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ABSTRACT

These "letters for parents" offer information about becoming a parent and the characteristics of preschool children. The first letter focuses on the transition to parenthood, bonding and attachment, and the infant's temperament. The second letter describes 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds and offers advice about practicing safety. (RH)

Becoming A Parent
Letter 1

Oregon State University Extension Service

Oregon's Children

Letters for parents of infants and toddlers

One of life's greatest experiences is the arrival of the first baby. Parents are filled with wonder over the new family member and the changed dimensions of their life. During the first months you'll be getting acquainted with baby, making adjustments in your routines, and experiencing new emotions. Some anxiety is normal as you realize the responsibility of being a parent, how much there is to do, and how much there is to know about babies. Raised on stories about the joys of parenthood, young parents often feel inadequate and guilty if they feel tired, overwhelmed, or resentful.

Most expectations about parenthood come from the mass media and from family memories. Smaller families since the late 1950's mean fewer young parents have had responsibility for young children. Taking care of younger children was a part of family life and provided training for the later role of parenting in the large families of the past.

The mass media presents unrealistic images of babies. Often older babies are photographed as newborns. Pictures in magazines, on TV, or baby food labels show beautiful infants with perfectly shaped heads, rosy coloring, and alert eyes. New parents expect baby to be smiling and ready for play from day one.

Childhood memories aren't reliable guidelines for parenthood either. They are based on an immature child's view of occurrences. Parents tell amusing stories about life with you as a child. They seldom dwell on the stresses or tensions they might have been having at the time. It's natural to discard less pleasant memories and idealize images of the "good" parent and "fun" child. It's nice if pleasant memories and high standards are passed on to you, but images of perfect families are impossible to imitate. If your standards of competency and efficiency for yourself are too high, you are paving the way for disappointment. Disappointment le ds to feelings of inadequacy and frustration when baby demands, fatigue, or changes in economic or social conditions seem overwhelming.

Transition to Parenthood

Understanding a new baby is challenging. However, an awareness of changes in attitudes, relationships, and goals that occur in partners as they make the transition to parenthood is equally important. No matter how much the role of parent is desired, there are questions about the ease with which men and women adapt to the role or whether it just "comes naturally."

While planning for and anticipating their first baby, most young parents are unaware of the changes that will occur within themselves and in their marital relationship. Sociologist Alice Rossi suggests young parents are tragically uninformed about how parenthood brings more abrupt changes in lifestyle and personal values than any other previous life adjustments such as marriage or work. Most other changes, including a new job, allow time to learn the tasks and practice the skills needed. Parenthood arrives in a matter of hours.

Books, articles, and classes for parents place children at the center of attention. They assume that if you know enough about children, you will be able to carry out your tasks. Usually they suggest enough tasks and worries to keep two parents hovering constantly over baby. This is neither necessary nor productive. While a child's need for adequate parenting is total and, at times, demanding, there's equal need for parents to continue their development as interesting, productive adults.

Developmental psychologists now say life is a series of transitions. A transition occurs when an

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event, such as parenthood, causes sharp changes in your usual routines. In all transitions some things are lost. New responsibilities and feelings about the self are gained. A transition does not mean abandoning everything from your old life, but some things will lose their importance in your new status.

There are individuals and marriages that strengthen with the bond provided by children. Others buckle under the strain of an added dependent person. For one thing, baby creates a triangle in which time and attention must be divided. It's often the husband, used to full-time attention, who suffers from jealous feelings. Some husbands complain about a loss of sexual attention. It's difficult to talk about this because feelings of hostility toward a tiny baby are not acceptable. Fathers who are a participating partner at birth are less apt to feel this way. They usually feel baby is as much theirs as the mother's.

The coming of baby complicates the wife's role also. An enormous amount of physical energy has gone into pregnancy and delivery. The never-ending tasks of baby care are fatiguing, leaving mothers irritable and often depressed. In addition, young women today are accustomed to stimulating activities outside the home and freedom to pursue their own interests. Before long, baby's presence makes them feel trapped at home; they miss talking with other adults. Being on call with baby 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, was not their life's goal.

Children bring other problems too. They interfere with casual conversations and spontaneous loving moments parents previously enjoyed. Important conversations are interrupted or postponed by baby's screams. One young father said, "I wonder if I'll ever sleep the same in my bed again." Babies have no respect for privacy, a good night of sleep, or your free time.

One of the most serious difficulties partners encounter revolves around "pet ideas" about child rearing. Most of these beliefs do not surface before children arrive. Ideas about who's in charge, discipline, punishment, money, and child freedoms are major causes of marital conflict. While baby is still young, discuss how you feel about the following statements:

- questioning and disagreement between parent and child should be encouraged
- spare the rod, spoil the child
- children should not be frustrated
- children learn more by what parents say than what they do

What can you expect while you're in the transition to parenthood? Here's a few symptoms you can discuss with spouse or friends to relieve anxiety:

- chronic tiredness
- loss of income of the mother and increased economic pressure on the father
- additional household work
- guilt in not being a better parent
- worry over self-appearance and body changes

Bonding and Attachment

A remarkable relationship is developed between parents and infants during the early months of life. No one is exactly sure about the mysteries of bonding, but in the hours after birth mothers, fathers, and newborns start falling madly in love with one another. Some hospitals place newborns in mother's arms, next to her skin, breasts, and the sound of her beating heart. Fathers hold and caress their newborn.

Although baby's attachment to mother does not instantly occur, observers report some infants show preferences for mother's voice as early as the third day. It is believed that the soothing effects of mother's handling, feeding, and care of baby promotes attachment to her.

Attachment is a special relationship between a child and adult that endures through time. They need a continuously responsive adult who meets their need for positive interactions and responds to distresses of hunger and discomfort. Infants need to be constantly reassured that the world is a good place in which to live. That assurance comes from dependable caregivers who may be a parent or an adoptive parent. Parents of ailing babies should be encouraged to handle their infants in the nursery as much as possible so bonding will occur.

The skills of mothering and fathering do not require special knowledge or social graces. They do require awareness and a decision on the part of parents to give a child the best start they can. Smiles, gentle pats, kisses, and hugs give baby a different message than frowns, impatient handling, and little touching. Your manner of attention tells infants how worthwhile they are. Infants' responses are limited at first. But sometime in the second month, don't be surprised if baby stops in the middle of feeding to look lovingly at you. In later months, you will notice that your infant, who has had steady, gentle attention to cries and

is picked up and handled frequently, will fuss less and be more alert than those who haven't had this advantage. Some things seem to go together—attention from parents and trusting, confident children.

Psychologist Eric Erickson maintains that during the first year a sense of trust or mistrust of the world and people develops. Infants whose needs are promptly met, are played with and talked to, get the idea that the world is a safe place, and people are helpful and dependable.

How do parents build attachment and trust?

- respond promptly to baby's cries
- talk to babies all the time telling them what you're doing
- hold babies securely while bathing as you let them feel the warm water around them
- play with baby's toes, fingers, hair, cheeks, legs
- cuddle baby closely while feeding and relaxing together
- concentrate on smiling at baby's face when dressing or diapering

Will all this attention spoil infants? No. Catering to infants in the first year usually results in a happier, more alert one-year-old. Infants act to satisfy their needs of the moment. The more adequately needs are met, the more satisfied they become. Crying is normal, waking at night is normal, and curiosity is natural and desirable. A great-grandmother who seemed to know what scientists are just discovering said, "The first year baby is boss, after that parents take over." Infants have a hard time if parents expect them to understand directions and obey rules before they are able. Lots of child abuse occurs to children under two. Parents become angered when infants do not remember or behave according to adult expectations that are beyond baby's capability.

It may seem that caring for baby is all you're expected to do. Attachment does not require parents to spend hours looking at and attending to an infant. Parents and infants need a balance of attention and time alone. Too much attention, body contact, or talking are not necessarily good for either of you. Infants like to hear that you are near, but it's not necessary to do what one mother said about her first baby, "We nearly wore the poor little thing out rearing him."

Infant attachment increases during the first year. By six months infants begin to recognize that some faces do not belong to their mother or father. They may show shyness, but it will disappear. By one year they can be extremely upset when left with strangers unless they have a warm-up time and gradually learn that when you leave, you do come back. If mother works outside the home, find a caregiver who will continue the warm, attentive care you wish for your infant.

Baby's Temperament

You may think all this advice is fine but what should you do if your child has been screaming and kicking since birth? It's even worse if the neighbor's child is charming and cuddly and sleeps through the night. Think of the adults you know. Are there aspects of their personality that resemble these babies?

Two psychiatrists and a pediatrician became interested in the personalities of infants in their hospital nursery. They watched some babies until their adolescence to determine what aspects of temperament, if any, are present at birth. Their conclusions show that individuals are born with a basic behavior style or temperament. The qualities that are inborn include: activity level, regularity in sleeping, eating and eliminating patterns, readiness to accept new people and situations, adaptability to change, sensitivity to light and noise, general mood of cheerfulness or unhappiness, intensity of responses, and persistence.

Infants show a mix of characteristics and some combinations of traits make some babies more demanding of parental tolerance and patience than others. Because parents have an image of the "perfect baby," infants who enter the world with predominantly intense reactions such as high activity level, a general mood of unhappiness, and longer periods of wakefulness are most likely to be misunderstood. If your infant is like this you'll need all the imagination you can muster to be the consistent, loving playmate baby needs.

Knowing about the characteristics infants are born with keeps parents from blaming themselves or feeling guilty about baby's behavior. If your baby is a poor sleeper, poor eater, a constant cryer, and stiffens in your arms when you're trying your best, it's just the way baby is. Much of the spark of this infant's temperament will remain but by the end of the first year and by mid-childhood many of the characteristics will have changed or modified. Like any other infant, adjustments to life depend on your loving attention to bring about a transformation in baby's less convenient behaviors.

Prepared by Marcelle Straatman, Extension human development specialist, School of Home Economics.

Dear Parents: There is no apprenticeship for becoming a parent—you're suddenly one. It's one of life's most gratifying experiences but requires many adjustments to new patterns and routines in your daily life. In addition, infants bring a new but exciting and challenging personality into the family circle. For more information and help to work effectively with your child read the paperback book, *Your Child Is A Person*, by Stella Chess, Alexander Thomas, and Herbert G. Birch.

Sincerely,

Oregon's Children newsletters are prepared by Oregon State University Extension home economics specialists and arranged for distribution by Marcelle Straatman, Extension human development specialist.

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Oregon's Children

Letters for parents of infants and toddlers: Letter 1

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Oregon State University Extension Service

Fascinating Preschoolers

Children develop while following a distinctive pattern that flows from one stage to another. Within each stage, children adopt new and independent actions leaving behind some dependencies of babyhood.

Children vary in the ages at which they reach and leave each stage. They progress according to their own internal timetable in intellectual, social, physical, and emotional steps. Skills that come easily and early to one child may be difficult and come later for another child.

While each child is distinctive, they are alike in many ways. Years of observing young children have produced information that helps parents know children are going to experience times when things go smoothly and times that are quite discouraging. Growth and change is a struggle for children and parents.

Preschool children are still basically self-centered. Their gradual growth in skills and social interest in others is developing through the first seven or eight years of life. Play is their natural way of learning. They use all of their senses to actively explore, imitate, and experiment with people, things, and behavior.

Three-Year-Olds

You'll discover three-year-olds are a calm, cooperative relief after coping with two-year-olds. Around the third birthday, activity is more balanced and smooth. But by 3½ children again turn non-conformist and become very strong-willed. A strong inner drive prompts their occupation with gaining a sense of control of who they are and what they can do and direct. It is appropriate that they make some decisions for themselves, but your patience and understanding will be challenged as you help them understand the necessity for family routines and rules.

Physically, three-year-olds have increased running, jumping, and climbing skills. Improved muscular control allows them to balance on narrow surfaces, use alternate feet for going up and down stairs, and manage small objects like buttons, snaps, and zippers. Some become picky eaters and all openly assert their likes and dislikes in food. Parents worry about decreased appetites but three-year-olds usually need less food as their growth rate slows.

Socially, three-year-olds are becoming more conscious of other people. They want to be with other children and show an increased desire to please others most of the time. You'll enjoy their willingness to cooperate with you. While playing with others has growing importance, three-year-olds have much to learn about cooperative play. They are beginning to share but still push, shove, or hit to get what they want. Their social problems stem from their natural self-centeredness and desire to call attention to themselves. "Look at me! I can ride the trike better than Billy!" is a bid for superiority. Help them feel good about themselves and reduce competitiveness with simple responses like, "You are a real whiz when it comes to riding a trike."

The third year is characterized by emotional extremes and some negativism. While children at this age are not as rigid or inflexible as they were a year ago, they can be very demanding and lose control from time to time.

Three-year-olds rapidly progress intellectually. Experimenting with vocabulary building means they pay more attention to words and how to make sentences. Have their hearing checked to insure that words are heard and spoken correctly. They enjoy chatting with adults and asking many questions to satisfy their curiosity. Keep your answers simple — preschoolers aren't concerned about scientific explanations.

Three-year-olds are learning to connect ideas and objects. Numbers and counting, naming objects, colors, different shapes, animals, and people are now firmly learned. They like sorting objects

according to size, shape, and color. When you look at magazines or books, point out houses, barns, nests, or stores. They like to look for happy or angry people, funny people or animals, dads, moms, babies, or boys and girls.

Play is the main occupation of three-year-olds. They have no preference whether it's with boys or girls. They are attracted to water, sand, or garden soil. A three-year-old enjoys building blocks, climbing, throwing, puzzles, musical activity, and story telling.

Three-year-olds carefully observe activities in the home and on television. Imitation is the source of active pretending during play. They spend weeks as Superman or Strawberry Shortcake. Grown-up tasks are part of play, too, so capitalize on their willingness to help with doing dishes, making beds, folding clothes, cooking, and sweeping the floor.

Four-Year-Olds

Exuberant and adventurous describes four-year-olds. They love excitement and anything new. Their creative imagination leans toward inventing more things to do, but their interest span tends to be short.

At four, physical control and energy has increased considerably. They like outdoor play that involves rough and tumble games, as well as running, jumping, hopping, skipping, and climbing. They rarely admit they're tired. Since they now think they're too old for naps, plan for daily quiet time. Tantrums, silliness, or aggressiveness usually are signs of fatigue.

At this age, children require companionship. They feel badly if they are isolated from the play group. Peers have become so important children may defy their parents in order to please playmates. Four-year-olds can play simple games in groups, but the games may end suddenly. It happens because each child wants to make the rules and decisions without regard for anyone else. In general, this is the year when taking turns and sharing gets better.

Children this age still turn to parents to solve most of their problems but they are torn between parent and peer influences. They discover subtle ways to resist you rather than flatly saying, "No."

Although four-year-olds have learned to handle an amazing number of emotional upheavals, many have wide mood swings. They may be pleasant one moment, in a rage the next. This calls for both firmness and freedom on your part. Many parents find that giving a "time out" period teaches children their unpleasant moods are not going to disrupt the family. Take children gently to their room saying, "It seems you need time out. When you feel better come back and play where we are." Emphasize that they can come out when they feel better rather than setting a time limit on their stay. Many spats between playmates can be resolved by the children without parental interference. However, be on guard against uncontrollable fighting or use of objects that could harm either child.

Four-year-olds continue the rapid intellectual growth characteristic of preschoolers. With a longer attention span they spend more time engaged in activities of interest. They expand their language skills by attempting new, big words. They make up rhymes and words of their own like,"smerfy, werfy, derfy" which bring on gales of laughter and more improbable words. They also discover swear words and "potty talk." It's best to ignore undesirable words as much as possible. Make it a habit to praise words you want to hear like "please" and "thank you," or offers of help.

The play of four-year-old's reflects imagination and love of pretending. Small-scale wood working tools or household equipment particularly fascinate them. Climbing, swinging, sliding, and riding a trike are favorite outdoor activities. Indoors they can spend a lot of time with creative materials: paper, scissors and paint, books, musical instruments, and building blocks.

Encourage their interest in books by helping them write their own. After a trip to the zoo, a birthday party, or any event, help them cut and paste pictures into a booklet of 4 or 5 pages. Under each picture print words your child chooses to represent the picture. Children are proud of books they write, often reading them again and again.

Five-Year-Olds

Five-year-olds are generally happy people who find themselves satisfying. They find life appealing as they bubble with affection and cooperation. But as with previous pleasant stages the mood changes at about age 5½ when a fresh set of strong demands and emotional upheavals affect their behavior. They seem to want too much, try things that are too difficult, and make new claims on the center of attention. Children approaching six feel pressured by themselves and others to act more grown-up than they really are

During the fifth year, well-developed motor skills allow children to perform more complicated tasks like riding a two-wheel bike. Better eye-hand coor-

dination lets them lace and tie shoes and handle a knife and fork more easily. They can use paint, scissors, pencils, or other art materials constructively. They now show right or left hand preference.

Initiative, or planning and organizing, is characteristic of this age. Their plans and routines in the bathroom may not be familiar to you, but the main thing is they have something in mind for getting the job done. Efficiency comes a bit later.

Five-year-olds reach a new level of cooperation in play with others. Most of them are happy, successful group participants. They want to be in on everything others do. But they are not ready for competitive games and are very discouraged by losing. Play for preschoolers is different than it is for adults. It's a child's beginning stages of thinking, planning, and organizing. These are also the years of their peak imagination—the rules for play are always their own.

Socially, five-year-olds have made great progress in learning what is "right" to say and do. They are more sympathetic toward others and usually in control of their emotions. They enjoy their independence and like to be given responsibility for running simple errands or taking a message to a neighbor.

Although fives can distinquish between what is true and false, they may exaggerate or tell "tall tales." Preschoolers deal with a shakey sense of reality and many unknowns. Was it real or wasn't it? Is it mine or isn't it?

Honesty is learned gradually. It begins to take shape in a child's thinking during this year. Families communicate the value of truth or not taking other's things with and without words. Lies may be imaginative tales, failure to understand your questions, or given in anticipation of punishment. Taking things is part of learning to distinquish what is theirs and what belongs to others. Even knowing that something belongs to someone else does not wipe out a desire to have it. This is not stealing. Accept their lying or taking things as mistakes.

Five-year-olds can understand reasons for behavior. Without being preachy or making them feel like criminals, help them return articles to their owners and praise their honesty. They soon get the idea that certain things belong to others. Make sure they have their own treasures too.

Five-year-olds talk a lot! They are very curious and constantly ask how, what, when, and where. They have many stories to tell that flow more logically now. They'll sit for a chat or enjoy talking on the telephone. Their interest in exploring words is rapidly expanding. They ask, "What does this say?" It's time-consuming for you, but learning words is a powerful accomplishment for fives.

Clocks and telling time become a new source of interest. They have little concept of next week or next month, but, when the clock hands are straight up and down, it's time for dinner.

Children of this age are interested in everything from the smallest leaf to the biggest machinery. Satisfy this yearning to see and touch things in your surroundings—a walk in the woods, a trip to a farm, or watch street construction. Collect and save objects from their excursions for stories and books.

Practice Safety

Although preschoolers have become increasingly independent they still need your constant protection from injury. Even though they are resourceful, their natural curiosity threatens their safety. You can prevent most accidents if you control or eliminate hazards.

Teach children about safety rules and their need to be cautious around playground equipment, automobiles, high places, or water. Be careful not to over-emphasize caution so your child fears normal play and exploration. Sparingly use warnings and explain why they must be cautious.

Preschoolers are not yet predictable enough for you to assume they won't experiment with matches, household cleaners, or medicines. Garages filled with garden supplies and tools are fascinating for young explorers.

Motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death and injury for children. The best way to protect children under five during sudden braking, swerving, or a crash is to use a child restraint system. Five-year-olds are safest in the back seat with the lap seat belt fastened across their hips and shoulder strap attached behind them.

It's always a problem to keep children orderly during long auto trips or even when car pooling from day care. Provide children with activities to pass the time. Most importantly, make it clear that drivers can't drive standing up and children can't ride standing up. If you fail to gain their cooperation, stop the car until they sit and buckle. You may have to make several stops before they realize you mean what you say. Most accidents happen less than 25 miles from home at speeds of less than 30 mph.

Prepared by Shelley Lindauer, graduate assistant, and Marcelle Straatman, Extension Human development specialist, School of Home Economics.

Dear Parents: Psychologists define love as helping someone to grow. Aside from the unconditional affection you freely give your children, helping their growth lies in understanding the world from their point of view. This letter about child development will help you enjoy their progress and appreciate their individuality as they solve the challenges of growing up.
Sincerely,

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