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## Tumbling Down From That Ivory Tower

By Toni Klym McLellan

**T**he screaming continued, unabated. We weren't even halfway home and my newborn son's car-seat protest showed no signs of waning. From the passenger seat, my mother-in-law raised her voice above the noise as if at a rock concert: "Maybe you should try a pacifier! It might ease his suffering a bit." My immediate response was, "No way. I don't use those things." So, unable to figure out a way to get my breast to my kid from the driver's seat, we drove on, accompanied by our very own human siren. By the end of that car ride, I'd adopted a new parenting philosophy. Within the week, all trips involving my baby and a car seat also included a pacifier. No more suffering. No more siren.

The thing is, I knew better. As the saying goes, "When you know better, you do better." But my version has an amendment: "Maybe by about the three-thousandth time you'll do better." I had my reasons for not wanting to use binkies, and not all of them were necessarily rational. It just didn't jibe with my idea of what an Ideal Mom did. But, in holding myself to a rigid and almost certainly unrealistic parenting standard, I failed to see — at least for one very long car ride — how shaking off my expectations might have saved everyone involved a lot of grief.

I knew better because I'd already had to adjust my new-parent expectations according to personal experience. During my first pregnancy, my subconscious mind adopted visions of how things would (or should) go. Along with my developing baby, I was gestating The Ideal Mom vision and her set of Ideal Experiences. I

sequestered myself in my ivory tower (the essential palace for every Ideal Mom) and focused on specifics for everything ahead: the pregnancy (where I'd gracefully combine girth and litheness), the birth experience (drug-free and stoic, with oh, maybe a low moan or two), breastfeeding (how hard could it be?) and... pacifiers? Never! Bedtime would involve some kind of nurturing routine followed by placing baby in the crib and watching sleep gently come during a soft, on-key lullaby. I'd then leave the room for the night, presumably to work on my perfectly executed baby book in my immaculate, flawlessly child-proofed house.

Then I brought our son home. I expected to be able to rest him on my bed to answer the phone or pee... until he learned to roll without bothering to consult me first. Childproofing? What's that? Oh, you mean what you do when you discover your 4-month-old can access the entire house and also has an affinity for electrical cords, floor lamps, hot ovens and basement stairs? I also assumed that babies just slept at night, like normal people. Shouldn't they be tired from chewing on cords and attacking lamps all day?

In retrospect, I was expecting two babies. The first was borne of reading, talking to seasoned moms and sifting through images gleaned over three decades of mass-media consumption. And then came the baby I actually had, bringing with his pink and wrinkly cantankerous self an entirely different reality. So, with my next pregnancy, I thought I was prepared. I waddled back up into that Ivory

Tower and waited, thinking the view was magnificent. But I was expecting my first baby all over again. I wouldn't need to be induced 13 days late, because I'd gone into labor on my own the first time. And, of course, babies didn't use binkies, because my firstborn hadn't.

Expectation and reality may have been amazingly disparate, but reality also exceeded my wildest imaginings. The unexpected pleasures of parenthood are many: the way babies use their toes and fingers interchangeably like little monkeys, or the way their chins quiver sometimes toward the end of a nursing session, or the sunburst effect in your heart upon seeing a first smile or knowing your antics made them laugh. I still wake up excited every day, wondering what surprises await us.

Looking back as a second-timer — who still falls into the Ideal Mom trap with some regularity — I'm not even sure what the destination is any more, but I'm certain I no longer care. I realize now that parenting is not about destinations or milestones, but the journey. It's rather like viewing every day as if it were your birthday: you don't know what gifts await you, but the element of surprise is the most fun part, anyway. Even if that surprise happens to be a three-pack of binkies and a clip for the car seat. ☺

*About the author:* Toni Klym McLellan, a former attorney, works from home as a freelance writer and recovering Ivory Tower Mom to her two boys, Jackson and Nolan.