Firstborns and Flashbacks: WARNING SIGNS FOR PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS

LuAnn Pierce, MSW

There is nothing like a baby to bring out our true colors. Even those of us who have learned to keep our darker side under control tend to let it shine through when it comes to protecting what is ours . . . including our ego. There is nothing like stress to lower one's defenses, except maybe fatigue and sleep deprivation.

Given these dynamics, new parents are especially at risk for allowing their dark side to surface during stressful times. New parents who want to do all the right things, be the best parents ever and never make the same mistakes their parents made raising them are quite vulnerable to stress even under the best of conditions.

This seems to be akin to the cycle created by any other perfectionist . . . the higher you raise the standard the harder you have to push yourself and the more stress you self-induce, making it even more difficult to make the grade. When I do this it feels like it takes twice as much effort to accomplish the same thing, someone else can accomplish in half the time with half the energy expended. Seems almost like a setup for failure, or an accomplishment at a very high expense.

Then we have the respective grandparents who may or may not have experience in the area of in-laws and new grandchildren. Those who are new grandparents will no doubt be ecstatic, unless there are outside circumstances that confound the occasion. Others who have "been there, done that" may be just as excited about the birth of the new baby, but more subdued about grand parenting . . . again, within the confines of any given family's makeup. Some want to help too much, while others may wish they could help more, but are unable to for whatever reason. Roles and relationships at this point become more important. Defining these boundaries ahead of time can be very helpful. It could even have a long lasting influence on your lives and the lives of your children.

During pregnancy and right after childbirth people tend to feel more connected to their own parents. If the relationship with their parent(s) is/was strained for some reason, this may bring up feelings of sadness and loss for the relationship he/she wanted with that parent. This is not unusual for people who have been adopted, do

not know their birth father or mother, were separated from one or both parents during infancy, childhood or youth or have a deceased parent. Nor is it uncommon for those who just did not connect or get along with one or both parents.

Grandparents may feel more connected to their own child/new parent at this time, also. However, if he/she has any feelings of ambivalence about things said or done in the past related to his/her role as the parent, it can result in emotional distancing from the new baby and new parent. This behavior may not be something he/she is aware of, and indeed the thoughts that create these feelings may not even be conscious. It can be something as minor as having thoughts of regret for an unplanned pregnancy or as major as child abuse.

New parents may want to talk about the "family rules" with one another and extended family members. If the same rules and consequences apply when children are visiting away from home or one parent is absent, it prevents confusion for the children and prevents grownups from teaching kids to manipulate adults. If it is not okay to eat in the living room when Mom is at home, it should not be okay to eat in the living room when Dad or the babysitter is in charge. Failure to do this NOW will make life much harder when the kids are 16 and the issues at hand have much higher stakes. Write down the rules and consequences and post them on the fridge!

Conflicts will arise about the best way to do x, y or z. Determine now how those will be settled. If grandparents give advice about "how we used to do it," it may be best to simply say "Thank you for the tip." If that is not enough to make the point that you have decided to do it another way, you may need to have a family conference, and as a couple decide how to handle the conflict. It is very important that both parents agree about how to handle the conflict . . . remember what we just said about consistent rules. Sometimes, like it or not, the new parents get to be in charge if for no other reason than because it is their child and their responsibility.

This is not always easy for grandparents, aunts and uncles to learn . . . just ask my brother! As a well- meaning aunt sometimes, I have to concede that, although I disagree with a decision they make or how they model themselves for the children, the children are theirs, not mine. In addition, the older I get the more I realize that I do not know everything, either. What a relief!

As the years pass professionals are learning new things that either discount the old beliefs or shed new light on things we never thought of before now. What I believed about the world, children, families and parents is radically different now than it was 10 years ago.

The same will be true for you as new parents and new grandparents if you are open to learning and continue to evolve. I realize that not everyone does this . . . and those who do not, whether it is due to a defect of mind, character or otherwise, are the people who refuse to explore new terrain, and cease to grow as a result. Those may be people in your families . . . the ones you will likely have repeated conflicts with because they are unable or unwilling to consider the new parent as a competent adult, or that others may indeed know more than they do about parenting. Be firm and consistent with these people, but have empathy for them, not anger. If you can begin to see them as people who have lost hope for change, lack the faith in others to do well and see little light in the future, your attitude will be different than if you see them as bitter, meddling and out of date.

If you have a conflict with someone about something that you are not that sure about, find out more about it, particularly if it has to do with the overall physical or emotional health of the child. You must also be willing and open to learning new ways of doing things. There is always another way . . . whether it is a better way can only be determined if you explore it for yourself. As much as I hated to admit it, my stepmother taught me to do many things differently than my mom did them. I hated that when I was younger because it seemed like I had to admit my mom was wrong about something, which felt disloyal. Now that I am older it seems like two different ways of doing things that I have available to use as needed.

One last thing about discipline . . . today there are forms of discipline that are considered to be abusive that were commonplace a few years ago. Many of us grew up in a time when physical punishment was considered the norm. When deciding on how to discipline your child, remember these guidelines.

- Never hit a child with an object or a closed fist.
- Never hit a child in the face, or around the head and shoulders area.
- Never use physical punishment when you are angry.
- Never hit a child hard enough to leave a mark or bruise.

Most importantly, always remember that discipline is to teach children, not to hurt them or relieve your feelings or anger.