



When does it . get *easier*?

Seasoned mums and parenting professionals offer their advice about how to survive the tears, tantrums and trials of early-years parenting with your sanity fully intact, writes *Kate Farr*.

Ask any mum her thoughts about her newborn and you'll probably be told that while she's head-over-heels in love, she can't wait for a full night's sleep. Fast-forward a couple of years

and that same mum is bemoaning the "terrible twos" and praying for the toddler tantrums to wane. Meanwhile, the four-year-old's parent is wondering why it's so darn difficult to persuade a pre-schooler to wear shoes outside.

So, when exactly *does* it get easier? Are we guilty of wishing our children's early years away, and is having your patience stretched daily all part of the plan when it comes to raising a family?



New mum nerves

From the day you bring your baby home from hospital, your life undergoes a seismic shift when caring for your child becomes temporarily all-consuming. Elaine, mum to two-year-old Lily, describes her first few weeks of parenthood as “a total blur. I felt anxious and overwhelmed with the feeling that I was going to mess it up somehow.” Reflecting on this time, she says, “Looking back, my daughter must have sensed my stress, as she slept quite badly and couldn’t settle unless she was physically attached to me. This meant I was constantly sleep deprived, short-tempered and honestly horrible to be around!”

Allison Banbury, principal of EtonHouse Pre-School in Tai Tam, explains, “With the arrival of a new baby, it’s natural to feel overwhelmed by the impact of all the resultant change. The huge sense of

responsibility felt – especially by new mums – is not necessarily something you’re prepared for. Be kind to yourself and give yourself the time to make the necessary adjustments. Talk to other mums about how you are feeling, as you may be surprised by the number of others who feel the same.” She also suggests seeking professional support if you are feeling unable to cope. “To voice how you feel can help you to identify the steps you can take to improve your situation.”

Sharon, single mum to Jonah, aged six, pinpoints sleep as a major factor in coping with the early months. “My son got very bad eczema at ten weeks, so sleeping through ended then. I was completely sleep deprived until he was two, as he was constantly up, crying in pain and restless. It was absolutely horrendous.” She continues, “I believe that lack of sleep is probably the determining

factor in your self-image, and in your relationships with your partner and child”.

Alison Watson, centre director of Tutor Time’s Red Hill campus, believes that snatching 40 winks where you can in those early days is a necessity, not a luxury. “Newborn babies typically sleep around 16 hours per day, but, unfortunately, rarely for more than a couple of hours at a time. This can be extremely wearing for parents or carers; if possible, don’t feel you must stay awake during the day. Try to nap while the baby is sleeping. Most babies will eventually adjust to shorter sleeps during the day and longer sleeps during the night at around six to eight weeks.”

Breakdown in communication

Parents can also struggle with understanding their children during the pre-verbal months, leading to



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frustration on both sides. (Who hasn't experienced their baby pitching an apple halfway across the room in a rage because they actually wanted banana?) Our experts suggest careful consideration of how you communicate with your little one to help decipher their needs. Alison Watson recommends engaging your baby in simple communication throughout the day. "Spend time talking to your baby and using hand movements. Speak to your baby, make eye contact and smile when you are doing mundane jobs like changing them."

Allison Banbury says, "Your pre-verbal child is already adept at communicating and will do so through actions and gestures, play and interactions with their environment and the people in it. You'll become adept at interpreting what your child is 'saying' and verbalising this on their behalf." She adds "Baby signing [sign language] can be a tremendously powerful tool for enabling pre-verbal children to communicate, and can help reduce their frustration while helping to support their speech development." Elaine tried this technique with her daughter. "We came to baby signing a bit late, as Lily was already around a year old by the time we started. We did find that it helped, especially at mealtimes, as she was able to ask for 'more' or tell us she was 'full' or 'thirsty'. If we had another child I'd try this again, as I think it could be pretty useful in other situations."

Tantrum taming

The much-feared tantrum stage rears its head from toddlerhood onwards, and to make matters worse, kids at this age are mobile and can run away from you! This phase tests the calmest of parents to their absolute limit, and its timing can often coincide with a parent's return to work, requiring inner reserves that you never knew you possessed.

Sharon recalls, "Working as a teacher, I had very little patience left by the time I got home, and for six months I really struggled with his tantrums, taking them personally and losing my temper. It wasn't until I talked to other parents that I realised that shouting and getting upset wasn't working. We were both losing out.

Now I keep calm and don't raise my voice. I give him the option of doing what I ask, or having a time out – but in such a way that it doesn't feel like a punishment: 'Maybe you should read a story for a bit then come and talk to me when you're nice and quiet,' or 'Would you like to play with some Lego first and, when Mummy's ready,



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we can have a chat'. ”

Allison Banbury offers some reassurance. “All young children have tantrums to some degree, but there are strategies that can help reduce their occurrence and severity. Children can find change in routine or in your expectation of their behaviours difficult. Using phrases such as ‘Now you are...’ and ‘Next you will...’ helps children to anticipate a change. Help promote a smooth transition by giving them warning when the change is imminent – a countdown or use of a timer can be valuable tools here.”

Parenting partnerships

When it comes to behaviour and discipline for our kids, Julie Lam, founder of Highgate House, encourages us to look beyond the naughty step. “Think about working in partnership *with* your child

rather than using a technique or strategy *on* them. This can produce a dramatic change, leading to greater cooperation.” She also suggests examining your child’s daily schedule. “Young children often express their frustration through challenging behaviour when they are mismatched to an inappropriate environment, perhaps when adult expectations are not in line with the child’s stage of development, or when an over-stimulating daily routine creates stress. If your child is at pre-school, look beyond the facilities or school design to the attitude of the staff. Ask how they manage challenging behaviour, how they care for the child respectfully and how open and willing they are to work with your child as part of your unique family situation.”

Sharon relates to the need to foster cooperation, particularly now

that her son is a little older. “If I’m really angry, we both have quiet time in our own rooms, and when we’re calm, I always make sure I sit him on my lap and explain quietly why I asked him to do something, or ask him how he feels when certain things happen, then encourage him to talk about his feelings.” Julie explains why this works: “Try to model the behaviour you want from your child. If you want them to be calm and respectful, then act that way with them. Your child is absorbing a powerful message and one day they will be able to reflect this back in the world.”

So it seems that the answer to the question, “When does it get easier?” is both “now” and “never”! Each stage brings its own challenges, but one of the many gifts of parenthood is the ability to forget the tough days and focus on the happier ones. 📖

