

MY OWN EXPERIENCE

A RELUCTANT FATHER

This is the sixth in a series of articles written by *American Baby* readers. In each issue, we will publish a story of some experience that either changed the person's life in some way, or from which he or she learned a valuable lesson. The story may deal with a personal dilemma, or with a situation involving the

\$100,000 from cradle to college, no more ski weekends, no more impromptu movies, no more late parties and sleeping in — I must admit that these were some of the thoughts that first went through my mind when my wife told me she was pregnant. Not that I wasn't the right age (29) and hadn't done the right things (traveled in Europe and completed my education), but really, when you considered the cost, the nuisance, the distraction from career, the loss of freedom . . .

Rationally, all you could talk about were the "joys of parenthood." But I found these rather elusive. About all I could think of was my "son" becoming a tennis star or being famous, and that was in the future — improbable and obviously egotistical.

But doubt does not stop gestation, and social conventions have to be observed, so I went along with the enthusiasm of my wife, accepted the congratulations of friends, and kept my ambivalence to myself.

I attended Lamaze classes with my wife and developed a clinical interest in the baby's development. It was difficult to resist being intrigued by the thought of millions of cells dividing and multiplying into human flesh. I couldn't help, however, on those late August nights when classes were held, looking at the other men in the group and wondering if they, too, didn't feel they were being irrevocably drawn into dull domesticity.

On October 4, my son was born. My wife says I jumped up and down. To the uninitiated, it is extremely difficult to convey the meaning of that moment of excitement and exhilaration as a human shape, carrying your genes, suddenly emerges from its dark resting place of nine months and starts to breathe and cry. In the next few weeks I experienced novel emotions. There was an incredible sense of protectiveness and warmth towards this miniature human I had helped create. As I fed my son, walked him to sleep, and looked for the start of a smile, I became acutely aware of his dependency and innocence, and of my serenity.

Sean is now two. I want to try to set down what I have gained from parenthood so far because I feel that we are inundated with articles that discuss the joys and anxieties of mothers, but never mention those of fathers.

First of all, there is his spontaneity and uninhibited giving of affection. Sean says, "Hi, Daddy," fifty times a day and is always either climbing on my back, going through my legs, nuzzling me like a puppy, or (when tired) putting his head in my lap. There is something very therapeutic in the physicality of my relationship with Sean. Perhaps it is because the American male is trained to be cool and self-possessed. He eschews genuine intimacy and prefers professional relationships to personal relationships. He is wary of touching, affection, and tenderness. Thus to poke, kick, wrestle, and hug without restraint or

family. All stories will relate to some aspect of pregnancy or parenthood.

Peter Gibbon is the author of our special Father's Day story. He is a history teacher in the winter months, a tennis pro in the summer months, and a father all year round.

embarrassment, to temporarily revert to your own childhood, is extremely healthy.

Secondly, there is an energy, exuberance, and enthusiasm in children which is rarely found in adults. Sean will run up and down the length of our hallway for the sheer joy of it. Then he will pull my hand demanding that "Daddy run, too." On a dark February morning Sean will be chattering and laughing over breakfast while I am gloomily pulling myself together to face another day. On walks or car trips he responds excitedly to everything in his environment — dogs, rabbits, store window displays, other people, the moon. Such unaffected delight in life cannot help but be infectious.

Third, a child contributes to the humor of life. This humor is hard to explain to an outsider, but it springs up at any time and is a personal amusement, quietly shared by husband and wife. It ranges from sight gags, such as Sean getting stuck in his toy box or appropriating a huge laundry basket as his new hat, to comical imitations of adult gestures and speech — Daddy putting his hands in his pockets, or Mommy calling, "Peter, come here." The humor flows through the day contributing to its sanity and well-being.

I don't wish to imply that there is no mess or inconvenience in fatherhood. Sean keeps our apartment in a constant clutter. He doubles the amount of washing and drying. He does not believe in tranquil dinner hours or the pleasure of reading a book. We no longer leave the apartment without elaborate preparations. There is no doubt that life becomes slowed down, regulated, carefully planned, and less spontaneous. In compensation, however, there is an increased emotional dimension to life which I can only imperfectly convey to the unbeliever.

As best I can explain it, new emotions are created; dead emotions are revived. My son has created in me feelings of warmth, tenderness, and spontaneity. He has revitalized playfulness and a sense of wonder. In a culture which does not glorify "fatherhood," but rather presents a dazzling series of options to the affluent and unencumbered; in which man's emotional responses are numbed by the demands of work and our respect for rationality and toughness; at a moment in history when many of the old incentives for parenthood have crumbled, it is important to give new reasons to reluctant fathers. □

We invite all interested readers — both female and male — to submit a story for future issues. Each entry should be between 1000 and 1500 words; must be typewritten and double spaced, and should be accompanied by a short description of yourself, and a self addressed, stamped envelope. For each story used, we will pay \$75. Send your story to American Baby, Department R, 575 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10022.