



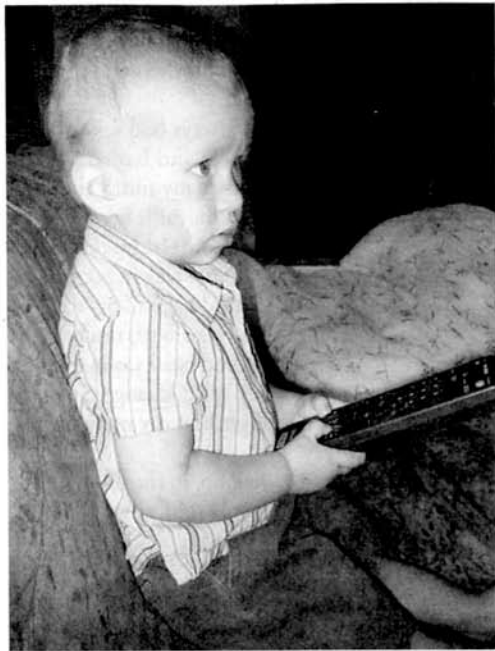
# Never Say Never

So you think you know how you'll be when your baby arrives.

By Cullen Curtiss

**B**efore I shared an airplane seat with a wriggling, babbling 20-plus-pounder named Gus, I was annoyed by those with uncontrollable baggage known as offspring. Being jostled repeatedly from behind by a size-three shoe was something I couldn't understand. "I'll never let our child do that," I said to my husband. "It's so rude."

Before I became the sole provider of sustenance to a snuggly, fattening boy, I thought it was downright wrong that my friend's child had given her mammary glands his own special moniker: num-nums. Not to mention that this little talker had evolved to standing and was unabashed to reveal his mum's beloved num-nums no matter if she wore a dress, leotard or blue wool coat. "I'll never let our child do that," I said to my husband. "It's weird."



*Would you trust your toddler with the remote control? Never say never.*

Before I laid my hand on the warm, purring body of my son several times throughout the night, I vowed to maintain a healthy nightlife of concerts and literary readings, despite my young mum status. "I'll never be the type to stay home every night with our child," I said to my husband. "You have to get out and trust other people with your baby."

He agreed, and off we went into the land of conception and parenthood, ignoring most of our firmly held convictions—the stuff that had made us *us*.

Then we bored people with my labor story—after deciding it was a private event for our scrapbook only—complete with every sound, smell, and emotion.

We acquired enough colored plastic toys to fuel an SUV for a year, after stating continually that wooden

toys, books and items found in our cupboards would be more than enough to keep Gus amused.

We referred to ourselves in the third person—"Dada's going to work now"—and we talked to one another through Gus—"Maybe your mama will read you a book." This after claiming it was just bad form.

We were going to be tough about letting him cry it out and learn to fall asleep without num-nums. Sometimes we *are* tough, but sometimes he's too cute or too sad. So much for providing the consistency we said was missing in the lives of other people's children.

Though we had explicitly decided to be reserved and allow Gus to show his own triumphs, we've bragged to playground acquaintances about his ball-playing skills. And in front of family, we've urged him to make the sound of a bear or delight us with his word for water.

And when my traveling husband asked me to put Gus on the phone, I didn't even flinch. The exchange ended in a button-stabbing frenzy, but we were not dissuaded to try it again the next time my husband went fishing.

We were set on participating in none of this; we would not be dragged by the undertow of parenting. But we have been, and we are ever curious about how it happened.

When we look back at our parents, we shake our heads at the mistakes we think they made. Maybe they were too young and naïve to have children, but they were likely not so shocked by parenthood. Settling down was the next step, and they just did it. Their identities easily morphed from college student to married partners to parents.

We, on the other hand, left dorm life more than 15 years ago and only recently said, "I do." That much extra life between college and babies tends to build a very particular person. We had time to nurture our identities to the point of rabid protection, never expecting to go from fully formed, exquisitely original people with specific ideas about raising children

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Courtesy photos.

to the generic mommies or daddies glorified in every parenting magazine.

So how did it happen?

Simple. We had a child. And the child transformed us. Everyone *told* us this would happen, but it wasn't fathomable until we were demanding pre-boarding privileges ourselves, or I was baring my breasts in public to soothe a nap-deprived Gus.

Evidence is the following line I uttered while rubbing my pregnant belly: "We're going to make the little guy adapt to our lives." To only the smallest extent did this become true. For the most part, our life without Gus and life with Gus don't resemble one another; there is no nifty sidecar option.

My husband and I set out to control the child chapter of our lives because we felt if we didn't, we'd lose ourselves and our values entirely—and this was a scary prospect after nearly 40 years of cultivation.

We've heard some new parents say, "I can't wait to get my life back," as if their children will go away at some point and they can go back to being their former selves. I remind myself that it's not about what I used to have, but what I have at present. Doing what's most practical and elicits the fewest tears on occasion has not ruined me—in fact, it makes me feel more mature and capable than ever. It makes me feel more in rhythm with the world.

While I feel guilty about abandoning the non-chlorinated, biodegradable diapers (because they are expensive and fail) within weeks of my son's birth for a mega-mass-produced option, I am otherwise a con-

scientious consumer. While I cringe that a glaring television can stop Gus dead in his tracks, I've had to occupy him sometimes so I could work. While I hate that he sometimes eats non-organic food that a machine extruded into a jar, I am happy for his caloric intake.

In other words, I am not irrevocably disappointed in myself, nor am I praying for or paying someone to find my lost identity. I'm me, but better, and being a little transformed at midlife isn't a bad thing. You see, the world didn't end the very moment my son walked into my lap, rapped on my chest, and said, "Moe." On the contrary, it instantly made more sense.

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