

baby

survival guide

7 truths that'll keep you sane

by Maura Rhodes Photographs by Alison Bank

a week or so after I had my first baby, my friend Susan stopped by—just in the nick of time: Will had been crying for what felt like hours and nothing I did helped. Susan, who'd just had her second daughter, calmly scooped up my inconsolable newborn and did a sort of combo side-to-side swaying and up-and-down jostling that magically lulled him out of Waa-Waa Land.

I've had three kids since then, and Susan's "mommy jig" has been a lifesaver with every one of them. But I never would have known it if I hadn't let her help me out—and that's exactly why she, and I, and other moms who've been there want you to remember these seven rules:

1 Asking for help does not make you incompetent.

Precisely the opposite, in fact. Sometimes, there's no other way to get from point A to point B. Even if there is, getting there alone can take twice as long and make you crazy.

Kim Ganier of Huntington Beach, California, was always a self-sufficient person—until her first baby, Laci (now 3), was a week old and Ganier found herself doing laundry while "someone else was sitting in my glider and cuddling my baby. The lightbulb went on," she says. After that, visitors were put to work so Ganier could enjoy Laci. Her advice now: Speak up,

be specific about what you need, and say yes when offered help of any kind. "You'll feel guilty at first, but you'll get over it," she says.

It'll be easier if you remember that someday you will reciprocate—if not to the particular mom who helped you out, then to another. Several months ago, I was having dinner out with my kids when the mom at the next table asked if I had an extra diaper. I happily handed one over. Sure enough, not long after that, I discovered I'd forgotten to bring a clean swim diaper to the pool and had to go begging from lounge chair to lounge chair for a spare. A better-prepared mom than I saved the day.

So never let guilt or embarrassment or even your ego get in the way of accepting help. Improvising a diaper is a lot harder than returning a favor.

2 Babies don't need as much new stuff as you think.

They seem to outgrow everything from stretchies to bassinets overnight, so why stock up? "I wish someone had told me not to buy cutesy, expensive clothes for my newborn," says Kristine Shuler, mom of 3-year-old Kaylee in Baroda, Michigan. "Little did I know she would spend most of the time in T-shirts from Target. She didn't wear half the clothes I bought!" >>





*Go a little crazy
with your baby
(not your life!)*

There are two lessons here: First, take your time when deciding what you'll really need. Do a little research, make a list, and stick with it. (*Parenting Magazine's Baby Must-Haves* book is a great resource for teasing out what to buy and what to skip, by the way.) Second, as tempting as it is to buy everything fresh and new and adorable for your first baby—resist. Some items, like swings and bouncy seats, are used for such short periods of time that they never see much wear and tear. Can you borrow from a friend? If not, check out Craigslist.org or Freecycle.org.

Marilyn Sklar swears by a children's resale store in her town. "When my daughter, Raquel, was born, I started buying gently used clothes from there. Later, I brought in some of Raquel's clothing and took an in-store credit to purchase more," says the mom of two in Phoenix. "Now I recycle that way whenever possible. We're saving money and being green!"

3 Getting a baby to sleep is worth the trouble.

This is a matter of basic maternal math: baby zzz's = mommy zzz's. Veteran moms will tell you that figuring out, early on, how to get your baby to go to sleep, stay

asleep, and take regular naps is key to getting through that entire first year. "Being sleep-deprived is a fact of life, but the sooner you get sleep figured out, the better," says Michelle Wilkins, a mom of three in Blacksburg, Virginia.

For Theresa Cole, mom of Ethan, 5, and Jordan, 1, in Kansas City, Missouri, the trick is to get your newborn used to falling asleep on his own: "Think twice about feeding your baby to put him to sleep. He's a clean slate, waiting to learn how to do things. If you teach him he can only drift off with a boob or bottle in his mouth, that's the only way he will—even at two in the morning. And, seriously, who wants to deal with that every night for the next couple of years?"

I'm a firm believer in consistency. When my third baby was 9 months old and not taking decent naps during the day, I came up with some new routines. I stopped letting him catnap in the car while I ran errands, and planned outings around his naptime, to make sure he could go down in his crib. I also turned his room into a sleep haven (blackout shades, white-noise machine). Pretty soon he was napping twice a day, and snoozing better at night, too. To keep daytime noise to a minimum, Jamie Pearson, mom of Avery, 7, and Max, 5, in Palo Alto, California, adds this tip: "Make a diplomatic front-door sign that says, 'Baby napping. Please visit us another time.'"

4 Competitive parenting: not cool.

Of course you already know that babies develop at their own pace. And of course you know there's more to your baby than when he hits milestones. But when

it seems like every kid in the playgroup except yours is sitting up or saying "Mama," it can take all your willpower to act like you just don't care.

It's totally understandable to compare. But for the sake of your sanity, it's worth trying to stop. "I made the conscious decision to believe the experts who said that the spectrum of normalcy was wide," says Susie Sonneborn Blim, a mom of three in Montclair, New Jersey. "I also stopped hanging out with moms who were constantly boasting about or obsessing over their babies' milestones, because that played a huge part in how caught up I got with comparing my baby to other babies."

Pearson had a similar tactic: "When Avery wasn't the first—or second, or third—baby in my mothers' group to crawl, I told myself that the impatient, intense, irritable babies were always the early crawlers and walkers," she says.

“There’s nothing more delicious than cuddling a baby—to a point. So take a break.”

"I kept these theories to myself, of course!"

If you're truly worried that your baby is falling behind, bring it up with your pediatrician. She should be your go-to expert when it comes to your child's health and development—not the bragging, pitying other moms.

5 You and your baby don't have to be joined at the hip.

Experts say: Being touched, held, carried, and cuddled is vital to a baby's development. Moms answer back: There's nothing more delicious than touching, holding, carrying, and cuddling a baby—to a point. When it's clear that you and/or your baby need a break from each other, take it. This is especially true when your infant's wailing or your pre-toddler's whining is about to push you over the edge. Hand her to Daddy or send out an SOS to a friend or relative.

If there's no one you can call on for help, take a tip from Christine Klepacz, a mom of two in Bethesda, Maryland. "When your baby is crying and you could burst into tears yourself, or when you're just overwhelmed, it's okay to put her in her crib for a while and sit by yourself. She's safe, and sometimes she needs time away from you, too. It's okay. We all do it!"

It's equally important to carve out time for yourself regularly—not just when you're about to go off the deep end. If there's one thing Jennifer Geddes, a *Parenting* staffer and mom of two girls, learned during the first year, it's that "you have to take a few minutes for yourself here and there. »»

It's essential to being a happy and healthy mom. I was so concerned with attending to my daughter's needs that I neglected my own. I barely ate, slept, or left the house," she says.

If you're thinking, "Yeah, right—I can barely get a shower," wait: It's doable. You just have to plan ahead, be creative, and adjust your definition of what constitutes a relaxing break. Where, prebaby, you were used to spur-of-the-moment shopping sprees or on-a-whim workouts, you might find, like Marilyn Sklar, that your idea of a good time now is "a glass of wine and a good book after the children are in bed." Or a brisk walk in the morning before they get up. Me, I swear by weekend matinees. I can get a lot of regenerative mileage out of two hours by myself in a cozy, dark theater with a bag of popcorn, lost in a great story onscreen.

6 The best baby stage is the one you're in.

"They grow up so fast." The reason you'll hear this from everyone and her grandmother: It's true. Kim Lavergne of Nashville, mom of 2-year-old Justin, remembers feeling like time was crawling after he was born. "In reality, the days go by so fast that the next thing you know, your child is no longer a baby," she says. "I've learned to cherish and enjoy the time I spend with Justin."

Charlene Kochensparger of Centerville, Ohio, who has a daughter and a son, seconds that. "First-time parents tend to wish the time away—'I can't wait for her to crawl, walk, talk'—and not enjoy the moment," she says.

The time slipped away from Loretta Sehlmeier of Dix Hills, New York, because she was so focused on being a perfect parent to her son, Christian, now 4. "I fretted so much over caring for him that I missed the entire experience. I honestly didn't notice that my baby was growing and changing a little bit each day. I spent a lot of time looking at him, but I was way too distracted to actually see him," she says. "So take some time each day, real time, to hold your baby and do nothing else but use your senses to connect with him. Smell his sweetness, and look at those tiny fingers and toes and amazing little nose."



Sure, it's hard to get him to sleep, but so worth it

7 There's no one else like you.

Only a handful of baby-care rules are written in stone (specifically, those having to do with health and safety—like, you really should always put a baby to sleep on his back). Most everything else is up for interpretation. "It's great to read up, solicit opinions, and listen respectfully to advice you haven't asked for," says Michelle Wilkins. "But you know your baby and yourself best. You'll know when an idea resonates."

Adds Chantel Fry, mom of Dylan, 3, and Madalyn, 7 months, in Pittsburgh: "You're going to be different than the next mom. Not better, not worse—because you do the best you can, and if at the end of the day your child has laughed, and is clean and fed, you can go to sleep knowing that you did what is expected of you." No matter how you did those things, exactly, you can be proud that you're inventing your own special way of being a mom. ■

Maura Rhodes, a mom of four, is a contributing editor at Parenting.