

Advice for New Parents
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Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota
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My first child was born a little after midnight on a Sunday morning in January of 1982. The location was Mount Auburn Hospital in Cambridge, Massachusetts. After my son's birth, the hospital staff placed my wife, Leslie, and the baby in a comfortable private room. Our home was an hour and a half away, and I did not want to leave Leslie or new baby, so I asked the hospital staff if there was a couch on which I could sleep. They showed me to a supply closet and gave me a folding green outdoor lounge chair.

This leads to my first discovery about being a new parent. Sleep is important and often difficult to achieve. In the morning I called the Unitarian Church in New Bedford, Massachusetts to let them know that the baby had been born and was healthy. I picked up a message that one of the members of the church had died. Mr. Prescott was the last of the New Bedford Prescott's, a distinguished New England Unitarian family. He had been an attorney, as had his father and his grandfather. I drove home, showered, changed clothes, and went to visit Mr Prescott's life partner, a man in his seventies.

I remember sitting in that old New England home talking to a gay man about his partner. They had lived together for more than 40 years. He shared with me memories and I took notes. Mr. Prescott had served in the military in the First World War. We looked at photos of him in uniform. Mr. Prescott read *The Wall Street Journal* every morning. He disliked *The New York Times* because the print ink got on his hands and he always felt like he wanted to take a bath after reading it. He liked roses. As I listened, I thought about the contrast. Sixteen hours before I had been present for the birth of my son. Now I sat with a man planning the memorial service for his life partner, his lover. For me this was no trivial day. We are born and we die.

I drove Leslie and the baby home a few days later. I went to church to officiate at Mr. Prescott's service. In the front of the sanctuary, there were two dozen red roses, provided by his partner. When the service and the graveside interment were over, Mr. Prescott's lover told me to take the roses home to my wife. I took them as a gift for Leslie and the baby.

When we took the boy to the pediatrician for the first time, the doctor had some useful advice. Dr. Lund said, "When they are very young, there are only three things that you can do. Feed them. Change their diaper. Rock them. If the baby is crying, run through this list: does he need to eat? Does he need his diaper changed? If the answer is no to the first two questions, rock him."

"Also," he added, "remember, with your first child you have the advantage. There are two of you and only one of him. So spell each other. When the baby is awake in the middle of the night, only one of you should get up with him, while the other one sleeps. *If you both get up, you lose your advantage.*"

On my own I discovered I could bring on giggles and laughter in my son by singing songs to him. He felt that my rendition of “Old McDonald Had a Farm” was very funny. Now he teaches music in a Jr High and a high school, no doubt inspired by my singing to him when he was a baby.

Based on this experience, I advise new parents to sing to your children.

Leslie wrote a “Child Dedication Service.” The president of the congregation of the First Unitarian Church in New Bedford (who was also our pediatrician, Dr. Lund) led the congregation in saying the words she had written:

Let him learn that he is like other people, even the people he may dislike; and that there is good and bad in all of us, and that each of us must make a hard struggle to bring the good out on top. Then, because of his own lost battles, he will acquire a gentle wisdom and walk softly where other people might get hurt.

I advise new parents to have a ritual of welcome, a child dedication, a naming ceremony. Rituals are important.

Our second child, also a boy, David, was born four years later, in Evanston, Illinois, on a June day in 1986. This time we opted for a home birth, with a doctor and a midwife in attendance. All went well. By then I had read a book called *Parent Effectiveness Training*. Following the advice in the book, I had worked on doing active listening with my first child. At first, it sounded to me like a stupid formula. I said things like:

“I hear you saying that you do not want to go to bed.”

“I hear you saying that you do not want to eat your vegetables.”

However, I found that when I learned to stop ordering my boy around and instead listen to him, and show him that I was listening by reflecting back to him what he had said, I seemed to be a more effective parent.

With our second child, I discovered that this worked even before the boy had learned to talk. If he was crying and I picked him up and said, “You are feeling really upset,” this seemed to help. Even before he could talk, perhaps because of the tone of my voice, he seemed to understand that I was trying to listen to him. Of course, this did not work every time, but it did work often.

We all hate it when strangers offer us unsolicited advice on how to care for our children. Therefore, I restrain myself. Still, at stores or restaurants or at airports I see screaming kids and parents who, not knowing what else to do, order their children to stop crying, or shame them by saying “you are acting like a baby” or threaten them by saying “If you do not stop crying I will give you something to cry about.” I want to say to the parent, “Give this a try. Gently say to your child, ‘You are really upset.’ Or ‘You are feeling really angry.’ Show your kids that you hear their feelings. It does not always work but, in my own experience at least, it is always more effective than ordering a child to calm down or be quiet.”

Our third child, a girl, Rachel was born in 1990. When she was four years old, she asked me some direct questions about death. We were sitting outside on the back steps of our house. I was helping her take off her shoes and socks. She had filled them with sand while playing in a sand box at her nursery school. She noticed a spider behind us in a web and jumped in my lap. I noticed that the spider was dead. I decided to try to use this as what we call a “teachable moment.”

“Rachel,” I said, “The spider cannot hurt us because it is dead.”

“But it can hurt us if it comes alive again.” Her answer fit in with what the child development experts say. Four-year-olds believe that death is reversible.

“It cannot come alive again,” I said. “Once something dies, it cannot come alive again.”

“Can we touch it?” Rachel asked.

“Sure.” I said. “It is dead. It cannot move. It cannot hurt us.”

“You touch it, Dad.”

I looked at the spider again to make sure it was dead. I reached over and touched it with my finger and, sure enough, it did not come alive.

I missed dinner with the family two days later, but Leslie reported a conversation to me. Rachel asked her mother, whether Leslie and I would die. Leslie answered honestly. “Yes, we will die some day, but not until you can take care of yourself, not until you no longer need us.” This answer did not please Rachel. Leslie tried to reassure her. “We will not die for a long, long, long time so long from now you cannot even imagine it.”

“You hope” cracked one of her older brothers.

My son was raising an important issue. Many cultures have a tradition of godparents – people who agree to take over the raising of a child in the unlikely event that both parents die. My advice to new parents is to talk about this together and with the person or persons you select to raise your child, if you die. Put the arrangements in writing. Sometimes children may express fear about the death of their parents. If they do, say something like this: “I think it is likely that I will live as long as you will need me. However, in the very unlikely event that something happens to your father and to me, your godparents will take care of you for as long as you need them.”

This is hard stuff, talking to children about death. My advice to new parents is that they become active in a religious community. In a church like this one, we receive support and advice about what to say when children ask about the big issues in life, like death and sexuality. In this church both parents and children can talk and ask questions about such things. In our religious education classes, children talk and learn about these subjects so parents do not have to do all of it themselves.

When children ask about God, what should we say? The religious educator Sophia Fahs advised against talking to children under the age of eight about the idea of God.

What happens, [she asked] when a person becomes fixed in his attitude toward God because as a child he was given a picture of God adapted to his childish experiences (at a period of life when he was wholly dependent on an earthly father), and was given it as the one right and true way of conceiving of God?

In answer to her own question, Fahs said that such an approach to religious education encourages children to remain dependent and helpless. When people raised this way become adults and have harsh experiences—the loss of a child or a spouse, a serious battle with sickness, or economic hardship — they discover the picture of reality their parents and teachers gave them as a child was false. If such persons wish to grow spiritually, they must throw off their childish religion. Sophia Fahs concluded:

Until a child has had some experience, which awakens in him a bit of this wondering after the mystery of life, the word “God” is best left out of the picture.

Of course, talking to children about Theism, Atheism and Agnosticism is a big topic. It is another reason to be part of a liberal religious community.

As you can see, I have lots of advice for new parents.

First, sleep whenever you can. Do not think, “Now that the baby is asleep I can get stuff done.” This is a big mistake. When the baby takes a nap, you take a nap.

Second, when they are young there are only three things that you can do. Feed them. Change their diaper. Rock them. You cannot love, hug, kiss, cuddle, or hold your newborn too much.

Third, sing to your children (even if they laugh at you when you sing).

Fourth, have a ritual of welcome, or a child dedication, or a naming ceremony or a baptism. Such rituals are important.

Fifth, even before the baby says its first words, listen to your child, and show to your child by your response that you are listening. Listening is often more effective than giving orders.

Sixth, select what is traditionally called a Godparent or Godparents. Arrange for this friend or relative to care for your children, in the very unlikely event that something happens to you.

Seventh, become active in a church, a place where you can get help talking with your children about issues such as death, sexuality and the existence of God. When they are eight or nine, they will begin to think about these adult topics.

Eighth, accept the fact that neither you nor your children will be perfect. The British psychiatrist Donald Winnicott, invented the phrase “the Good Enough Mother.” Other child care experts expanded the phrase, talking about “the Good Enough Parent.” This is in contrast to the over achieving, over-functioning parent who strives to be perfect. Perfection is not within the grasp of

ordinary human beings. No parent can live up to an impossible standard of perfection. No child can live up to an impossible standard of perfection. A good enough parent accepts human frailty both in themselves and in their children. No matter how good we are at parenting, our power is limited. Our children will go out into the world and encounter dangers from which we cannot protect them.

When I was a child, my parents attended the Unitarian Church. A man named Arthur Olson was the minister. In a sermon on raising children, Rev. Olson said, "Parents get too much blame when their children make mistakes and too much credit when their children are successful." My father would quote that to me. "Parents get too much blame when their children make mistakes and too much credit when their children are successful." It helps to do the best we can, accept that we will make mistakes and accept that our control over our children is limited.

Finally, enjoy the smell of a newborn. If you are like me, when you are a new parent you will not be thinking about smells. After our third child was born, I brought her to church one Sunday. I passed her around to church members who asked to hold her. And I remember one man, a grandfather handed my daughter back to me and said, "I like how she smells. New born babies have a smell that is special and unique."

So hold, hug, kiss, cuddle, feed, change, rock, sing to and smell your newborn. Because every night a child is born, is a holy night.