part of that. That's fantastic! I let myself heave a great sigh, a great love from very deep down in my heart.

Para leer la historia en Español, visite al sitio del internet www.risemagazine.org/pages/en-espanol.html.

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A Partner for Parents

Visiting nurses guide and support new moms.

The Nurse-Family Partnership is a national program that helps low-income, first-time mothers learn how to parent. You sign up as soon as you know you're pregnant (no later than the 28th week of your pregnancy) and you'll be matched with a nurse who will visit you and your baby until the baby turns 2.

Mary Joan Murphy, a nurse who works with parents in the Bronx, NY, explains how a visiting nurse can help new mothers.

Q: Why might new moms need a nurse's support?

A: Most of the moms we work with are teens who have dropped out of school, are making less than \$18,000 a year, and are headed toward living in poverty if nothing changes. A number have been in foster care, and most have no role models for motherhood, or if they do, they're not positive. A lot of their own moms were mentally ill or using drugs, and most of their moms were teen moms who never developed into adults, so they don't have healthy role models. But these moms want to be the best parent they can be.

The nurses help these young moms grow. One of the best things about our program in the Bronx is that most of the nurses come from the same background as clients. They're African-American or Latina, they grew up in Bronx, and some were teenage mothers themselves. These nurses are such role models. They're independent and self-sufficient, and for a lot of the moms in the program, it's the first time they've known a woman like that.

We work with the moms to become self-sufficient. Becoming a full-grown adult is about being accountable—if you say you're going to be somewhere, you show up, or if you have a job, you do your job even when you don't feel like it. As a mother, someone else is counting on you, so you



ILLUSTRATION BY PATTY DELUNA

'It's normal to feel frustrated, fed up, and alone. Moms have to know their limits and know when to ask for help.'

need to learn those adult behaviors. But when you have a baby, it's much harder to go back to school or get a job, and if your opportunities and exposure to the world are limited, it's harder to grow up.

The nurses really guide them through motherhood for two years, giving the moms and their babies the healthiest start they can have.

Q: What challenges do new moms face?

A: What puts mothers at risk of abusing or neglecting their kids is developing postpartum depression or becoming exhausted, and thinking you can do it all by yourself when you can't. We tell the moms, "You need at least 4 hours of uninterrupted sleep every night or you're going to go crazy."

We work in the areas of the city where infant mortality rates are the highest. Babies die in the U.S. mostly because of accidents – because

the parents are using drugs, they're sleeping in same bed as the baby and smother the baby, or because parents are so overwhelmed and exhausted that they shake their babies out of frustration. Parents harm their children because they don't know they're putting their babies at risk, or because they don't have support and they're exhausted.

It's normal to feel frustrated, fed up, and alone. Moms have to know their limits and know when to ask for help. We all need support. The nurses have the moms write a list of people in their lives they could go to for support, and what support they can get from each person. The moms also call the nurse, saying, "I'm flipping out," or, "My child has a fever." The nurse is a calm voice of reason.

Q: What support do the nurses give new moms?

A: We start working with moms while they're pregnant. We talk about the importance of good nutri-

tion, exercise, and a safe environment. After the baby's born, we help them with breastfeeding, and with understanding how babies communicate and what they need.

We teach moms to talk to babies like they're babies, not as if they're 15 years old. If you tell a baby, "No, don't do that!" they're not going to follow commands. If your baby's crying, you want to engage him by making your face really animated and saying in a soothing voice, "What's the matter? You're OK. I'm here."

It's in toddlerhood when abuse really happens. Kids are getting into stuff, you've got to watch them all the time, and if they don't get what they want, they'll kick and scream and carry on. We tell parents, "This is normal." When your toddler does something bad, instead of hitting him, you can say, "You don't do this and this is why" and give a time out. Or, "I know you want to do this, but you can't." You can't get upset about it. It's normal.

Then, when your toddler does what he's supposed to do, you want to really acknowledge it. If you're positive about what you like you'll get more of it.

A lot of the moms haven't had too many opportunities to show their strengths and to build confidence in themselves. We work on small steps, and when they do something we asked them to, we really congratulate them and build their confidence. When they give birth to a healthy baby, we say, "Look how healthy he is because of all the hard work you did!" We say, "See what you can do! See what a good mom you are!" The encouragement changes what they think they can accomplish.

To contact the Nurse-Family Partnership in New York City, call 311. To find the program nationwide, visit www.nursefamilypartnership.org.

‘Walls Start to Fall’

A group where parents learn from each other.

BY JACQUELYN ISRAEL

When parents attend the first meeting of the parenting group I run, most are unsure what to expect and do not think they need to be there. They say, “I have been a parent for many years. What can you teach me about raising my children?”

I tell parents that their knowledge is important, and that each person in the room has something to teach and something to learn from the group. “You are all invited to begin an ongoing journey to enhance your parenting skills,” I say. “By the end of eight weeks, I always feel that I’ve gotten as much from facilitating this group as y’all get by attending.”

A History of Trauma

I explain that I am a Parent Advocate at the foster care agency, Graham Windham Services in New York City, and am also a former client of the agency. My children spent two years in foster care because I became addicted to crack.

By attending drug treatment and parenting classes, I came to terms with the pain that led me to drugs—my traumatic, abusive childhood and my husband’s death. My children returned home angry, but I was a stronger person and was able to rebuild my family.

Like me, many parents become involved with the system not only because they lack parenting skills or life skills, but also because trauma contributed to the destruction of their lives and parenting abilities. Parents involved in the system often have a past history of trauma like physical and sexual abuse, and they experience trauma again when separated from their children.

The focus of my parenting groups is to provide parents with a space where they can recognize the impact of past trauma on their parenting skills and their families’ lives.

Revisiting Childhood

When I tell parents about my experience, most join the group. Some attended because receiving a certificate of completion aids them in getting their children home. However, the group process goes deeper than compliance. Walls start to fall as parents share fears and learn that they have strengths, weaknesses and concerns in common. For many parents this is the only safe place where they can explore their ideas about parenting and become open to change.

I ask parents to look at how they were parented as children, what tools worked and what tools didn’t. Revisiting childhood helps parents to see how they way they were parented might be shaping how they’re raising their children now.

Sandy (not her real name) was a typical parent in my group. I met her at her “72-hour Conference,” the first meeting between a parent and



ILLUSTRATION BY HANDEL MORENCY

support her family before her kids entered care.

Alone and Afraid

I went to Sandy’s first family visit a day later and noticed she was sitting on the far side of the room. I asked Sandy, “How are you? What time were you told the children would arrive?”

Parents should ask their children about their lives and feelings, and explain to their children what’s expected of them.

child welfare staff after a child comes into care. My first impression was that Sandy was soft spoken and unsure of herself. Sandy was afraid and it showed.

But my second impression was that Sandy was also strong and together. Unlike many parents, she came to the conference prepared with proof of the services she’d been getting to

“My children are over there,” she said, and pointed to a foster mother standing with two young children.

“Why didn’t you go start your visit?”

“I didn’t know when to start,” she said.

Luckily, her kids weren’t waiting for an invitation. They came over and

started hugging and kissing their mother.

Opening Up

I realized that Sandy would not take any action if she was not sure she was allowed to. As a domestic violence survivor, she’d been told for years: “You stay over here, do this.” In a new situation, she tried to be as safe as she possibly could so she wouldn’t be reprimanded in any way. She was traumatized and hadn’t yet healed from the abuse.

But after joining the parenting group, Sandy started calling me to talk. She would talk about her loneliness, the battering she went through,

and about raising her older son, who was 13 and was having behavior problems — he’d even gotten in trouble with the law.

Some people won’t say to me, “Can I have your number? Can I call you?” They feel embarrassed or think they’re showing weakness by asking that. One of Sandy’s strengths was that she could say, “I don’t know. Can you help me. Can I talk to you about this? I’m scared.”

Teaching Your Child

In the parenting group, we talk about helping children with friendships and peer pressure. We ask the parents, “How do you talk to your child about friendships? Have you sat down and asked your child how he develops friendships and what those relationships are like?”

We also talk about behavior issues. We ask, “Do you know how to make a contract with a child around behavior?” And, “How do you teach your kids self-pride and self-esteem?”

Sandy was able to look at those les-

Ages and Stages

Developmental milestones help you know how your child is doing.

sons and say, "That's what I'm going through with my son. I see what you're saying." She started to have those conversations with her children.

A Parent as Guide

Because of the trauma she'd been through, Sandy's way of dealing with her son was to restrict him. She was afraid of the world and didn't want him to go outside and make friends with people. But he needed to make friends. At 13, he also really needed to make mistakes and have a safe environment to come back so he could talk with his mom about the life he was living. He needed his mom to be a guide for him, and she really learned that in the class. The way she talked with her son began to change.

Sandy didn't seem to realize she had strength and power. I told her all the time, "You're leaving behind what you know was bad for your family and for yourself."

As Sandy grew as a parent, I saw her kids grow, too. Like Sandy, her daughter was very quiet at first, very nervous. A couple weeks into the visits, when she knew she was safe, she was acting like any other kid. You had to tell her, "Shhh, use your indoor voice." I was glad to see that. It meant the family was healing.

'What Do You Think?'

When my kids were in care, my social worker suggested that I take parenting classes so I could better meet my children's needs. I looked forward to hearing all the answers on how to be a better parent. I thought I would be taught to be Supermom! I was wrong.

The parenting class couldn't give me all the answers. It simply taught me that I needed to talk to my kids about school, sex, drugs and, yes, rock and roll. Parents with better parenting skills ask their children about their lives and feelings, and explain to their children what's expected of them. That helps children become healthier and happier.

Sandy often asked me questions that I wished I could answer (because I do have an ego!) but couldn't. She'd say, "My kids have a relationship with their father, who abused me. How can I handle that? How can I support their relationship with him but keep myself safe?"

"I don't know," I'd say. "What do you think? What could you try?"

Ultimately, Sandy figured out a good solution. Her sister takes the kids to meet with their father, and it works.

Empowering Each Other

One important change I've made since I started as a Parent Advocate has been to stop saying "I teach parenting classes," and to start saying "I facilitate parenting groups." I teach parents about child development and urge them to talk more with their kids. But most of all, I support them as they grow.

In the group, each parent becomes a support to the other group members. The parents take the responsibility for trying new ways to communicate with their children. They share their ups and downs and empower each other.

If your child is having trouble doing some of these things, you might want to contact 311 or 1-800-522-5006 for information about services to help your child. Early help makes a difference!

3 Months

At three months of age, most babies:

- turn their heads toward bright colors and lights
- move both eyes in the same direction together
- recognize bottle or breast
- respond to their mother's voice
- make cooing sounds
- bring their hands together
- wiggle and kick with arms and legs
- lift head when on stomach
- become quiet in response to sound, especially speech
- smile

6 Months

At six months of age, most babies:

- follow moving objects with their eyes
- turn toward the source of normal sound
- reach for objects and pick them up
- switch toys from one hand to the other
- play with their toes
- help hold the bottle during feeding
- recognize familiar faces
- imitate speech sounds
- respond to soft sounds, especially talking
- roll over

12 Months

At 12 months of age, most babies:

- get to a sitting position
- pull to a standing position
- stand briefly without support
- crawl
- imitate adults using a cup or telephone
- play peek-a-boo and patty cake
- wave bye-bye
- put objects in a container
- say at least one word
- make "ma-ma" or "da-da" sounds

1½ Years

At 1½ years of age, most children:

- like to push and pull objects
- say at least 6 words
- follow simple directions ("Bring the ball")
- pull off shoes, socks and mittens
- can point to a picture that you name in a book
- feed themselves
- make marks on a paper with crayons
- walk without help
- walk backwards
- point, make sounds or try to use words to ask for things
- say "no," shake their head or push away things they don't want

2 Years

At two years of age, most children:

- use two-to-three word sentences
- say about 50 words
- recognize familiar pictures
- kick a ball forward
- feed themselves with a spoon
- demand a lot of your attention
- turn 2-3 pages at a time
- like to imitate their parent
- identify hair, eyes, ears and nose by pointing
- build a tower of four blocks
- show affection

3 Years

At three years of age, most children:

- throw a ball overhand
- ride a tricycle
- put on their shoes
- open the door
- turn one page at a time
- play with other children for a few minutes
- repeat common rhymes
- use three-to-five-word sentences
- name at least one color correctly

'I'm Sorry, My Son'

When my husband and I split up, my baby needed more than I could give.

BY YADIRA FRAGOSO

Translated from Spanish.

When my second son, Steven, was six months old, my husband and I separated. My life totally changed. I had to take care of Steven and his older brother, Stuart, who was only 2, and continue working in the restaurant where my husband, Pedro, also worked. That was the beginning of the worst period of my life.

Pedro and I had I started having some problems before I got pregnant with Steven. Pedro didn't want to have a second child, and I did.

Pedro had also started to go out fishing and playing soccer often. When the weekends would arrive, I'd say, "Let's go to the park with Stuart," and he'd say, "You bring him, because I'm tired." I would start to cry and I wouldn't bring him to the park because I was used to going everywhere with Pedro.

Separation and Depression

Even though our second child, Steven, was a baby we planned to have, things didn't go as well for our family after he was born. Pedro didn't always have work. When Steven was four months old, Pedro and I decided that we would both go to work in a restaurant to make more money.

I worked the night shift so that I could watch them in the morning and Pedro could take them at night. I felt like our married life was starting to come together economically, but emotionally, things weren't better between us, but worse. Finally, we split up.

After Pedro moved out, I fell into a depression, crying all the time and enduring terrible migraines.

To handle my feelings, I dedicated myself to my job and didn't pay a lot of attention to my sons. The worst part was seeing the difference in the

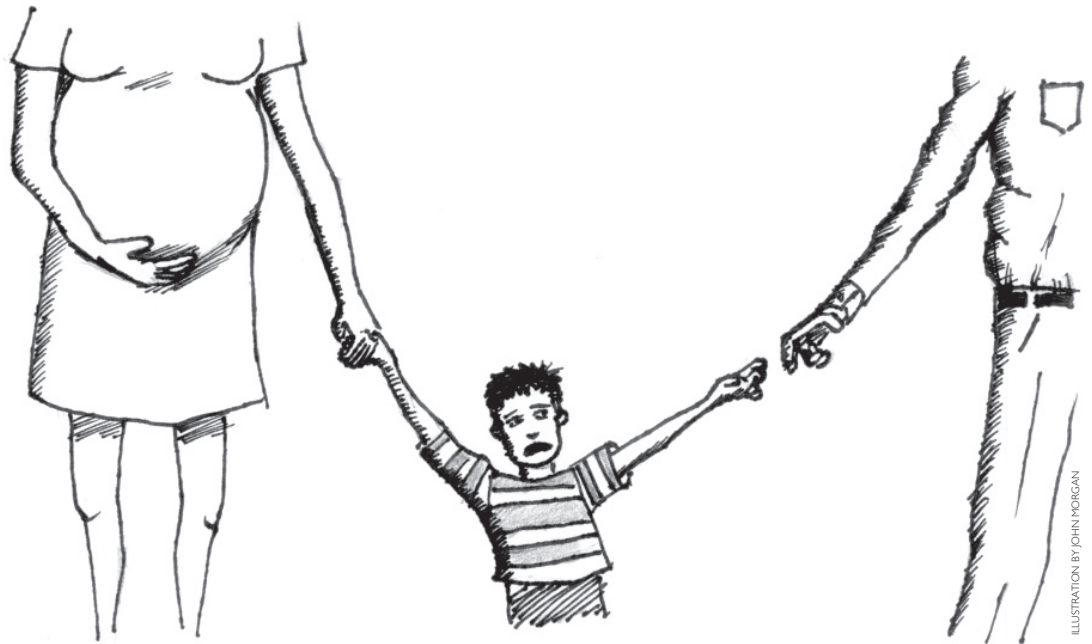


ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN MORGAN

lives of my two babies. Steven had to witness my arguments and my desperation, while as Stuart had grown older, he'd been able to share his life with his mother and father.

Close to Our Son

When Stuart was little, I had enjoyed motherhood a lot, and Pedro and I spent a lot of time with our son. We tried to give him the best childhood we could.

I wanted Stuart to become a very smart kid. I'd heard that if you talk to babies, telling them what you want them to become, it'll come true. So when he was just a little baby, I whispered in his ear while he was sleeping, saying, "Stuart, you have to be a very intelligent baby, and you should enjoy going to school a lot, so that when you are big you can have an important job where you want. Always be a good boy."

After a long search, I found a daycare for Stuart and I went back to

work when he was 8 months old. Obviously it wasn't everything I might want in a daycare, but it was a place where I knew that they were going to take good care of him. It gave me a good feeling to see how Stuart continued growing. Right away, he started the typical game of saying, "Give me five," and with great enthusiasm he'd slap my hand!

Teaching Our Son at Home

Pedro and I were always finding ways to teach him new things. When I took Stuart out shopping with me, I taught him the names of the fruits and vegetables, and said to him, "This is a car, a bus, a truck," and so on. Pedro and I also brought Stuart to the library to read, and borrowed books to read in the house.

When Stuart was almost a year old, I found out from a friend of mine about special classes for toddlers. I asked my social worker, but she said they were only for children with trouble speaking or with other prob-

lems. Even so, I asked for Stuart to get evaluated, and it turned out he could attend the special school. The school suggested that a teacher come to my home three times a week for an hour so that Stuart wouldn't forget what he learned.

When Stuart started his classes, I felt very good and content with myself as a mother. Over the two years he took them (until he turned 3 years old), I felt so proud of him. He learned the colors, numbers, and the ABCs, and improved so much in his speaking. I also asked Pedro if we could buy him English without Barriers for children so that Stuart could continue practicing English. Once the classes ended, I put on those videos, and through them, he learned new things.

'We'll Always Love You'

When I got pregnant with Steven, Pedro and I prepared Stuart by taking a book out of the library called, "The Baby's Arrival." I remember it

well. It was the story of a pregnant mom who was ready to go to the hospital, and when the baby was born, returned home with the baby in her arms.

I said to Stuart, "Look, here under my tummy I have a baby that is going to be your brother, and when he's born, you shouldn't get angry, because your father and I will always love you." Stuart said to me, "Ok, Mami," and he hugged me and kissed my belly.

When I was almost ready to give birth to Steven, I asked Pedro if we could decorate the room so that it would look nice and give a good welcome to my Steven. Not much later, he was born.

'Where is Papi?'

When Pedro and I split up, my sons and I suffered a lot. It was up to me to help Stuart in the process of understanding our separation from his father. Stuart would ask me, "Where is my Papi? I miss him." My tears flowed and I didn't know how to answer him. I'd invent excuses, like that he'd had to go work far away and that he was going to come back to see him and his brother.

But Steven suffered the most. During this time, I treated Steven as a child, not a baby. By that I mean that I would yell at him if he wanted something. If he cried, I would get annoyed and tell him to stop it. Sometimes when Steven wanted to play, I'd say, "Not now, I don't have time for that," or I'd ask Stuart to play with his little brother.

I remember one day that my Steven, when he was just 6 months, was crying and I got angry. I screamed, "All right, shut up now! What do you want?" and I left the room. I went to the kitchen and sat thinking, "What am I doing? He's a baby! He's not at fault for what happened." I felt so bad about the way I reacted.

Then I returned to the room crying, and I held him and said, "I'm sorry, my son, it's not your fault. I'm sorry." I hugged him and kissed him so many times until I felt better.

Of course, that's not how I treated him all the time. I also was loving. But it hurts me to realize how different I was with him than I was with Stuart.

My Babies Needed Me

I knew that that my sons' lives couldn't be OK if I wasn't OK. My babies needed me. They were the main reason I had to keep me from allowing myself to be completely defeated.

Fortunately, I had a number of

my time taking the babies to the park and reading them a book every night, and I did that, trying to remain calm even when they misbehaved.

For a while I went out with a friend who was lovely with my babies and me. On Halloween, he accompanied me to buy costumes for Stuart and Steven, and we took them out to trick or treat. Although I felt happy while I was with him, when I returned home I felt flattened again.

Finally, I decided to take Stuart and Steven with me to Mexico for a year so we could live with my family. Being home with my mother, and dedicating more of my time to my sons, helped me a lot.

During my depression, I treated my son like a child, not a baby. When he cried, I'd get annoyed and tell him to stop it.

people helping me so that I didn't fall apart completely. Thank God I could count on the support of my *comadre*, Tere, and my sister, who both loved me so much.

I also continued with therapy and it helped me understand that my world didn't end with the separation and that I could become stronger day by day.

One day I arrived at my appointment undone, crying because I felt so bad. Unburdening myself to my therapist helped. She listened to me and said, "Yadira, you're a great woman, and I understand that you're sad—it's a difficult situation to confront—but everything will be OK. You can do it." Oh! Those words really made me feel good.

She suggested that I try to occupy

Still Feeling Guilty

After a year in Mexico, my sons and I moved back to New York in the fall.

Even though I'd say 75 percent of the depression I felt when Pedro and I separated has lifted, I still don't have as much time with my sons as I'd like because of the hours of my job. I wish I didn't have to work and I could stay at home teaching them and showing my love to my children.

Now Steven is 3 years old and I feel like I have given him more of my time. I always hold him close and kiss him, telling him, "You're my baby." (Although maybe that's not right, because now if Pedro asks him, "Are you my baby?" he says, "No." If Pedro says, "Are you Mama's baby?" he says, "Yes.")

My Steven seems a little bit restless and unsure of himself at times. If I want him to sit with me and draw or watch some children's videos together like I did with Stuart, he'll only be entertained for five minutes and then he'll get up and do something else.

I sit with him to do his homework, which is a little difficult, but we do it. I feel very proud of him because now that he goes to daycare, he's started to speak a few sentences in English.

Pedro tells me that Steven is a child that cries a lot and doesn't obey because whenever I yell at him, afterwards I soothe him. That might be true. What makes me do it is my sense of guilt that I didn't treat him like a baby when he needed me to.

I think that it's going to take a long time for this feeling of guilt to leave my heart. I still leave with the fear that Steven will reproach me for the difference in the way I treated him. I think I won't rest until I can hear my son, when he's older, tell me, "Don't feel bad about what happened, Mami. I understand."

Proud of Myself

Stuart is already 5 years old and graduating this spring from kindergarten. I feel proud of my sons, who are both so sweet and handsome. At night, we sing a lot of songs together. They tell me I'm the best mother in the world, and I feel proud of myself.

It's been three years since I was turned upside down, and I see that I'm on my feet, continuing my fight to move forward, and always in the company of my sons.

Para leer la historia en Español, visite al sitio del internet www.risemagazine.org/pages/en-espanol.html.

Child Support

Early Intervention Services can help your baby grow.

As babies grow, they develop new abilities to move, speak and relate emotionally. At each age, there are “developmental milestones”—typical behaviors or abilities that you’ll want to watch for in your children. For example, at 3 months old, babies should be able to make fists with both hands, lift their head and chest, and turn their head toward sounds, bright colors and light.

If your child isn’t meeting the milestones (which are listed on p. 5), consider getting your child evaluated for the Early Intervention Program, which provides special services to infants and toddlers up to 3 years old. In New York, all of the services are free.

Cara Chambers, a lawyer at the Legal Aid Society’s Kathryn A. McDonald Education Advocacy Project in New York, advocates for services for children with developmental delays or disabilities who are involved in the child welfare system. Here she explains how to get the help your child might need:

Q: How can parents know if their babies need help?

A: Parents should try to pay attention to how their babies are developing in a variety of ways. You shouldn’t feel that you’ve done something wrong if your baby’s delayed in meeting those milestones. Many children develop delays for unknown reasons and need special help. Parents simply can’t be experts in all areas in development, so they should use the expertise of specialists if their babies need extra help.

It’s important to get the services your child needs. When kids don’t get help with developmental delays, it can be incredibly stressful for the parent and the other members of the family. If you have a 2 ½ year old who can’t communicate verbally, then your child might communicate by having tantrums, biting, hitting, or scratching. A specialist can teach your child how to communicate so the whole family will have an easier time.



ILLUSTRATION BY ASMAH AJRABI

You shouldn’t feel that you’ve done something wrong if your baby’s delayed in meeting the milestones.

Q: How can parents get special services for their babies?

A: If your baby isn’t meeting the milestones, you might be able to get free Early Intervention Services. Some services help parents, such as respite care, parent training, or nutrition services. Others help your baby directly. Specialists might work with your toddler on daily living skills like feeding themselves with their hands, pulling their socks up, holding their arms up to get dressed, brushing their teeth and washing their faces.

To get these services, you start by requesting an evaluation. In New York, you call 311 and ask to speak to the Early Intervention office in your borough. An Initial Service Coordinator will ask what your concerns are, so you might say, “My baby’s not talking very much at 3 years old.” Or, “She’s a year old but not really crawling.”

The coordinator will set up a meeting, usually in your home, to explain the services and your rights, and to

get your consent to do the evaluation. Then the coordinator will set up a number of different evaluations and specialists will come into the home to assess how your baby is doing.

Once they’re done, you’ll have an Individualized Family Service Plan meeting, where a team will decide whether your child is eligible for services. You are a member of that team and have a right to attend the meeting. Your child will be eligible if he has a disability (a diagnosed condition like Cerebral Palsy, Downs Syndrome, etc.), or if he has one or more developmental delays.

If you don’t want the recommended services you don’t have to take them. But if you want to go ahead, then they’ll develop a service plan to address your child’s needs and specialists will begin coming to your home to help your child develop the skills he needs to catch up.

The greatest benefit of Early Intervention is that, because it’s pro-

vided in your home, you have an opportunity to learn from the specialist. Parents learn different games and strategies to use with their child, and when the specialist isn’t there, you can use the techniques to reinforce your child’s skills.

Q: Are those services available to infants and toddlers in foster care?

A: For children in foster care, there are sometimes difficulties setting up the services or keeping them going. Often, Early Intervention doesn’t know who to go to for consent. When children are in care the parent still has the right to consent to evaluations and services, unless the parent’s rights are terminated or the system cannot locate the parent. In that case, Early Intervention appoints a “surrogate” parent, usually the foster parent, to make those decisions.

Children in foster care sometimes change foster homes or return home, so when they move, their services get interrupted. We step in to get those services set up again.

If your child is in care, you have a right to be part of the evaluation or to be with your child while the specialist is there. In fact, it’s very important for the parent to be part of the services so they understand their child’s needs.

Sometimes you have to get creative. If the parent only has supervised visits it might be possible to have the evaluations and services provided at the agency during the visits. If the parent can go to the foster home where child is living they can be part of the services there.

Early intervention is part of a federal law, and every state has its own eligibility criteria and procedures. For information and help accessing services in your state, contact your state Parent Training and Information Center through www.taalliance.org.

Building a Bond

How to strengthen your connection to your baby.

BY SABRA JACKSON

My son was taken from me straight from the hospital because he was born positive tox. At first, I saw him weekly with my older daughter, who was 7. I would whisper in his ear, "Mommy loves you, and you're coming home soon." He was so little I had to give him something that would help him connect to me.

But I felt very disconnected. So three times I asked for "bonding visits"—which are twice a week—until I finally got a court order to make them happen. Then I would bring special treats for him and we'd have our Mommy Time.

I think it helped, because when he came home after 11 months, I would pick him up and gently whisper, "You're home now. Mommy loves you." He would light up.

Still, it's very hard to bond when your baby is in foster care. To find out how parents can connect with their babies, I talked with Mary Dozier, a professor at the University of Delaware who helps birth parents and foster parents bond with their babies.

Q: What kind of care do babies need to develop strong bonds with their parents?

A: It's very important to have nurturing, stable care from someone who is very highly committed to the child. The baby needs to know that somebody is going to be there for him and respond to his needs.

Babies are biologically wired to have a caregiver who's going to be there no matter what. There's a range of situations that babies can adapt to—like being in childcare, or having a babysitter—but it really challenges babies beyond what they can deal with to have caregivers who are not

committed to them or to change from one caregiver to another.

Q: How does it affect babies to move from one caregiver to another?

A: When babies move from one home to another, it's hard for the baby to trust the new caregiver. We've been studying how moves affect babies' bodies and behavior.



ILLUSTRATION BY AMIR SOLIMAN

We see that babies who've been moved around tend to push away their caregivers or cannot be soothed when they're upset. Because they push away help, these babies look like they don't need care, and their caregivers respond by giving them less attention.

If you are a birth parent who is reuniting with your baby, you can be hurt so badly if your baby acts like he doesn't need you or pushes you away. We do a lot of work with birth parents to help them see it's not personal. The child had to adapt in this way just to deal with multiple separations. And the good news is that babies' behavior can change if the parents know how to respond.

Q: How can parents help their babies bond?

A: To help parents bond with their babies, we do a 10-session intervention with the mom and her baby. We try to get them to learn a few things:

First, parents need to very gently provide nurturance and affection even though child doesn't seem to want it.

It's hard for the parent not to start to assume, "He doesn't need me," or, "I haven't been with him and he doesn't care about me anymore." I know that from personal experience. I was divorced when my kids were 2 and 4, and when my 2-year-old started visiting his dad, he'd come back so mad because I hadn't been with him. He'd lash out and even hit me.

My normal instinct would be to say, "Don't do that. You can't hit me." But I was studying kids' development, so one day I said, "I think you're mad because I wasn't with you last night." He said, "That's why I'm mad!" and we had a real connection. He needed me to recognize how he was feeling.

The second important task is for parents to learn how to nurture their babies. Lots of us as parents are not naturally nurturing, so you have to override your instincts.

Say a child falls and hits his head, and cries. We don't want parent to just say, "That didn't hurt!" Instead, the parent can gently pat the baby's back and say, "Oh, honey, that hurts, doesn't it?" We videotape the moms with their babies and then review the videos with them. We help them see what their automatic response is and begin to make different kinds of responses.

The third thing we help parents learn is to follow the baby's lead and create a warm, delighted relationship with their child.

Suppose that a mom isn't showing a lot of excitement in taking care of her baby. We use the videotapes to help the mom see when she and her baby are connecting and when they're not. So you might see the child throwing a toy on the floor and Mom not giving it back or smiling. Well, the mom might not realize it's a game, and that the baby's showing her that he's so excited and engaged.

If every once in a while you see Mom smiling at her child, then we really focus on his response and say, "He just lights up when you do that." Often, moms are able to say, "I didn't do it there, and look how he got sad."

It isn't easy, but in using this method with foster parents, we've been able to prove that we improve how secure the babies feel.

Q: What are some signs that parents and their babies might need extra help reconnecting?

A: One sign is that someone says, "Oh, this child is just doing great. He's not upset by the move at all. He never cries, he doesn't ask anything of me." You don't want a child that doesn't show distress at all. You want him to trust in his caregiver to help him with his distress. If the child has pulled into himself and does not depend on anybody, I would worry about that.

I always tell parents, "Babies shouldn't be easy." It's not that they shouldn't be pleasant and happy, but a baby who's willing to sit in a carrier for hours is not doing well. The baby should be crawling on adults. We really want babies that ask a lot of their worlds.

Growing Up Together

It's hard to handle my son's temper along with my own.

BY VANESSA SANCHEZ

One day I went to the supermarket with my 3-year-old son, John, and he started screaming at the top of his lungs. I tried to remain calm. "John, do you really think that's necessary? Do you even know why you're crying?" I asked. But that didn't stop him.

It felt like we had a huge, bright spotlight on us in the middle of the jam-packed supermarket. My friend who was shopping with me slowly but surely drifted away, as if she was not with us. Everything seemed like a blur of embarrassment moving in slow motion as my son cried as if someone was beating him.

'I'm Tired, Mommy'

I didn't know what to do. I moved into an empty aisle and started yelling with a stern voice. "If you do not be quiet I will leave you right here on your own!"

Finally, I took a deep breath, hugged my son and said, "I love you, John, and you are embarrassing the both of us, so if there is something you need, you have to say it, because I cannot understand you when you're crying.

"I'm tired, Mommy," John replied.

I sighed, "It can't be it was that simple, John," but it was. So I removed my coat and made a pillow of it for him to lie on in the shopping cart.

It is extremely difficult at times for me to handle my son's temper along with mine. The good things—that smile he has, the moments when we connect—keep me going.

I'll Be Better Than My Mom

I was 18 when I found out I was pregnant with my son. I was one of those stupid little teenagers who wanted a baby because I thought it would be cute. I didn't know then how difficult it would be to raise a child on my own, how there would



ILLUSTRATION BY ASAHAI AJIBABI

Parenting is all about confusion. Should I say no, or do I say no too often?

be times where I would feel lonelier than I ever had before in my life, with no one to blame but myself because I made the decision to have a baby.

When I got pregnant, I was determined to prove to myself that I could be a better mother to John than my own mother had been to me. My mom used drugs when I was a child and my childhood was sad and embarrassing, from the beatings to the jokes at school for wearing Payless shoes. My mother was so caught in her drug habit that our Christmas gifts were given and sold all in the same day.

It Is Not That Easy

I want prove to myself and other people that growing up in a negative environment doesn't mean you can't flourish. I will raise my son without abusing him in any way, and finish college and pursue a career as a nurse.

To prepare to be a mother, I participated in parenting classes and read books about parenting. I remember sitting on the bus and seeing this woman giving her son a slap on the hand because he was jumping on the seats. "That's not how I am going to be with my child," I said to myself. "He's going to listen and we are only going to have to sit and talk about discipline for him to follow what I say." Yeah, right. Little did I know. It is not that easy.

Crying and Crying

The first few months after John was born were a lot harder than I expected. You know, with a newborn, you're lucky if you get a full three hours of sleep. One day John just started crying and crying. I had no idea what was wrong. I mean, I burped, changed, fed and rocked him but nothing helped.

Finally, I had no choice but to put

him down and walk away because I was literally shaking and dizzy. It took a while before I pulled myself together and said, "If I don't do it no one else will." I got up, grabbed my baby and paced for about an hour more before he stopped crying.

About two months after John was born, I was finally catching some ZZZs, but I was already behind in college by the time John was 2. Taking care of my baby, working and going to school turned out to be nearly impossible and I put school off.

Now John is 3 years old. He has a big head topped off with a mat of brown hair, big brown eyes and two handfuls of cheeks. His little voice brings me an array of feelings, from joy to frustration. I find my son more interesting now because he is learning and has more to say. He is also tougher to discipline. I say, "John, don't do that." He says, "You don't do that!"

My Son vs. His Teacher

I love my son but, boy, does he do some things. I get repeated complaints from the teacher: "Your son is being disruptive." "John does not focus on his work."

One day John's teacher said he hit a little girl and was put on time out. John was so angry that he kept cutting the teacher off to say, "But Mom, Victoria bump me with her butt against the wall!" I wasn't sure who to believe, but I was upset that my baby keeps getting into trouble.

Is He Becoming His Father?

I requested an evaluation through the Board of Education, only to find that nothing is wrong with him. I worry, though, because my son's father was very disruptive in school. I am so afraid of my son possibly repeating anything of the negative patterns of behavior on my side of the family or on his father's. Seeing any bad behav-

ior causes me to think he's going to end up in serious trouble.

However, maybe I should consider that my son is just a 3-year-old boy who likes to play more than he likes sitting down and writing the letters of the alphabet. The evaluator even suggested that he might do better in a pre-school that is more about playing and less like school.

Am I Becoming My Mother?

Sometimes I catch myself doing the same things I hated in my mother. Because of her addiction, my mom was inconsistent. I felt frustrated that I couldn't count on her to cook when I was hungry or help me do my homework. She disciplined my siblings and me when it wasn't necessary and let us get away with things when we needed discipline.

Inconsistency is mistake number one that I make with my son today. If John jumps on the bed I punish him, but if I am on the phone and he jumps on the bed then I completely disregard it. I know consistency is difficult, especially for a single parent, but I feel upset that I'm not as on top of things as I'd like to be.

Angry and Overwhelmed

Sometimes I just feel overwhelmed. One day recently I was arguing with John's father while cooking some sausages on the stove. When they started to burn I said, "I'm not dealing with that," but he did nothing. Smoke started to fill the kitchen. I got so mad that I flung the pot against the kitchen door.

My son was watching cartoons in the next room and walked out to see sausages on the floor and his mommy upset. "What happened, Ma? You all right?" he asked. I quickly had to grab my composure and say yes. I thought, "He's going to learn that this is how to react to anger." That really bothered me. I felt embarrassed that I'd lost control.

Parenting Is Confusing!

What I've learned is that parenting is all

about confusion. I am always confused about little things, like whether I should give John a time out, or whether to give him juice when bedtime is around the corner. Should I say no, or do I say no too often?

I am also confused about the big things: which school I should put him in, whether John is learning the right behavior from me, if he's growing into a good kid.

I look for signs that John is doing well. I see that John has good qualities: He's loving and helpful and very entertaining. Our communication has developed so we understand each other better now.

Just the other day I was sick and he came and rubbed my back, saying, "Mommy, you all right?" I was feeling half-dead, but I was able to crack a smile, because my baby came along with a thermometer saying, "Turn over, Mommy, I'll help you."

Making My Son Proud

Now I understand why people say, "You're too young!" Being a single mother is something you need to be mentally prepared for. My advice to other girls is to wait!

But I also like that my son is here with me through my own years of growing. I started college again in the fall, and over my winter break, I kept John home from pre-school most days. I wanted the extra time with him. I am bored at home with no one to tell, "Stop that!" or, "Come play ball with me," I was also able to work on his behavior so that when he returned he listened to the teacher more.

There are times when John and I are home and I say to myself, "Wow, my baby is growing so fast." I know I have to keep growing at a fast pace, too, to be the mother I want to be. I'm determined to set us both on the right path and make my son proud. John will be there to see me finish college and will be learning from me as I start a career.

Hope in a Crisis

A nursery gives parents a break.

When Melanie (not her real name) started feeling like both her kids were too much to handle, she thought she would have to give up her two-year-old son. As a young single mother living in a shelter, she didn't believe that she was able to take care of him.



ILLUSTRATION BY LEE SAMUEL

Melanie's shelter sent her to the New York Foundling's Crisis Nursery, a program in lower Manhattan that offers up to three weeks of free childcare to parents facing a crisis. It also gives parents emergency cash and goods, counseling, help in dealing with city agencies and a service plan that connects them to support in their own communities.

Supporting Parents

Melanie was relieved to find a safe place to leave her son for awhile and to receive guidance on parenting. The Crisis Nursery found out that Melanie was a victim of domestic violence, and that part of the reason she was thinking of giving up her son was that she feared she couldn't keep him safe. The Crisis Nursery gave her counseling on domestic violence and connected her to a support program in her own neighborhood.

Melanie is now living with both of her children and continues to stay in contact with the nursery. "She feels more capable of meeting her son's needs," said Victoria Peña, the Crisis Nursery director. "And she knows she can always count on us for support."

Facing a crisis without support can be more than even the most well-meaning parent can handle, Peña says. And too often, that's why children go into foster care. By caring for the parent as well as the child, the Crisis Nursery hopes to make the whole family safer.

'The Challenge is Fear'

One of the greatest challenges the Crisis Nursery faces is convincing parents to trust it. Many parents who come to the nursery have been in care themselves or had bad experiences with city agencies.

The Crisis Nursery is working to get out the message that their goal is to help parents care for their children, without judging or separating their families. "We understand that they don't know who we are," said Peña.

Victoria Peña said parents often feel a sense of relief as soon as they walk in the doors. "Because they're in crisis, they feel like there's no one. But when they walk in here they know that there's hope."

For family support services in New York City, call 311.

ABOUT **Rise**

Rise is a magazine by and for parents who have been involved with the child welfare system. Its mission is to provide parents with true stories about the system's role in families' lives and information that will help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

Some of the stories in this issue were written by participants in a writing group at The Center for Family Life in Sunset Park, a preventative service agency in Brooklyn, NY. You can reach CFI at (718) 788-3500 or www.cflsp.org. Other stories

were written by participants in the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), an advocacy program that teaches parents about their rights. For more information about CWOP, call (212) 348-3000.

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Temper Tamer

Learning how to say 'No' to my daughter.

BY ALBERT SHEPHERD

When the day finally came that my daughter came home from foster care, I thought I was ready to be a single father because I'd spent so much time visiting my daughter at her foster homes and having overnight and weekend visits with her. But to say that actually living full time with my 5-year-old daughter was rough would be an understatement.

Stubborn Spells and Crying

During our visits, my daughter had rarely had temper tantrums or shown stubbornness. But once she got home, whenever she didn't get her way, she would start by putting on a disappointed face, then wait a couple of hours to show how upset she was. Her tantrums were either stubborn spells where she would sit with her arms crossed and a frown on her face, or extremely loud crying sessions that made it sound like someone was beating her. Oddly, despite her crying, there were no tears on her face.

I didn't know what to do. She is my daughter and I love her dearly, but I wasn't going to give in to a 5 year old's demand to have everything her way.

Soon I noticed she was breaking things in her room when she threw her fits and I sent her to her room. So I removed everything from her room but her bed and dresser. Then I saw that she'd written on her white dresser with a marker. I was at my wit's end. I had to leave the room before I lost control. I feared I would hit my daughter and I never want to do that.

'No, Because...'

But her behavior was so frustrating at times that I wasn't sure how to handle her. I knew I had to figure out a way to respond without getting upset. Finally, I told my daughter's agency worker about our situation and asked, "Is she too used to getting her way?" The worker said it was good that I was setting rules and limits, but suggested that I explain the reasons for my rules to my daughter.

Now, rather than tell her a simple, "No," I say, "No, because..." or, "Not now because..." I always give her a reason. As a result, my relationship with my daughter has grown. My daughter and I have learned to respect one another and we love each other even more than before.

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