



motherhood

# The *Changing Goalposts* of Motherhood

Words by Alana Kirk-Gillham

**T**he books and the magazines and the midwives tell you how to prepare for motherhood in lots of different and useful ways – what cots to buy, how to structure feeds, how to keep your precious babies safe, and the holy grail of course – how to get them to sleep. But nothing and no-one can prepare you for the emotional rollercoaster those little bundles of neuroses will take you on. There is no manual, no DVD, and certainly no preparation to equip you for the mental and emotional journey you are about to embark on.

The life-rattling rollercoaster of parenting is full of highs and lows, turns and dips. Rarely is the path smooth, and rarely is it straight – and perhaps that’s why it is so fulfilling and challenging. One week you are flavour of the month, (which is always a blessing and a curse), and the next week it’s Dad’s turn and it cuts you like a knife. How annoying the constant phrase ‘Mummy do it’ can become, and how much you miss

it when you suddenly hear ‘Daddy do it.’ One minute (the exact one in which you are trying to cook their tea) they are clingy and needy, their arms outstretched, pleading for your undivided attention, and the next (the one you finally sit down and want a cuddle) they are striding out for independence and push you away – you are currently surplus to requirement. You need the patience of a church full of saints...and not just because you have to read *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* 26,290 times with exactly the same enthusiasm. But because it is the hardest job in the world.

But the most difficult part of parenting I have found is the constantly changing goalposts. Just when you think you have it all figured out – they toddle off in their inimitable way and change the rules. Just when you pat yourself on the back for a job well done, a new challenge looms large and ominous, casting a grey cloud on your glistening rainbow. There is no time to catch your breath – or they’ll be catching you out.

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And it starts early. Just when you think you've got the adorable new docile baby thing sussed, they start getting frisky and demanding more stimulation. You finally manage the whole breastfeeding lark, and after five months of frustrated fumbling, you eventually feel like mother earth, when the books start telling you to wean them off and give them proper food. You just get the hang of a rainbow of pureed fruit and vegetables, spooning nano-millilitres into their gaping mouths, when they start demanding finger food and you worry about choking, even in your sleep. You think you've just come to terms with crawling and have the house well and truly finger-proofed when Wham! you wake up one day to find them walking and a whole new set of challenges await you. You've just mastered the terrible twos when potty training looms and you are left a quivering wreck of insecurity and frustration.

With every new success, comes a crushing realisation that there is a fresh 'next-step' loitering around the corner waiting to trip you up. You barely have time to stand back and congratulate yourself on the mastery of a new skill (yours, not theirs!) and you tumble back to the bottom rung of knowledge as you try to figure out how to potty train, or discipline, or teach them how to cross a road. I think in nearly three years of parenting I've had about two weeks of status quo. Two weeks when my toddler wasn't embarking on some

new psychotic personality phase at the exact moment I had just about learnt to cope with the existing one, and my baby wasn't morphing before my eyes into a teething, tetchy, crawling, walking toddler.

I'm not sure I could realistically expect much more, having had two babies in two years. With childhood being one long journey of discovery (yours) and phases (theirs), two different journeys in parallel were unlikely to merge into a golden path of calm. Our yellow brick road is bumpy and adventurous. It's breathless and chaotic, but I guess the best journeys are. So my advice for surviving motherhood? Eat well, because you have to have the strength to be the adult all the time, even when you want to throw a tantrum of your own. Sleep well whenever you can, because they won't always. And hold on tight. I liken it to sitting in the passenger seat (because you will rarely feel like you are in the driving seat...) of a rally car – you just have to buckle your seatbelt and hold on until your knuckles are white – because surviving motherhood is a hairy ride that will leave you exhilarated and terrified, deliriously happy and shockingly demented, often at the same time. Only the brave need apply – you are going to need a heart of cotton wool, wrapped in nerves of steel. Oh, and don't think for a second there'll be time for patting yourself on the back. There's always a new challenge waiting for you. \*

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