

Freedom Lost? and Found!

How a baby changes you. . .

By Brette McWhorter Sember



Photo: Courtesy of author

The Sembers share this photograph from their family album.

When you decide to have a baby, you know your life will change with nighttime feedings, constant diapers and sessions in the rocking chair. But not until you come home from the hospital and your life as a parent begins, do you realize the freedoms that are now beyond your grasp and the new ones you have before you.

Freedoms lost

You can never leave the house in under five minutes again. This hit me when we got ready for our daughter's first pediatrician appointment. We started an hour before we needed to leave (nursing, diaper changes, spit up clean-up, packing diapers, wipes, blankets, etc.) and we were still late! It doesn't get easier.

Toddlers have tantrums and need toys, snacks, missing/hidden shoes, drinks, potty accident clothes; preschoolers need favorite toys that are always missing, snacks and juice boxes and last minute potty runs. My first grader cannot leave unless her hair is perfect (by her quality control standards, not mine), her clothes are just right, and she has the right book. When you have two children, they can never both be ready at the same time. Leaving used to be so simple — purse and keys and go!

Time crunch

Once you make it out of the house, your days of leisurely shopping or visiting are over. Your infant screams in the car seat. Normal radio doesn't cut it. You wear out two Barney tapes and several Raffi tapes. Once you reach your destination, you dash through the store or rush through a visit before you run out of toys, snacks or bribes. I don't remember how to shop without a cart and I haven't tried-on clothes in a store dressing room in seven years!

Once you realize how difficult it is to get out, you think just staying home is easier. However, there are very specific rules you find you must follow, or you'll be severely punished. If we try to go anywhere during nap-time, we end up with a screaming out-of-control child. The Schedule is everything — if you don't stick to it, some awful punishment will occur.

Bathroom blues

There are also restrictions on bathroom use. When you have a baby, you're afraid to leave him alone to go to the bathroom, so

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continued from page 21

hands. The stuff inside your nightstand drawer is grabbed for amusement whenever you're trying to get dressed. You find hiding places up high!

Nix nap-time plans

Gone are the days of planning things with friends or relatives at any ol' time. You find yourself explaining to people that you must schedule around naps and meals. This leaves you with only a few good hours in the morning and one or two in the evening. If it can't be done then, it won't get done.

Before children, you had the freedom of choosing whether or not to talk to your parents. Now that they are grandparents, they have a Constitutional right to know how long the baby slept or if the toddler's nose is still runny (and if it is, it's because you didn't put her hood up when you picked her up two days ago). When the phone rings at night we always call it — "Your turn!" If you don't call it, YOU have to answer.

There are days when I feel dragged down by my children, the strict parents. I can't do anything I want to when I want to. I start to feel sorry for myself and long for the days when I had the house to myself, for the solitude that was so much a part of me. If I could just have a few minutes alone, I think.

But when I am alone, I feel bereft. I am a prisoner in a dark room and I wonder how I lived without the sun for so long.

Freedoms found

All of the freedoms my little dictators have taken from me are nothing compared to the ones they have given me. Today, I sat at a water table and played with rocks, twigs and sand. I saw the changing colors of the water, I listened to the splashes the rocks made and felt the bark of the twigs.

I remarked at how miraculous it was to see my little boy dump a pail of water upon his surprised self. I watched his hands move in a water ballet and I soaked up the expressions on his face that were constantly changing. I thought at the time, 'this is what makes life worth living.'

Our children open so many doors for us. Because of them, we read books over and over and feel their poetry in our teeth. We learn to just sit and play while things 'to do' pile up. We are free to cry with them — over a skinned knee or a Dada gone bye-bye. We pick up feathers and stones and are able to really see their beauty.

Law and order

In the tyranny of The Schedule, I have found freedom. You need not worry what to do next because you already know. The burden of decisions is lifted. I get more things done simply because it's preprogrammed that it's time to unpack the dishwasher, fold the laundry or work on the computer.

Our children give us the chance to transcend reality. Make believe can be real. They teach us to look at a box and see a boat, a doghouse, a race car or a doll bed. Nothing has to be what it seems.

The greatest freedom children give is the ability to throw love around with great abandon. There is love for the doll, the dog, the next door neighbor's children, the day's favorite book, the cup of milk and for you. There is more love available than you can use up in an entire lifetime.

Because our children do not hold back, they release us from our adult chains and let us experience all emotions. They feel everything so deeply and so terminally. My 7-year-old cries and cries when she leaves Grandma. Her love and sorrow are so fierce that they fill a room.

My 16-month-old screams in outrage when left in the playpen — Mommy whom he loves more than anything has left him and he will never recover. His emotions knock my heart on its keester.

New perspectives

Children also give us the freedom to see things as being just momentary. Falling off the bike is the end of the world until you are back on grinning with the wind blowing past you. We see them torque and change with each moment, and this helps us realize that maybe we need to just let go and feel the moment without thought of what came before or what will come next.

I'm willing to forsake my bathroom and eating privileges, to be a slave to The Schedule, and to forget about sex at any hour, so long as I can do Barbie hair, build towers, hold hands, wash slippery bodies and bask in the sunlight they give off. My heart has found the greatest freedom. I hope yours will, too. ■

— *Brette McWhorter Sember of New York, is an attorney-turned-writer and author of several 'Legal Survival Guides' published by Sourcebooks.*