

4. Your Baby's First Night at Home: The Worst Thing That's Ever Happened to You (Yet)

There's a reasonable chance that you're going to feel confident heading into your first night at home. After all, you're back on your own turf, you probably had a pretty good, quiet afternoon, and you've got everything you need. You're a team: mom, dad, and baby, working together. You'll do a little high-fiving. What's there to worry about? You'll think, "I guess all our planning paid off! We know what to do!"

Asshole, get over yourself. You don't know what to do, and that baby isn't on your team. That baby doesn't respect your plan. That baby doesn't even know you.

Fact: your baby doesn't know how to sleep.

Fact: your baby doesn't know it needs to sleep.

Fact: your baby doesn't know how to poop.

Fact: your baby doesn't know why its stomach hurts.

Fact: your baby still doesn't really know how to eat, or why.

Fact: your baby knows how to cry.

Fact: your baby doesn't care about your feelings.

You're in for hell.

Here's the good news. While this stage of your life is going to be terrible, you probably won't remember much of it. And the more children you have, the more completely the first days are bleached from your memory. Ask around. Everybody remembers it as one of the worst things they ever experienced, but when you ask for specifics, most people's memories grow hazy, like someone administered heavy shock therapy to them. They say, "Huh. It must not have been *that* bad. I guess in the moment it seemed terrible, but if I can't even remember..."

Don't listen to them. It's exactly as bad as they thought. Their brain doesn't remember for a few reasons. First, much of what happens in the early weeks and months of your baby's life happens when you're getting somewhere between a quarter to two-thirds of the sleep you're accustomed to. Without rest, the human brain does a lot of things differently, and in my experience one of the things it does is cripple your

ability to form clear, reliable memories. You'll notice this right away. You and your spouse will be trying your best to remember something important from an hour ago, and you'll come to some agreement about what likely happened, and maybe—maaaaybe—one of you will remember this consensus guess and freeze it in place as an actual memory. You'll be actively recording fiction as fact. So, sleep deprivation interferes with memory formation. Second, what occurred for many of these people could be described as trauma, and the brain's reaction to trauma is notoriously variable. There are some people whose brains DVR trauma, but that doesn't seem to be the norm. Most of us recall our worst moments not with clarity but through a morphine-like fog. Your first nights with your child might be as traumatic as a car accident, and your brain will acknowledge that as a brain does, by freaking out.

Phase One: "We Got This"

So what is this trauma you're going to endure? While the variations are endless, most begin with a sneak attack. You'll get home from the hospital around noon, and the afternoon will probably go OK. You'll have a few conversations that go like this:

Parent 1: I think the baby's sleepy.

Parent 2: She just woke up.

Parent 1: Hungry?

Parent 2: She just ate.

Parent 1: I should check her diaper.

Parent 2: Just did that.

Parent 1: Huh. So she's just... crying?

Parent 2: Is it possible this baby's just a dick?

You'll both laugh, do what you can, and at various moments your baby will stop crying or start eating or will gurgle in a way that seems meaningful, and you'll attach significance to all of it. You'll begin believing that you know things about parenting this child. "She likes this rocking motion!" "She's a left-boob eater when she's cranky!" "When the meth dealer next door slammed the trunk of his car, she fell asleep!" You'll be positive of these things, because you'll be applying all of your focus to solving the riddle

of this baby's behavior. That intensity level leads to intense beliefs.

You'll be wrong about all of it. Repeat this like a mantra: "We don't know what the hell we're doing." Diminished expectations will serve you well.

At some point a relative or friend will bring you a lasagna and hang around for awhile, staring at the baby. This period will be uneventful. Your child will probably sleep, giving this third party a departing image of a house cloaked in loving, sleepy quiet.

Phase Two: Psychological Warfare

Midway through a piece of the lasagna, the first piece of hell will break loose. Your baby will begin to scream loudly. Your baby will arch his back and writhe in agony and sing lyrics to Nickelback songs. Your baby will begin throwing punches.

You'll bust out the soothing techniques you learned from a book, and your adult track record of meeting problems head-on will give you the confidence and emotional reserves to bear down and stay the course for at least six or seven minutes.

And then you'll be spent and angry. This child is broken.

Your spouse will step in, because you've got each others' backs. Tap out! This is your chance to sit to the side and learn that neither of you know what the hell you're doing. Your loving wife or brave husband will take the baby in a confident grip and perform the same soothing maneuver you just attempted, though, you'll be told, with a slight difference you'll be unable to detect. The baby will stop screaming almost immediately, and you'll know, deep in your heart, that just as you almost opened that pickle jar by loosening it to the brink of success, *you* just soothed that baby, because your now-gloating spouse only continued the exact steps you took. But hey, you're an adult. You're too big for spite. You're just happy that peace has been restored. The adults are in control. This baby will soon be asleep, and you'll all curl up and dream of...

The baby is screaming again. And she just spit up even though she last ate over an hour ago. It's only the first day, so you still believe that you must change the baby's clothes when they're gross. You and your loving partner divide and conquer: one of you runs for a change of clothes while the other dabs the spit-up from the face, chest, and area surrounding the howling rage demon you both cherish.

In your haste to get the baby into a clean outfit without ratcheting up her anger

even further, you try to do it as a team. Oh, you fools: teams train before they take the field. They run drills. Teams have coaches and a playbook. Successful teams do not rely on a psychic connection, because they know that's not possible: they just look as if they are reading each other's mind. You, on the other hand, are counting on a miracle, on the idea that your undying love and commitment will create between you a synched sense of not only purpose but action. You are more likely to split this screaming baby like a wishbone than you are to dress her in an elegant synchronized display of magic tandem parenting.

You will get through this. But guess what? Unless you're in the dead of winter, the sun hasn't even set at this point. You're not even at hour one of this, the longest, darkest, most terrifying night you've ever experienced.

Tonight, your baby will plant seeds of doubt that'll blossom into strangling vines you'll contend with for months and years to come. Tonight is the night your baby shakes loose all of your certainty. Tonight, your wife will be in tears. Tonight, you'll stand in the hallway, confused, holding a child wet at both ends and screaming as your spouse is sequestered behind a closed door, attempting to get two hours of much needed sleep, when you realize a critical baby supply is also behind that door. Tonight, you'll seriously doubt your ability to do this, or to do anything. Tonight, you'll consider putting your child up for adoption. Tonight, you'll feel every minute as an hour, and if you don't stare at the clock, it *will* spin backward.

On our first night at home with our first baby, I charged through the bedroom door and yelled to my sleeping wife, "Take her! I can't do this anymore. I need..." I stared at her, crazy-eyed... "I don't know what I need, but I have to be alone for awhile."

Phase Three: Is It Asleep?

On our first night at home with our second baby, my wife and I lay in bed, exhausted and awake, ten feet from our infant son, and we relearned an essential lesson we hadn't forgotten but which we'd forgotten the importance of: babies sleep loud.

That phrase "sleep like a baby"? That phrase means the opposite of what you think it means. If you sleep like a baby, that means you sleep fitfully, grunting, kicking, moaning, and crying. Babies sleep for long periods with their eyes open, lolling their heads around and making noises like the Ringwraiths of Mordor. If you are an adult and

you “sleep like a baby” then you are single, because anybody who might have loved you fled for their safety and sanity; unlike your parents, they weren’t legally obligated to stay.

Why do newborn babies sleep like this? Because they're BARELY HUMAN. Your baby is just a confused weird lump of flesh that has been scuba diving in a hot tub for months, and is now adjusting to a non-aquatic environment that's drafty and itchy. You think it's weird they don't sleep right? They think it's weird that... fill in the blank. It's the easiest Mad Lib ever, because your baby thinks everything's weird. Your baby doesn't know a fucking thing. Your baby thinks the cat is his dad. Your baby routinely punches himself in the face and doesn't make the connection between the simultaneous physical sensations. Your baby will rub his face into anything thinking it's a nipple, and if you give the baby a nipple, he'll probably think it's the cat again. Your baby is an idiot. So of course he honks like a goose in his sleep. He's just a bundle of misfiring synapses, fury, and weird, tarry poop.

"Sleep when the baby sleeps!" You've been told this at least a dozen times and every baby book repeated it, too. Sleep when the baby sleeps. Everything else is secondary: get your sleep when you can. This is FANTASTIC advice, and on this, your first night home, you're determined to follow it. But how are you supposed to do that? Theory and practice are diverging rapidly. You're laying in bed, trying to get some desperately-needed sleep, and the asshole fruit of your loins is groaning and quacking. Instead of sleeping through his barnyard slumber, you're listening to every second of it, on alert for the sign that he's woken up and needs something. You will not sleep. Instead, you'll jump out of bed repeatedly to check on him.

Now, maybe your baby won't do this. They don't all do it. If so, good for you. Your baby will embark on some other shit-brained inhuman nonsense mission that will make you want to die. Your baby will vomit up something it didn't eat. Your baby will scream for a solid four hours without breathing. Your baby will recite lines from *Scarface*, trying to prove it's a badass. Most likely of all, your baby will wake up twenty minutes after you set it down, and it will do this ALL NIGHT LONG. You will surmise that your baby can only sleep while being held, and this will make sense to you because until a couple nights ago, your baby never slept outside the womb. Of course it needs a warm embrace.

So you will—within hours of coming home from the hospital—either break or

contemplate breaking a rule they gave you: you will sleep sitting up with the baby draped across you. This is not, as mandated, a basinet. Your baby is probably not on her back. Your baby will be on her belly on your belly. You'll be trying to will sleep on her and on yourself, but it's not going to work. This baby is a disaster, and you're no prizewinner, either.

Phase Four: In Which You Consider Poisoning Your Child

Remember in the hospital, when the nurses asked you to rate your pain on a one-to-ten scale? Well guess what? The night I've described so far is a THREE. We haven't even begun to diagram your broken psyche. Let's get into the real mess: eating.

There is no topic in all of the free baby-raising world that's half as contentious as feeding a baby, and I want to save our visit to that circle of hell for the next chapter. Let's deal with one damnation at a time. But we must knock on that hell's door, because tonight, this first night at home, your loyalty to breast feeding is going to be mightily challenged. Dutifully, you've learned all the reasons that breast milk is superior to formula, and you are a believer! The lactation consultants probably warned you that bottle feeding is so much easier than breast feeding that a baby who has success with a bottle may not be willing to go back to the breast. You don't want to risk months or years of better nutrition and risk your child's health just to make this one night easier! You wouldn't do that! You're a good parent, not a selfish monster!

But then you remember a weird moment at the hospital, when one of the nurses, like a steroid pusher at a high school football tournament, casually mentioned that things might be a little easier if you gave the baby just a little dose, just a little taste of formula. No, of course, she wasn't saying you shouldn't breast feed. Of course not! She was just saying that (in her limited 30 years of experience, dealing with 60 new parents a week every week from the time she was a new parent herself until well into menopause) she's found—with startling regularity—that babies become hungry before their mothers have actual milk to feed them, and that, what with the contemporary obsession with infant weight as a single indicator of parenting success and failure—it is, after all, an accurate predictor of a child's likelihood of living a good life that includes meritocratically-gained wealth and an Ivy League education—some parents find that an augmentation of the natural order improves things for everybody. Oh, no no no!

Formula isn't a replacement for breast milk! It's just a little stopgap, the nurse tells you. Under legal duress, even the lactation consultant might acknowledge that your first priority is to feed the child, and that a nip of formula might be called for. She will explain this in a tone that reinforces the full extent to which you are a failure and a monster if you actually do this to your child.

You think this over and discuss it as a couple, but decide that the helpful nurse is a demonic gargoyle perched above you, bringing doom with her every utterance. Neither of you is willing to break first, to be the one who suggests that a little formula might do more good than harm. So you endure.

But at 2am on your first night home, your baby is screaming endlessly, shows no signs of sleep, and has a clean diaper. There isn't a drop of breast milk coming from the tap. The bottle of Similac the nurses slipped into your hospital bag is transmitting a strong signal, and you are tuned to its frequency.

This Has Been a Test. Were This a Real Emergency...

This feeding crisis, like the soothing crisis, is not about what you think it's about. Your baby's inability to sleep tonight will not hurt your baby: it's one night. The food debate is similar. Your child is hungry and what it eats tonight has about as much to do with its longterm health as the microfiber content of the nursery rug you panicked over. The only danger to your baby's health tonight is that you will lose your mind and burn the house down in a lunatic rage.

Whichever way you go, this night is going to destroy you. You've probably been trained to consider deviation from breast feeding orthodoxy as child abuse. Reaching for that bottle is an admission of grotesque failure. If you stay strong and adhere to the credos of Big Boob, your child will wail in agony, because your child is *fucking hungry*. You will feel like an abusive parent. Your inability to do what you've been told is natural, added to your unwillingness to do what you think you must? They combine to catapult you back to psychological adolescence. Your adult confidence vanishes in a moment, and wherever you were at your worst—was it middle school? college? your first bad relationship?—you're now equipped with the confidence you had then, but you must, tonight, marshal your fleeting strength of will to care for a helpless child. You'll probably vacillate between solutions for hours until, exhausted, the baby sleeps for a

bit, and you, exhausted, stare with hate-filled eyes at your spouse who was no better than you were.

The challenge of the first night at home is a psychological one, and you will lose. It can't be won. Look what's arrayed against you:

- Mom's system has been suddenly drained of all pregnancy hormones, and her brain is chemically adrift.
- Dad is unwilling to take the reins because of lifelong cultural training that this is a woman's domain. He is here in a support role.
- Your baby is still an idiot, all unexamined need, no capability.
- You've spent all of your nights so far among nurses and support staff who do this professionally, and with clear minds. They made some of it look easy and did much of it without your knowledge.
- You are overconfident. Between books, classes, nurses, and natural chemical stimulants, you have devised a levee system that seems secure but is really no match for the Category 5 shitstorm rolling in tonight.
- The State Department says that sleep deprivation is a form of torture. People do weird things when they're being tortured.

Here, finally, is why all those parents don't remember the exact horror of the night. What their baby did on night one was just a taste of what the baby dealt them for months to come. In reality, the baby's actions weren't so terrible. It's just a baby. What was crushing about the night was the complete breakdown of parental confidence. What crushed the parents was not just their unpreparedness for the biological challenge of sleep deprivation. What crushed them was having to make new, important, seemingly urgent decisions while sleep deprived. So many battles that come later in life will be more horrible, more painful, and more fraught, but few are by definition fought from a losing position. The parents you talked to didn't have a good night when their kids came home, but the damage was to them, not their babies, so somehow they got past it. Since that first night, they've learned some humility and lowered their expectations.

They did not win the first night's contest, and you will not win either. The match is rigged.

Can you eke out a draw? The trick, I've figured out, is to minimize your losses, to preserve whatever sanity, goodwill, and patience you can. In the moment, this is a Herculean task. You, friend, are not Hercules. You won't get even the draw, but if you tip your cap to another ancient Greek, Odysseus, and tether yourself to the mast of low expectations, rooting yourself in reality as best as you can, the siren song of perfect parenting will sound slightly out of tune. You might just sail past without being eaten alive.

That's the theory anyway. I'd try it, if I could do it again. But I won't be doing it again. I leave those seas to braver, stupider sailors. I leave them to you.