

ENTITLED TO ALL THAT PARENTING HAS TO OFFER

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Infertility takes its toll. It wreaks havoc on our finances, our bodies, our marriages, our friendships, our identities and sometimes our souls. All we want is a child to love, care for, nurture, and endow with all that we have fantasized for years.

So what happens when we finally get there? The children we end up parenting are not likely to be the brilliant and exquisite children we imagined them to be; and less likely is that we will end up the embodiment of the perfect parents we imagined ourselves to be.

Our infants will cry through the night, our toddlers will use “NO!” as their favorite expression, our kindergarteners may not be the fastest learners in class, and our adolescents will pierce their belly buttons and push the limits of our discipline. But they will also wrap their arms around us, pushing their noses against ours and say, “I love you.” They will search out our faces at their school performances, and beam with pride when we bring cupcakes to the classroom for their birthdays.

For our parts, we will hopefully enjoy the disappointments as well as ecstasies that all parents experience. We will become so exhausted with infants we will struggle to remember our intense desire to parent. We will lose our tempers at our toddlers, yell once, twice and then some, and be wracked with guilt afterward. We will agonize over the right schools in which to place our kids and forever after pray we made the right decisions. We will let them watch a little too much T.V. while we balance getting dinner ready at the end of a long day. We’ll not throw the ball with them as long as they might like, and once in awhile, we might miss a soccer game. In other words, we get it all.

We get to tuck them into their warm beds at night, when they’re tired and vulnerable and tell us their secrets. They will share with us the crush they have on Jimmy or Sarah in the second grade, confess that they threw away the note from the teacher, traded lunches with the kid with the Oreo cookies. We will be the ones who try to find the reassuring words to ease the pain of Johnny not wanting to play with our child on the playground. We will infuse them with the strength the next morning to invite themselves into Johnny’s group, ask the teacher for another note to the parents, make up the homework they didn’t do. We will try to be patient as they learn their lessons, and we learn ours, holding our breaths that our children’s adulthood will reveal we learned our lessons well.

For those of us whose children come to us through one of the many options available, which exclude us from the genetic or gestational contribution, we will struggle to find the words and heart to help our kids understand. We will decide at their various developmental phases if now is the time they are ready to hear the particular facts we fear

them knowing. We will try to keep our own stuff clean; we will revisit our infertility, check ourselves over and over. We'll renew our commitments to the truth and listen to our hearts pound as we revisit the loss of our genetic children or the loss of our ability to give birth. We will try like hell to make room for our children's feelings. When our kids ask about the donors or surrogates or birthparents who replaced us genetically or gestationally in our children's lives, we will take a deep breath and remember that we are as prepared for this moment as we can be. During these delicate moments, we will, as all parents must, put them first and only. This is the greatest gift we can give our kids-to do our work ahead of time so that when their time comes to have feelings of sadness, confusion, grief or anger about their conceptions and birth, there is room for them to have those feelings because we have already grieved. Not that we won't grieve again. Not that the feelings forever are gone, never to plunk themselves down in the middle of our lives again. They most likely will. But that is our work, not theirs.

Our jobs are not to take away our children's pain, though heaven knows we want nothing more. But we can't. Our jobs are to be there to help them through all of life's disappointments, pain and confusion, as well as their accomplishments, joys and successes.

And that's the point. We get it all. Whether infertile or not, genetically related or not, whether we gave birth to them or not, we are entitled to all the title of Mom and Dad confers upon us-the blessing and the curse-with our eyes open and fully cognizant of the blessing which we have finally received.

Carole LieberWilkins is a Marriage and Family Therapist in private practice in West Los Angeles. She has been specializing in infertility, reproductive medicine and family building options since 1985. A founding member of Resolve of Greater Los Angeles, she served on the Board of Directors as Director of Education for 13 years. In her practice, she sees individuals, couples and facilitates support groups for general infertility and pre-adoption. The author of a booklet, *Talking to Children About Their Conception, It's Easier Than You Think*, she is a well-known author, teacher and lecturer on the subject of disclosing non-genetic and gestational information to kids as they grow. Carole is mom to two adolescent sons, who came to her through adoption and ovum donation.

(This piece is unpublished; it has been distributed at conferences and to patients.)