

in my VIEW

COMING INTO MOTHERHOOD

Mom, that tuna fish you gave me for lunch yesterday smelled like a pig's butt," my eight-year-old son, Casey, told me, his small hands on his hips and his Tootsie Roll-brown eyes large with delight. It was 7:40 a.m., and I was picking my way around a mushy cucumber and Colby jack cheese in our overstuffed refrigerator, looking for lunch inspiration for him and his twin sister, Rebecca.

"ThanksALOT," I replied, pretending to be insulted. "How about you make your own lunch today, Mister?"

"Oh, Mom," he said, rushing toward me and throwing his skinny arms around my waist. "Just kidding."

I squeezed him back, lingering there, letting the refrigerator doors remain open, a halo of fluorescence engulfing us.

"Mmmm, you smell like heaven," Casey said, milking this delicious moment for everything it was worth.

Which was priceless. And fleeting.

I am aware that with each inch grown and milestone met, my children are growing up. We're all huggers, but there will come a time when they will pull back. It's already happening in small bursts. "Mom, don't do that," Casey whispers urgently when I try to kiss him goodbye at the door to his class. He practically knocks me down trying to escape this public humiliation.

Yep.

My daughter, too, a real Mama's girl, wrestles with her burgeoning sense of self. She's adapting to a new school, new friends, and a new blended family, and she depends upon me, her "constant," to anchor her. From her earliest days at two and a half pounds - the size of a small roasting chicken - Rebecca's love was fierce. "That girl's got a set of lungs on her," remarked one of the neonatal nurses. "She's a survivor, don't you



Photograph by Ellen Jaskol

By Nancy Sharp

worry." So, so true. My loving and fiery daughter, who inhales life (have you seen her laugh?), uses those lungs a lot, for me, because I am still her world even as she takes steps toward independence, which I encourage her to do.

"I'm never leaving you," she tells me after I suggest she spend a week at the Jewish Community Center Ranch Camp this summer.

I confess, even bribery failed.

"Mom, I'm not even going away to college," Casey chimes in. "I'm going to Johnson and Wales so I can live at home."

Hmmmm. If all goes well, college is a decade away; I decided to forgo the bribes and "expand your options" lecture.

Are you sensing a pattern here? The ticktock pendulum of motherhood.

One moment we are castigated; the next we come close to godliness. One moment our children devour us, wanting to re-enter the womb; the next hour they slam the door in our faces.

On better days, when the morning routine is calm and the three of us sit together at my grandparents' white breakfast table, the eastern sun warming our shoulders, with eggs, toast, and orange juice in front of us and the warm smell of my coffee in the air, I think, "Yes, you are a fine mother." All is well. I'm happy; my children are happy.

Minutes later someone will have an outburst, maybe me. My daughter forgot to complete her reading log, my son forgot to study for his spelling test, I forgot about the school auction

meeting, I forgot to buy toothpaste and soap to donate to the children of Bolivia for the class project.

We all mean well - we just get bogged down by life.

Maybe if I read some of those parenting books I'd feel more on top of my game. *Love and Logic* makes perfect sense when I read it, but in real life I tend to scratch and sniff, mothering by instinct, which I suppose is what most of us do pretty much most of the time.

I wonder when a mother wholly embraces motherhood. When does blind, scared intuition become trust, trust become knowledge, knowledge become confidence, and confidence beget certainty and love of mothering?

Just when I thought I was starting to nail it (sort of), I became a stepmother to two teenagers. They're good boys, and with three years of togetherness under our belts (but less than two living together as a family), we aren't quite so foreign to one another. Dylan, a muscular 17, walks around in boxer shorts and invades my private stash of chocolate chip cookies in the freezer. Ryan, 18, calls to ask if his college friend, Emily, a vegetarian, can come for dinner. Yes, yes!

Despite our burgeoning closeness, I still tread lightly with my stepsons, since probing questions about friends, drinking, grades, summer jobs, and the mess of soda cans and dirty socks in the basement ("the underworld") can quickly provoke their ire. They're typical teenagers who show their disgruntlement with eyes rolling to the tune of "God, you JUST don't get it." Most of this innocent rant is gifted to their father, Steve, my husband of 22 months, but I'm next in line, just as he is when my twins holler and cry, "You are the WORST mother."

Let's take a poll: Have you been there before?

It's complicated, motherhood. I'm still trying to make sense of it all: my responsibilities and rights, opinions and expectations, boundaries and freedom. Whether your children are young,

pre-adolescent, or (gulp!) teenagers, whether they are yours biologically or not, choosing motherhood, I believe, is a little like appointing yourself to the U.S. Supreme Court. You represent the highest form of the law while trying to maintain civil order. Then one day your service ends, and while you are not held in quite the same esteem, your vote still counts for something.

This is the common thread that binds us mothers together.

Naturally, every family has its history. For me, the path to motherhood was foreshadowed by loss because, as readers know, life and death collided after the birth of my twins. They were born; their father died. Today, they have no real memories of him, only pictures and dreams.

It's no wonder with all this background drama that I've been slow to embrace motherhood.

Despite my many missteps - the way I rush the kids, yell or nag them about leaving the skateboard in front of the refrigerator - I'm coming to realize that the whole of motherhood is indeed made up of many small parts. The essence of what it means to be a mother, I think, lies less in those milestone moments and more in the tender, infinitesimal times in between. Like the other day, when Dylan nudged extra-close, not quite asking for a hug but willing to receive one. Words aren't necessary; feelings are.

As I humbly scratch and sniff my way along this uneven precipice of motherhood, I think I've stumbled upon a little wisdom: Challenges come with the territory. There is but one today. Make it count.

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