

Ep #82: Parent Your First Baby Like They're Your Fourth

PARENTHOOD PREP

with

Devon Clement



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Ep #82: Parent Your First Baby Like They're Your Fourth

What are the differences between a first-time parent and a fourth-time parent? And why is it something that could be helpful for your mindset?

Welcome to *Parenthood Prep*, the only show that helps sleep-deprived parents and overwhelmed parents-to-be successfully navigate those all-important early years with their baby, toddler, and child. If you are ready to provide the best care for your newborn, manage those toddler tantrums, and grow with your child, you're in the right place. Now here's your host, baby and parenting expert, Devon Clement.

Hello, and welcome back to the *Parenthood Prep* podcast. I feel like it has been so long. Of course, with everyone being busy over the holidays, we do some reruns of some classic episodes so that you don't miss anything important. And then we had Margaret guest host, which I loved. She's fab, and I'm already implementing some of the things that she taught us.

So, yeah, I'm so happy to be back to recording. Things are great over here. We had a great holiday, the usual up and down with winter illnesses, but really nice to just relax and get some recovery time. Obviously watched *Heated Rivalry*, of course. Then we watched it again, and then I read the book. So, you know, just keeping busy over here with the usual stuff.

Today I want to talk about something that I think is really important, especially for first-time parents, is that I wish I could help everyone treat their first baby as if it were not their first baby, as if it were your fourth baby or your 10th baby because there are just some differences that I think make parenting so much easier as time goes on. And I think some of them you do need to just learn by doing and learn from experience, but I do think there are some tips and strategies that I can give you to help you get to that point a little bit sooner.

I don't have my own children yet, or possibly ever. Something that people say to me all the time is, "Oh my God, you have so much experience. You're going to be such a good mom." And I don't necessarily think that determines it. I think I'm going to be just as anxious and stressed and all that kind of stuff as a lot of first-time parents are about certain things, and certainly not magically doing well without help. If anything, I know that I need more help.

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But something that I have noticed is that because I have spent so many years taking care of newborns, infants, toddlers, preschoolers, older kids, twins, I've been 24/7 live-in. I've done, I've kind of done it all, and I think there's just this comfort level that develops that doesn't go away when it's your own baby. So if you're somebody who's not ever really been around kids, you are not going to have that comfort level, especially newborns because, really, unless you're actively seeking them out or you're from like a huge family, we don't encounter newborns all that often in our everyday lives in our modern society.

If you're visiting a friend or a family member with a baby, usually the baby's a little bit older. Maybe you're just there for a brief visit, or they come to an event or something, or you go to the baby's bris or baptism or something like that, but you're not really getting that hands-on perspective of what it's like to take care of a newborn. So everything is brand new. People say all the time that the way the nurses in the hospital handle the baby compared to the way the new parents handle the baby is so different because we know that they are tough.

I foster kittens. When I have a teeny tiny kitten and our friends are so cautious with them and handling them so carefully, and I just start tossing them back and forth from one hand to the other because I know that they are totally safe and it's fine to do that. I mean, I don't do it standing up over a concrete floor, but sitting on the couch, because I know that first of all, I'm not going to drop them, and even if I did, they would land in my lap and they would be totally fine.

So, what are the differences between a first-time parent and a fourth-time parent? And why is it something that could be helpful for your mindset? Well, again, it just makes you a little bit more relaxed, a little bit more comfortable, and makes the process a little bit easier. Not only that, it helps you not completely lose everything about yourself and your identity into caring for your baby. So, for instance, if you feel very comfortable leaving your second, third, fourth baby with a babysitter or a family member or some other kind of caregiver, then you should feel that level of comfort with your first baby and be able to say, "You know what? Someone else can take good care of this baby too, and that means that I can go out and have a date night with my partner or run some errands and

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take care of some things that I need to take care of instead of just waiting for nap time or whatever." So in that way, you can really recapture your own identity.

Something that I think people need to really get their head around is that obviously every baby is different. But when I say this, what I'm going to say is that all babies are exactly the same. Just because one was born first and one was born fourth does not make that a different species or a different type of human being. So, for example, germs. With your first baby, you are so, so, so careful about germs. You are hand washing constantly, hand sanitizer, everybody that comes in the house, somebody sniffles funny over the phone and you're like, "Please stay away for at least six weeks."

Obviously, you don't want people that are actively sick around your baby, but guess what? You have a three-year-old and you have that second baby, your three-year-old is probably going to be sick while you have a newborn. They are sick all the time, especially if they're in daycare or preschool. They're always picking up germs and bringing them home. And yes, you still want to be careful, but the level of concern that you have about a random stranger getting your baby sick, like people won't even leave the house with a newborn sometimes because they're worried about germs and stuff like that. And when you have a three-year-old that you have to take to preschool and you are the only one caring for that baby, you're going to bring them with you and honestly, it's not going to be a big deal and you're not going to care that much.

You know, maybe you try to keep the toddler from sneezing directly on the baby, but you would have to be superhuman to keep the toddler from sneezing on anything that the baby is going to interact with, and the baby is probably going to be fine. People are just a little bit more laid back about stuff like that.

Same thing with injuries. Your toddler, even your early crawler, they're going to have bumps and bruises and scrapes, and they're going to roll off the couch and they're going to fall down a step or two going from one room into the other. And you're going to realize with time as it happens over and over that they're okay and it's just part of life. So when it happens with your second baby and your first is running around, running directly into the wall with a bucket on its head, you're

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going to be like, "You know what? This is not such a big deal. I am going to feel a lot more relaxed about this." I will never forget a client that I was nannying for had twins. I've talked about them before. Her mom is now one of my dear friends. They were probably about nine months, and at that age where they're crawling, climbing, learning how to walk but not really there yet, but kind of standing up, holding on to things, trying to stand independently, sometimes they fall over.

And the mom was out for the day and the grandma came over ostensibly to quote unquote help me, but really it was just kind of more annoying. I appreciated the gesture, and we were playing with the babies in the playroom, and she was gasping every 10 seconds. Every time one of the babies wobbled, every time they would look like they were going to pitch forward. And I wasn't doing that, and I think she was a little judgy to me about not being more worried about it. But I was like, "Lady, I am with these babies morning till evening every day. I would die of oxygen deprivation if I gasped every time it looked like they were going to fall." They look like they're going to fall constantly. They rarely do. When they do fall, it's usually not that bad and it's fine. We can't be so paranoid. And in that case, it was twins.

Twins are your first and second baby at the same time, which is pretty interesting. And something that you learn really quickly with twins, something that I learned from working with twins that really informed the way I work with every baby is that sometimes they just have to be okay. Sometimes you just have to say, "You know what? You're fussing. Maybe you're even crying, but your sister's on the changing table and I cannot tend to you while keeping her safe. So you are going to have to wait until I get this diaper on so that I can take her off the changing table and put her down before I can tend to you."

And usually, they calm down all on their own. Or if it's something where they're waiting to eat or whatever, you realize that they can survive for five additional minutes before it's feeding time. Just like if you are in the bathroom with your potty training two-and-a-half-year-old and they're in the middle of doing a poop on the potty and the baby wakes up from a nap and starts crying, the baby is going to have to wait. And that is fine. They will be fine. When it's your first baby,

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sometimes you're sitting there staring at the monitor waiting for them to wake up or you're in the bathroom going poop on the potty and you jump up in the middle of doing your business to go get the baby because you're so worried about their crying.

One of the things I say to my first-time parents, my newborn care clients, is if the baby starts crying while you're in the shower, you are allowed to rinse the shampoo out of your hair before you go and get them. You can even put conditioner in your hair and rinse that out before you go and get them. I mean, don't sit down and shave your legs while your three-week-old is screaming, but you can always rinse the shampoo out of your hair before you go and tend to the baby. And when that one baby is our main focus and our primary objective and the only thing we're ever thinking about, everything else becomes less of a priority. And the only thing that can fight your baby for priority in your mind is your other kids.

Same thing with using your attention, anxiety, worry, concern, care, all of that, you have a finite amount. And when you have one kid, it is all devoted to that kid. And when you have a second kid, you split it. You don't split your love, that grows, but nothing else grows. Everything else, you don't have more brain power when you have two kids. So if your brain was fully focused on your first, then your second comes and you have to divide it in half. And then the third comes and they actually get kind of a smaller wedge, and so on and so on. And do you think that third or fourth baby is worse off than the first baby? No.

There's so many benefits to being the younger sibling. You get all the cool toys, you have siblings to play with. Maybe your siblings are older and they can even help care for you. Being a younger sibling is great. Being an older sibling is great. But anyone who's a firstborn, myself included, will tell you, your parents are so worried about you all the time. And when they kind of chill out a little bit, it's nice. So just think to yourself, duplicate your baby in your mind and be like, if I was caring for my baby right now, would this other baby, the same baby crying, would I be running and doing that? No, what I'm doing is shampooing my hair, so I'm going to finish shampooing my hair. And just really try to think of it that way.

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I love those commercials from a few years ago. I don't know if you remember or retained them because you weren't a parent at the time, but they were for Love's Diapers, which are a good diaper, but they're on the cheaper side and they're more economical and they're not that fancy. And their whole marketing mission statement is we are for the second-time parents who do not care about fancy, they just want what works and is cheap. And so they would show the parent with the first baby interviewing the babysitter, "Oh, you have a master's degree in early childhood education, but not a PhD? Okay, well, we'll call you."

And then the second kid's babysitter is the local goth teenager from the high school just showing up at the door. And not that there's anything wrong with that. I'm sure goth teenagers are great babysitters. I was a great teenage babysitter. I was more of a nerd, but you know, the person wants to hold the baby and have you put enough hand sanitizer on the back of your neck or covering your entire body. And then the mom is at the car repair shop with the two kids, and she's going to get her credit card out of her purse and she just hands the baby to the car mechanic that's covered in oil and grease from head to toe, and she's like, "Just hold her for a second." Because you realize what matters and what doesn't matter and what's important to stress about and what's not.

Same thing with feeding your first one, you're trying to feed them all the right stuff, everything healthy and organic and this and that. And then the second one, they're eating pouches on the go because you're taking the older one to school. Again, not that there's anything wrong with that, but if you had a little bit more of that attitude with the first one, it would be so tremendous and so much more relaxing for you.

A friend of mine a few years ago, I used to be part of this mom's group that was great, but they were very, very strict about attachment parenting and gentle parenting and all these things. And I'll tell you, none of them were sleeping, which I'll do a whole episode about another time. But very into breastfeeding and co-sleeping and all these things. And then some of them, their kids were older or were getting older, and they were realizing that, yes, you do the best you can, but there are so many things that you can let go of as obsessions with perfection.

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She mentioned going to her son's little league and being like, "You can't tell who was breastfed at the little league." There's all those memes that go around that are like breastfeeding, bottle feeding, they're all just going to be eating McDonald's french fries off the floor of the minivan someday. And it's true. If you have to go through the McDonald's drive through every so often, it is not the end of the world. So what can you choose for yourself? What conveniences can you choose that are going to make your life easier and more pleasant when you have the first baby instead of waiting until you have the second kid and you have to choose conveniences because it's the only option?

So just having that attitude. Also, having friends with more than one kid or family members with more than one kid, talk to them, ask them what the differences are, how do you parent differently, and observe them and maybe try to take that to heart a little bit. I remember my girlfriend had four kids and her youngest was climbing the bookshelves and I was like, "Oh my God, is he okay?" And she was like, "Yeah, I can't look in four places at once. So a lot of times you just have to let them do what they're going to do and realize that they're totally fine." Whereas with the first kid, they move towards the bookshelf and you're scooping them up and saying, "Oh no, honey, don't climb that," all that kind of stuff. That's where you can observe that.

One of the things my mom says, she had a friend with older kids when we were babies or before we were born, and she got so much wisdom from her. Like when she was pregnant with my sister, she said, "How do you have two kids? How do you love them the same? Don't you have a favorite?" And the friend said, which I think is so great, "Yeah, you always have a favorite, but it changes every two years." And I just think that's so helpful to know because sometimes you might be in a moment where you're like, "Goddamn, I really like one of my kids more than the other in this stage, in this moment." And then two years later, maybe even a day later, maybe even 20 minutes later, you're like, "Oh no, actually, I like this one again and they were just being annoying in that moment."

So, realizing that just because you occasionally feel like you like one kid more than the other does not mean that you are a horrible person or a horrible parent. That reminds me of another meme I love, which is the woman says, "My son's

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friend just took out the garbage because it looked full. So it turns out I do have a favorite child after all."

Also, when I speak to clients on the phone and I speak to, for my newborn care business, and I speak to a first-time parent who's trying to hire overnight help, and they're like, "Oh, well, we're not sure what we want, and we want to spend some time alone as a family, and maybe we're not going to need that much support." And maybe you don't. That's totally fine. But the second-timers are always the ones who are like, "We know what we need. It's a lot of sleep, it's a lot of help. We didn't have help the first time. We really want to do it this time around."

Or, "We had help the first time. It was super valuable. Now we're chasing a toddler during the day. We know that we need it more than ever." It just makes a big difference to realize that no one's going to judge you for having support. In fact, people are going to be jealous. And anyone who does judge you for having support, you shouldn't be friends with, because screw that person. There is no medal for doing it alone without help.

Scheduling, you realize what's important to have a routine about and what things can be a little bit more easygoing. The first one, you might be like, "All naps have to be in the crib. They're on a strict sleep schedule." And then the second one, you're like, "You know what? Preschool pickup is in the middle of nap time and you're going to have to take your nap in the stroller, and that's okay." My sister used to fall asleep in the shopping cart at the grocery store because my mom would take her shopping while I was at school. And if she was tired and she needed a nap, she would nap on a package of toilet paper at the grocery store.

We take care of my niece, my baby Audrey who I talk about. We've had her visit us for a few days around the holidays. Her dads were really busy with work, so we kept her for a week. It was great. We loved having her here. But because I have taken care of so many kids, I have realized what matters and what doesn't. We put her pack and play in our bathroom because it's the best space for her to sleep and it's the darkest and it doesn't affect living our lives that much. I don't

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have a changing table for her. I use a bathmat on our bed and I just change her on that. Our bed is very tall, so it's comfortable for my back. I do not recommend changing a baby on a low bed because that's just annoying, but things like that just I'm like, she doesn't have a nursery here and it doesn't matter. She's perfectly happy in her pack and play in the bathroom and she sleeps great.

Just all these different little things where you think to yourself, is my outsize focus on this baby going to be possible when I have another child, if I'm planning to have another child. And if you're not planning to have another child, you should still think about it that way because you don't want to be obsessed with your kid forever to the point that it gets so annoying. You want to do things that you want to do and prioritize yourself sometimes, and that is totally okay. And you know what? It makes you a better parent when you are also tending to your own needs and desires and taking care of yourself.

Something along that line that I also like to mention is screen time. Do I think that you should put babies in front of the television or show them an iPad or whatever? No, I don't think that. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no screen time until at least two, which is great, but also pretty unrealistic, especially when you have multiple kids. So when you are breastfeeding or bottle feeding your newborn on the couch, it is fine if you have the television on. Incidental screens happening around your baby is not the end of the world. Try to limit it and don't go crazy putting screens in their face all the time, but also not for nothing, I don't feel like parents should need to give up television when every grocery store, every place you go in the world has just like flashing screens everywhere and babies are going to be exposed to it.

Again, I don't think you should sit them in front of something, but to that point, once in a while, like we had Audrey and we were getting ready to pack up and leave the house and she was awake and I plopped on The Sound of Music and she watched it for five minutes while I got the car loaded and it was great and she's still just as wonderful and smart and engaged and active as ever. And so when you have that older one, maybe they're four and they're watching Bluey for some time in the afternoon when they get home from preschool, maybe you have older kids that are watching sports on television or something like that,

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your baby is going to be in the room with a screen that's on and they're going to be fine.

So, all these little things where you just think to yourself, what would this be like if I also had a five-year-old or a two-year-old or an eight-year-old or whatever? And then you can just let go of a lot of things. And I'll just leave you with one parting anecdote, which is that a sleep training client I had a few years ago, they were lovely, but she was so anxious and so wound up in every little detail of the baby. And of course, part of sleep training is me giving people tools to just have it be easy and relaxed about that kind of thing. And she said that her pediatrician told her that she should have a second baby as soon as possible so that she wasn't so crazy and anxious and obsessed with the first baby. So that's the only time I've heard that advice given, but I thought it was very good and I was really glad that the pediatrician kind of knew what was up.

Parent your first baby like they're your fourth. Observe people with multiple kids. Think about what you can relax about, what you can let go of, and for God's sake, finish pooping and rinse the shampoo out of your hair.

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