



Words to Live By

Choices, stimulation, creativity, oh my!

By Kelli Wheeler

I blame the parenting magazines. They led me astray at my weakest, most vulnerable time. I'm talking about the magazines I turned to, first in idealism, then in desperation, searching for wisdom and guidance on how to raise the perfect first child they knew I was going to have.

I consumed the pages of those magazines like a woman falling off her diet with a bag of Oreos. I was sure I was going to be an enlightened, hip mother raising brilliant, well-behaved children. I was going to transcend my mother's common sayings like, "And how do you expect me to pay for it? With my good looks?" or "Hey! Who wants to play the Silent Game?"

I was going to use teachable phrases such as "Honey, that is expensive. Let's figure out how many weeks you need to save to be able to afford that" or "Can you please tone down your voices and find something constructive to play?"

These magazines were going to tell me how to be the perfect parent. Who wouldn't trust a periodical with the faces of impossibly beautiful and angelic babies on its cover each month? I followed each article to the letter in the smug certainty that my overachiever personality was going to yield enviable children.

Oh, how the high and mighty shall fall.

My biggest magazine-inspired downfall was to give my children

choices. "Giving your children a choice will give them a measure of control over their lives and keep them from acting out in defiance of consistently strict guidelines they feel compelled to test the boundaries of." OK, I just made that up, but it was something along those lines.

Choices! Let them have choices! What clothes would you like to wear today, honey? Shorts in the winter? Sure! Motherly intuition tells me to protect my children from the cold, but the magazine instructed: Let them experience the consequences of their decisions as long as it won't harm them. In theory, yes. Reality: I am convinced children don't grow cold receptors until they are at least 10, and I now fight regularly with a 6-year-old boy who wants to wear shorts and tank tops in any weather, causing me to lug around sweatshirts hoping he'll come to his senses and cover up.

And don't even get me started on food choices! Who knew that offering either peas or corn was the path to becoming a short-order cook?

Another trail I was led down by parenting magazines was to provide lots of mental stimulation for your baby. "By sitting down and guiding your infant or toddler through hours of repetitive play, you will stimulate their intelligence, problem-solving skills and awareness of their environment." Or something like that. Great in theory. In reality: My firstborn child, who benefited from hours of mind-numbing repetitive play and constant stimulation provided by his guilt-racked working mother, is aware that his environment is not being stimulated

unless it involves someone interacting or watching him. Translation: The kid doesn't know how to entertain himself!

The magazines also taught me that you are no one if you are not creative with your child. "When you add creativity to any endeavor, making art projects together, turning a walk into a nature hike, letting your child help make dinner, you provide an invaluable learning tool." I'm sure I must've read that somewhere. And once again, it's a

good theory in principle. The reality check that I am cashing every day goes a little something like this: an art dresser overflowing with colorful paper, ribbons, buttons, beads, glitter glue, jagged scissors of every design, feathers, foam paper, Popsicle sticks, fabric and anything else on sale at Michael's and two children telling me, "I'm bored." Asking my kids if they want to go down to the river, but they'd rather go to the Kids Club at

Mommy continued on page 46

the gym. Giving cooking instructions through clenched teeth as I clean up the broken eggs from the floor only to have my kids give up midway to go watch TV.

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I tried. I really tried to be the perfect parent. And I blame my failure squarely on every parenting magazine being carried around in diaper bags across America by first-time parents. "Perfect parent," of course, is an oxymoron. Raising kids is the biggest learning curve there is and it lasts a lifetime. The Cliffs Notes to parenting magazines is this: When you care enough to try to provide the best possible opportunities and

experiences involved in raising a family, your parenting is perfect, whether you succeed or not.

So after the first child, when you're seasoned and wise through experience, you learn to reach for People Magazine and hope you have time to read it in the bathroom as you're screaming at your precious children, "When the door is shut, that means I want privacy!"

Words to live by, Mom. You should start a parenting magazine.

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