



Congratulations on growing your family! For many the transition from one to two children theoretically seems perfect and should be easy. After all, you managed one and if you're already out of the toddler stage, those harder times may seem pretty far away right now. Even if you aren't out of the toddler stage, you can totally handle two, right? If you're still expecting, I don't want to burst your bubble too much, but as those of you who have already made the switch and are taking this class already know, the transition to two may be one of the hardest things you ever do.

You know when you go online and you try to share parenting wisdom with others and are met with the statement, "You must only have one!" and when you had just one (or have, for those of you), you get a little put out and think these people are just being assholes? Well, they kinda are because they really shouldn't treat you like that, but there's also some truth to it. The challenges of raising one child are certainly there, but when you double the number of kids, it's not just doubling the work (or as many assume, just adding "a bit more") - it's exponentially more.

To start out (and of course we'll talk about all sorts of things in the weeks to come), there is the issue that the number of relationships that you will be worried about and managing isn't just one more - it's two to three more as your new baby will also have to contend with relationships with your other child and your partner (if there is one) in addition to you building those bonds. Now the extra relationships would be less concerning if they could actually happen in a vacuum without your assistance, but let's be honest, two children don't magically get along and this one relationship alone can take up *a lot* of your time.

On top of these new relationships, we forget that it also means the existing relationships we have with our child and partner will also shift and morph into something new. As these relationships change, we are forced to adapt in our sleep-deprived, overworked, and stressed-out state. Again, if the shift were natural and easy, that would be one thing, but often we face partners who are more stressed-out (like us) and so that relationship can get bumpier and we definitely face little ones who really need more

support than before in coping with these changes. More support right when we don't have it in us *because there's a new baby*.

As I do in many of my courses, I will be sharing some of my own stories only because I hope some of my own failures and struggles will help you in any small way. Sometimes it's knowing you aren't alone in this situation, sometimes it's the concreteness of a story that helps, and sometimes it's nice to see someone who's supposed to know better fail miserably (schadenfreude anyone?). If you get anything out of these stories, they have served their purpose.

So here goes your first: My daughter was five years old when my son was born. I had some health problems before pregnancy and after and yet somehow I was certain I could totally rock this. Life would change - of course I knew that - but I truly felt like I had this covered. Fast-forward to my son about four weeks post-partum and there I am in the middle of the night holding a screaming child, bouncing on the yoga ball, crying my eyes out and feeling like my child deserved *so much better* than me. In my mind, I was an utter and complete failure. By that point I wasn't able to provide for my first as I anticipated and my son had silent reflux which I had yet to figure out the cause of, so these nightly scream fests were becoming the norm. I was lucky that one of my best friends had five kids at the time my son was born (she now has seven) and was the one that told me that that transition to two had been - by far - the hardest of all of her kids. (And she's had health problems with some of the later ones and even those didn't compare.) She shared her own struggles in those moments and I looked at the most together mother I think I've ever known and felt relief.

She gave me what I hope this course will give you - permission to allow yourself to be overwhelmed, guilt-ridden, and stressed-out *and still know that you are an amazing parent and you will get through this*. This course also includes practical advice and tips to help you on this path, hopefully without giving up your deepest held beliefs or your sanity. So welcome to the circus that is parenting two...

Section 1: How Did I Become Such a Failure?



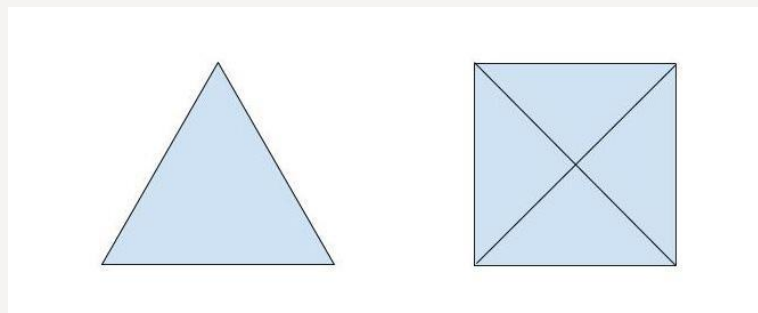
Sometimes we sit back, take a moment, and wonder, “How the hell did I get here?”

These are the moments that many new parents face that we think we won't face again. That is, until you have your second. I can't count the number of times I have spoken to families where they really can't see how they went from being pretty together to feeling like they were wholly unraveled. You start to question your own sanity at a certain point - *Was I always this much of a failure and didn't see it?* - and you certainly can't see the way out.

I want to start this course by talking a bit about *why* we can feel that way. For those of you who aren't there yet, it can be helpful to realize what may be coming so that if you know in advance what to expect, it may not be all that shocking when you get there and maybe, just maybe, you avoid the feelings of failure described herein. In fact, my greatest hope for this course is that anyone taking it ahead of time will be prepared enough that they feel they maybe didn't need the course at all.

So why do we feel like failures?

First, as alluded to earlier, there is the immense shift that comes with adding another person to the family dynamic. The change in relationships, the change in responsibilities, and the new struggles everyone faces make the change exponentially harder. When we aren't prepared for this, we feel overwhelmed. Just look at the following images:



The triangle represents the unit of 3 (if there are only two of you then it's a straight line) where we see there are three dyadic needs to handle. The square is what happens when you add another unit to this.

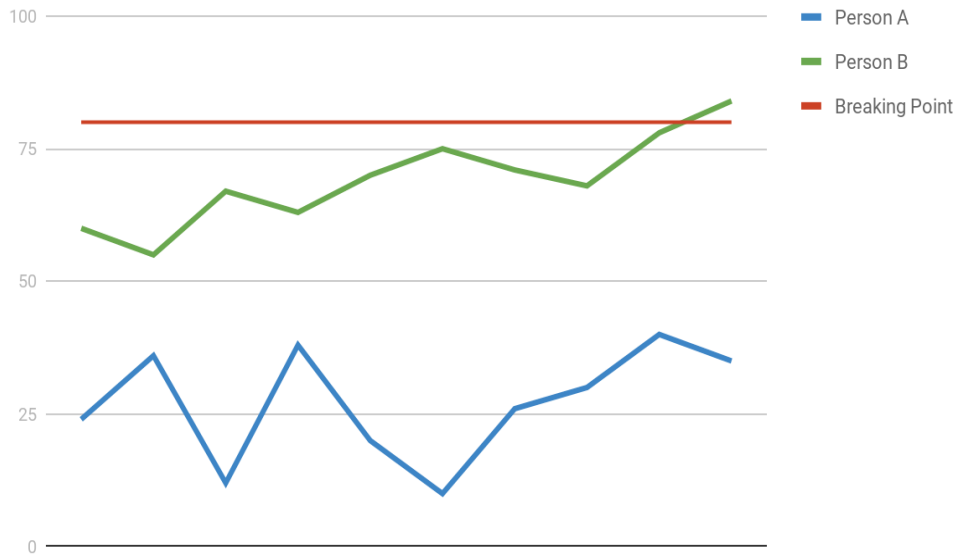
Ignoring the huge change that happens in the existing relationships (which shouldn't be discounted, but isn't represented here), you now have 6 dyadic needs. Perhaps even more importantly, one of these new lines represents the sibling relationship - one which causes much stress and requires intense consideration by the parents yet we often feel we have little control over it.

The second consideration is the failure to rest and recuperate after birth. Some people didn't get this the first time around and were back at work within weeks if not a couple months, but even during that time, there was one baby and hopefully you could rest a bit during that downtime. With your second, you may have longer time at home or not, but the minimal ability to rest is probably absent for many of you. If you have another child at home, you're not napping with the baby, but trying to miraculously juggle a sleeping child and "quality time" with your older child or even chores if you have care for your older child because the time to get it done later is even less. This failure to have space to rest and recover means we never get to a baseline where our brains and bodies are prepared for what lies ahead.

The third consideration is the all-too-frequent lack of support with the older child. You are expected to be "on" with your eldest while also being "on" for a new baby and what these things entail are often quite different. An older child has gotten used to playing and crafts and outside time and so on. You are up and out and about with them doing lots of amazing things. They may be used to homemade meals, craft projects, and various sensory activities. A baby expects a quieter environment, lots of feeds (breast or bottle), lots of time to rest, and a parent that isn't stressed out because that stresses them out. If you provide for your eldest in this situation then you can feel like you're failing your baby. If you provide for your baby (which is often what has to happen due to the need to also recover), you feel like you're failing your eldest. It's a no-win situation for many families.

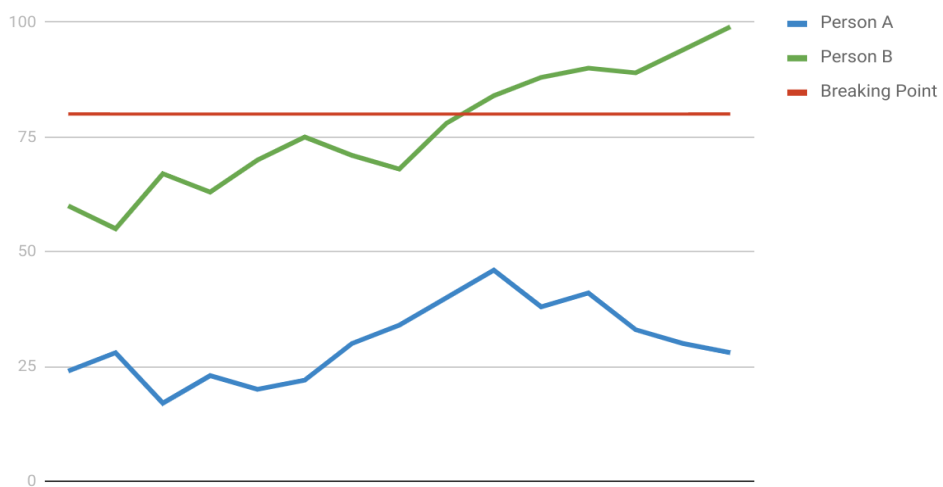
The fourth (but probably not final for all of us, but enough for here) consideration is the very real effects of what many call "baby brain". Having a new baby not only causes hormonal shifts for us, but also the change in our sleep patterns and the body working extra hard to recover means we are not at our peak performance. Not even close. As we all should know by now, when we are in a good state we can handle a lot of things coming at us without reaching our tipping point into oblivion or stress or hell (whatever you want to call it), but when we are living closer to that edge, the small things seems bigger because we're so close to going over that edge. Consider the following graph:

Stress Level



As you can see, Person A and Person B have the same breaking point. The blue line representing Person A is in a pretty good state and it would take a lot to get them to that breaking point. This person can parent “better” (which really means more as they would like) because they have that space to experience set-backs and stress without it having a huge impact on their overall well-being. Person B however is closer to their edge and thus the same small things that affect Person A bring them over their tipping point. Of course once we’re over our tipping point, things often spiral out of control so the end graph looks more like this:

Stress Level



As you can see, once we cross that breaking point, things can spiral upwards instead of us having the capacity to regulate and get ourselves back down to a reasonable state. This is often what happens to families on a daily basis when they are struggling with the addition of the second child. Each day feels like “survival” (the word I hear more than any other).

The biggest problem though is that our culture has told us that *we and we alone* are responsible for these elements. We are told to prioritize rest (sleep train!), use daycare, engage in more self-care, and so on. These are not the answers many of us want because they take us away from that central tenet that *we want to be there with our kids*. *We want* to be present and responsive and warm and gentle and all the things we know they need and expect from us.

The one thing I need you to know and truly accept before you can make any change that will help you during this time is this:

This is not your fault. You are enough, but you live in a society that has absolutely failed you.

I’m not kidding. This is really, really not your fault. You see, if we think about what child-rearing evolved to be, it was not us alone handling these situations. Allocare has been a staple of human history for good reason - not only do our kids thrive when they are truly loved and cared for (like family) by many people, but the burden on the parents in this situation (often mom) is eased so much so that she can often focus on what needs doing to ensure not just survival, but thriving in the given environment. Imagine having family that played with your eldest all day, providing the attention and comfort needed while you took care of a newborn, resting your body as needed and ensuring you were healthy and strong. Imagine having help in the middle of the night so that if you needed more rest, you could cuddle with your eldest as others snuggled and cared for your baby. Imagine being valued for all that you are doing and not derided for what you aren’t. That is our history and we would do well to not forget it because although we aren’t there, one of the things I hope we can do is take that knowledge and do what we can to help make it a reality for future generations.

But for now, please sit in the knowledge that you are being asked to do too much and given too little support and value for what you are doing. It won’t be easy to quiet the voices in your head, but hopefully you can find support at home or through friends or even through your office hours here to find ways to tell those voices to simply shut up.

Section 2: Shifting Mindsets



The very first stage of helping our guilt (or avoiding it altogether) is to work on our mindset, or our expectations for ourselves. We all tend to be guilty of thinking we can handle far more than we can, and while we don't want to throw in the towel completely on our parenting, we need to balance the reality with our desire for perfection. Box 1 provides some examples of how we can take our expectations down a notch without compromising our ideals.

Box 1. Taking Our Expectations Down a Notch

The following are some of the more common expectations that parents have, especially the more gentle kind, and ways in which we can shift or modify these to meet the more hectic demands of parenting two kids.

Current Expectation	Modified Expectation
No screen time at all	Pick a few high-quality shows that you feel comfortable using when things are overwhelming with your eldest. Limit the number of shows to 1-2 a day. Look into educational games that use screens so that it's not passive watching but your kids are engaged in something that is helping them learn.
All home-cooked meals	Scale back on what you cook so that they are easy meals, but still made at home and preferably in batches to freeze. Find restaurants that offer healthy alternatives and use them when needed. Offer to do a homecooked meal swap with a friend where you each make extra of one meal

	and share half so you get a night off and are just doubling what you would normally cook.
Lots of crafts and activities	Pick easier ones that will entertain your child and don't involve you as much. Sensory games like water play are great for kids and easy to set up and observe without needing to be hands-on.
Little to no outside care	Sometimes this is for financial reasons when you have a new baby and when this is the case, you could consider approaching a friend who has same-age kids and ask if they would help. If money is not the issue, look into high-quality programs that are outdoors like forest schools or Waldorf-style playgroups.
Always holding baby	We may have been used to having our eldest in arms almost 100% of the time, and with another kid, sometimes that doesn't work. If it doesn't, then think of those who can hold baby or ways you can keep baby close while still attending to your eldest as needed, like using an appropriate wrap or carrier.

Another way to reduce expectations is to be aware of how much you want to limit your allowances during this time. Thinking of the above example of homemade meals, perhaps the exception isn't *how* the meal is made, but how often you deviate from this. Some people may allow 2 meals a week to come from the store or a restaurant but keep up their other homemade meals the other times. When looking at screen time, it may be you choose a number of days or shows per week your child can watch and limit it to that. Choosing how much you are willing to deviate can help keep you from going completely off the rails with your ideals.

As I hope you can see, there are often other ways to relax our expectations without throwing them out the window. However, sometimes we may need to throw them out entirely. If you find you're struggling with postpartum depression or anxiety, for example, screens may be a saviour to get you through. A shortish period of more/lots of screen time will not damage your child forever when put in comparison to your mental health and ability to parent effectively, if not perfectly.

Crucial to these expectations is that we use this down time to not feel more guilt. Even if it's hours of a screen when we're at our worst and trying to survive a day, the guilt of that is not going to help us move

forward. What can help us is to critically analyze *why* we're feeling the guilt. Guilt is a very helpful emotion, but can be misplaced. If you find yourself feeling stressed out and guilty about whatever your child is doing or whatever you aren't doing, then it's time to go through what I call, "What's the worst that can happen?"

In these moments, I suggest talking through with yourself exactly what the long-term problem is when we move away from our ideals. Often going through our fears can help us see where we may need to make some changes or how to avoid these long-term problems. It can also help us realize that many times what we fear doesn't come about from short-term or temporary use of these crutches or shifts, but rather *reliance* on them. Let's walk through a hypothetical situation that may or may not have come from yours truly's own thought process at times...

The issue is screen time and how much a mother is using it in the early days with her eldest in order to make it through the day with a distressed baby and health issues post-partum. The fear is that so much screen time will cause the eldest to fall behind or hurt them cognitively. Perhaps it's even changing her brain for the worse in the long-term.

Now to the challenge.

The first question is, "How much is she really watching a day?" The answer was a few hours. Is this ideal? No. Is it all day every day? No.

Next question, "Is she only doing this and nothing else?" The answer is no. She's also got some other activities (though less) and some visits with friends and walks to the park (but less).

Next question, "Is there evidence that short-term heavy use of screens will undo all the good that's been done in her life?" Hard no.

Next question, "Is she watching age-appropriate material?" Yes. Educational too!

At this point, Mom can likely start to calm and know that this isn't the end of the world. So then comes the following question, "How long is this going to go on for and is there something to shift here?" This leads to the key issue of not letting it fall into a pattern you can't get out of, but maybe making small changes to start getting back to as much normal as possible. Perhaps it's using audiobooks instead of screens or doing one show then turning it off for a spell to let the eldest play. Perhaps aiming for a bit more time outside walking or going to a park when possible. Or trying to arrange more playdates to ensure there's enough time with others not in front of a screen, especially those close by who may be able to pick her up.

Using this process to question our fears and worst-case scenarios helps us get a better sense of what we fear and how we can handle it. It's almost never a drastic change, but a good call to get us to realize that we probably want to at least have this in mind so it doesn't become permanent and may even lead to a shift starting at that moment.

There is one more important question when we feel guilt and that is *why*. Sometimes we can't actually articulate why we feel we need to be doing something and when this is the case, we should ask ourselves how much of this desire is our own or something we've internalized from our culture. If guilt is coming at us from culture, it's more like shame and is likely not necessary and this is often when we can't articulate the why behind the feeling. If we can articulate then we know it's really our own and that makes it easier to see ways beyond it. If you are questioning your own situation, talking it out with someone can help us see how well we understand and buy into our own guilt versus it coming from elsewhere.

The final piece here with expectations is what I call the 80-20 rule. You've probably heard of it or seen it in other realms of life, like dieting or exercise. It's a good ratio to keep in mind and gets to this idea of moderation or accepting imperfection. We will never be perfect parents. Never. Please throw that idea out the window. In fact, it's good to literally take a piece of paper, write "I can be a perfect parent" on it and then burn it. It has no place in being a gentle, kind, and responsive parent; as the saying goes, "Perfection is the enemy of good".

With the 80-20 rule, the goal is to aim for being that parent you want to be 80% of the time and knowing it's going to go to hell in a handbasket the other 20%. There will be weeks it's more like 90-10 or 60-40 and in those good weeks, celebrate and love it. In the not-so-good weeks, try to see what the triggers are and how you might be able to address the underlying cause of the struggles. For example, it took me a while but I learned that when I have a bad pain day, I am not a great parent and I start my day closer to that threshold you saw earlier and then am far more likely to cross it and spiral out. Unfortunately I couldn't control when the pain would come or even effectively handle it with medication, so instead I became honest with my eldest and would say, "I'm having a bad pain day so please forgive me and I'll work at trying to just remain calm". This helped as I was able to set expectations aside on those days for myself and know they were my 20% (sometimes 30 or 40% too).

It can feel really hard some days even when we have all the right expectations. Sometimes we can *know* stuff on a cognitive level, but still struggle with it practically speaking. Emotionally we can feel so overwhelmed that we cannot allow ourselves to really believe what our head is telling us. In these cases, it can be so helpful to have someone else who has been there, who also shares the reasonable expectations, and who will be 100% honest with you to talk to. I know personally hearing it from my friend and mother of five (at the time) how hard that transition was and recalling some of her own struggles and how she overcame them was exactly what I needed. Seeing her well-adjusted kids who may have spent more time on screens as she adapted to that transition was such a relief and now I do the same for any parent I know struggling with this transition. If you don't have a parent that can be this person for you, consider joining a gentle, honest parenting group online that you can turn to in times of stress.

At the end of the day, when you have more realistic expectations for yourself, parenting is easier. And this encompasses realistic expectations about what we can and can't do, how often we do it, and knowing that things don't have to be forever, but just to get us through the harder times.

Section 3: What Our Kids Really Need From Us



What you may have noticed in the previous section on shifting mindsets is that many of the expectations we have for ourselves centre on the things we do. It's the TV time, the homemade food, the activities and crafts we provide, and so on. In our culture, we have this idea that to do all this is to make a great parent. This isn't too surprising given the lack of value our culture places on the mere act of parenting and the idea of care and responsiveness; no, our culture values these extra things we do to try and make up for the fact that we're "just parenting".

The thing is, these are *not* the key things your kids need from you and sometimes we get caught up on them at a detriment to the real issue at hand - *connection*. At the heart of parenting is the strong bond between parent and child and helping our kids feel more love and connection from us. What happens when we welcome a new child into the mix is the obvious change and fears associated with this change in terms of how these relationships work. Some of us then focus on these external ideas of parenting in hopes that will make up for the shift in relationships, but as lofty and nice as they are, they really don't make up for the drastic change that is happening for everyone and often just end up adding more stress.

Let's look at first of the two main concerns with connection:

We worry about our eldest kids and how much they are losing out on time and connection with us because of the needs of the new baby.

This is probably the biggest issue facing many families with new babies because there has been a fundamental shift for our eldest kids and yet no matter how we try to prepare them for this, we simply can't. We also can't prepare ourselves for the intensity of their emotional struggle with this and how it can manifest. Depending on your child and their temperament, this may be mild or it may be some of the most intense emotions you'll see. If your child is higher-needs or sensitive or an orchid child, this can be particularly difficult as they struggle to regulate at the best of times, can struggle with change, and the new sibling is the cumulation of all things difficult.

What can we do? Let's start by understanding that our kids spell love t-i-m-e and this means the reduction in time that they have with you can feel like a reduction in love. This isn't your fault, it's just the way they are and we have to accept this in order to work with it, not against it. Many times I work

with families and they are clear that they *are* spending time with their kids and trying to work in special time and all these things, but it's just not enough. And of course it isn't because it's not what they had before.

What we need to realize is that to fill their well with love you can no longer rely upon time which means you have to shift to finding ways to help your child experience love in a new way, a way that can be done more easily. Here I want to offer a couple ways for you to meet these needs in a way that works with parenting two:

1. You need to start expressing love in new ways. Yes, we say "I love you" to our kids (though that's so vague many fail to truly grasp it) and we hug and cuddle them and spend time with them. We continue to do all this, but it can be decreased with two so it ends up being a net loss for our eldest. What we need to start doing is utilizing verbal love more effectively than just saying "I love you" and start to find ways to do things *for* our kids that matter to them to show them we love them.
 - a. Verbal expressions of love. These are highly effective for many kids as long as they are really clear and exact. Love is an abstract term that means little to kids when used vaguely, especially if there are times when we may not *act* like we love them that way. Being explicit in what you love is an excellent way to help fill your child's well. For example, you can say, "I love your smile" or "I love watching you play" or "I love the way you dance". These are all ways of telling a child that you love the parts of who they are that they can identify with and this allows them to *feel* that love in a way that speaks to them. When you use "I love watching you..." it also serves to tell them that you love them *even when you aren't engaged with them* and that is so crucial at this juncture. If you aren't used to doing this yet, you may need to set timers for yourself then when it goes off, observe your child for a moment and then comment on how much you love whatever it is they are doing.
 - b. Doing things *for* our kids. Many may be laughing at this because isn't everything you do almost all day for your kids? Yes, it's true, but they don't always see everything we do as being explicitly for them because not all of it is what they actually want. When I speak of doing things for our kids in this regard, I mean doing something *extra* or something *special* that you know means something to them. This doesn't have to be a big thing either, it can be making a special meal they like (which is often not "special" as in hard, just their favourite or fun, like pancakes for dinner), it can be providing a gift that comes from your heart (so not necessarily a toy or anything, but something that shows love), and so on. These things are ways we tell our kids we're thinking of them and doing things for them even when we aren't with them. Again, the goal is to get them to realize our love moves beyond just being with them.
 - c. Note: Sometimes we may not feel like being expressive of love or doing things for our kids, especially if times have been difficult. It's okay to feel that way, acknowledge that

emotion as normal, but then overcome it. Change comes when we are able to make the first move and the more you do this, the easier it becomes because of the positive effects you can see in your child and your relationship with them.

2. You need to make the bit of one-on-one time you have *special*. As I mentioned, even when we provide our elder kids with one-on-one time, we rarely are doing it as much as we used to so it still seems like it's less-than for them. This means we have to make it special. And no, special does not mean more exciting things to do, but rather *how* we approach it so that it feels more special to our child.

Let me explain a bit more. Imagine if in your relationship with your partner (or any previous relationship), they got a new job and you guys had less time together than usual. You wanted more time and you would ask for as much as you could get. Sometimes your partner said yes, but less frequently than you would like. Yes, the time would be good, but you'd probably feel a little put out and maybe like you valued the relationship with your partner more than they did with you. This is often what the relationship with our kids looks like.

Now imagine the same scenario, but regularly your partner made a point of being the one to ask you for time and made it clear how much they valued that time with you too. In that case, would you feel put out? Would you resent the lack of time? Or would your well be filled not just because you are getting some time, but because you know you are valued as well? This is what we are aiming for with our kids when they are facing the arrival of a new sibling and the change in time. Our goal then has to be to make the time special by making it clear we want it. When we do this, less time fills that 'love well' way more than it does when we just spend time.

How do we do this? It's really quite simple. First, we do have to set aside some one-on-one time, preferably daily, but this can be 15-20 minutes a day. Second, we have to ask our child for this time and make a big deal about how much we may miss the extra time we would normally get with them, but that we really want to spend some time doing something with them. If you've done this already, you will know the light that comes into their eyes when we are really almost begging them for time. Third, set a timer to explain that when it goes off, we'll have to stop, but that you want to do this more. Now, if you can, set the timer for a few less minutes than you actually have. When it goes off, your child will likely look crestfallen, but that's when you hesitate and say something like, "Okay, I know this is supposed to be it, but things seem to be going okay right now and I'm having so much fun, do you think we could do maybe 5 more minutes? Only if you want!" With those words, you've shown your child that added love by saying you want to throw the rules out to have some extra time with them.

Note that when you do have to go, you can also express this love by saying something like, "I know we have to end this, but I just love spending time with you. Do you think you'd like to come and help me do X? It's okay if you want to keep playing too by yourself." They may want to join and may not, but they will know that the offer is there and it comes from you.

Now what about our youngest and one of the primary fears for them? Let's take a look at that big fear which I summarize as:

We worry about our younger kids having to make do with less time and attention from us because of the needs of our other kids.

Let's face it, our second kids come into this world and we can feel like we've failed right out of the gate. Those blissful moments of just connecting and getting to know each other are immediately interrupted by our other child who is wanting to be just as much a part. When my daughter was born and had her regular wakes in the middle of the night, I would relish the time on the sofa as she nursed and looked around and I went through *Sex and the City* over the first months of her life. It would play in the background and I would both watch and engage with her as she stared at the world around her or snuggled in for more boob. These moments were bliss.

Most of us don't get these moments with number 2 because our capacity for handling the days has decreased. We are more tired, more stressed, have more demands, and in turn the time and attention that our first-born kids have isn't available for our second. Now this isn't always the case and it depends on the family and their circumstances, but I know it's one of those fears that grips many of the families I've spoken to and worked with.

When we start out already feeling like we're less-than, it's a hard thing to overcome. And objectively, it's true that many second kids get less attention than their older sibling. There are only so many hours in a day. But there are two things we forget when we worry about our second kids not getting enough:

1. Most of the time they are absolutely getting "enough" from us. I'm not kidding. It's not like my son suffered for the lack of *only* one-on-one time because he was still getting all the cuddles, the baby-wearing, the attention that I could provide, and so much more. He also got all this from my husband when I was taking time with my daughter. It may not have been solely from me, but he was certainly getting the love and affection any baby needs.

Yes, when I sat with my daughter as a baby and watched *Sex and the City* it was lovely. But it was also amazing to have days out walking with my son watching my daughter run or scooter ahead as I wore him and chatted about all we saw. It wasn't purely one-on-one, but I don't believe for a second *that* somehow left him lacking in the attention or love department.

Now sometimes there are cases where we can feel particularly stressed about what our youngest are getting or missing, as when older kids have special needs or there are extenuating circumstances. We will get to this in Week 4 so please know I'm not ignoring this, but rather saving it for a whole section unto itself.

2. There's a whole other relationship that our second kids can benefit from - the older sibling. What our youngest kids may miss out on with us I do believe they can gain in spades with the sibling relationship. When we lack sibling rivalry and our kids get along, there is a *massive* benefit to our youngest kids. After all, children learn best from kids that are older than them,

Week 1: Welcome to the World of Guilt

they have built-in playmates when they get along, and there is one more person to lavish love and affection on them (and sometimes the opposite). Overall it's arguably the first-born that has missed out.

In thinking about these issues, it brings to mind for many the importance of the sibling relationship and one of the areas many families worry about. It's not always perfect and it's not always even good, but there are things we can do to facilitate the sibling bonds we want our kids to have for life. And that is why we will be looking at it in depth next week...

Bonus Section: The Parent Relationship



One of the struggles that many families report having when they have a second child is the parent relationship. The loss of time that comes from parenting two often leaves the parent relationship as the one that suffers most, especially when you parent gently and responsively because the needs of our youngest are so intense that there's little left for anything else. As with all things, this can lead to - you guessed it - guilt. In many cases, parents wonder if they'll get back to their relationship ever and I can happily say for many, that's exactly what happens, but not always. Because of this, I think it's worth considering that there may be steps you can take to avoid that pitfall or if you're already there, steps you can take to get out of it.

The first thing to recognize is that during these early times with two, your relationship is less about the two of you *connecting* and more about the two of you *supporting* each other. That is, as much as you may want to think about having some time together, really this is the period where it's about providing whatever it is each of you needs to get through the adjustment period. This can include supporting each other with care of the eldest child, with providing outlets for each other to get sleep (or whoever needs it most), taking on other household chores to let the primary caregiver rest more, and so on. In doing this, you also hopefully express the gratitude to each other for providing these supports. When we don't get time with our partners, the ability to be grateful to them can help fill that void and keep the relationship strong.

The second thing is to realize that what is crucial now is also a shift in the relationship between your partner and the kids. If there has been one parent that has typically been the primary carer, the other will often have to take on more with the eldest and because building that relationship is crucial to everyone's mental health, the time that might be spent together really should be spent there. Sometimes the partner will take over co-sleeping with the eldest child or tending to their needs in the middle of the night. Sometimes the partner will take over responsibilities for play dates or activities. When the partner is focused on taking on a larger role with the eldest, this is not only another means of support in the early days with a new baby, but also is a natural progression in relationships. Although our kids will often favour the primary parent in the early years, it is not meant to remain that way and the other parent should take on a more central role as our kids get older. The other relationship is that

of partner and new baby. Though there may be less time, part of the earlier support issue is having the partner be able to bond with baby while you get time with your eldest.

In many families, there comes a time where there is a bit of a split, at least in the mind of the kids. One parent naturally spends more time with one child and the other parent with the other child. This isn't bad, but rather a normal way in which our time and efforts seem to align. As our kids continue to age, these relationships will shift again and the split may look different.

Now, either through time passing or effort, you do want to get back to the parent relationship taking some priority (it will always fall below your kids' *needs* until they are much older and everyone's needs become more equal). In the early days or if you're just trying to find your way out of the rut, I recommend considering the following ways to help keep your relationship on the forefront of your mind and the bond between you strong:

1. Gratitude. I said it before, but it's important, so I say it again: Say thank you to your partner daily. For keeping the kids alive, for making dinner, for doing cleaning, for picking up kids, for letting you sleep, etc. Each side needs to do this each day. The more you express gratitude, the more you will be aware of what the other has done and appreciate them in a way that builds rather than breaks your relationship during these trying times.
2. Physical affection. This one is really hard for many moms, in particular breastfeeding moms as they get very touched out by the constant need for affection from babies and older kids (especially if tandem nursing); however, our partners also have a need for physical touch and your relationship needs regular physical touch. This doesn't mean sex (though go for it if you're game), but rather taking the time - each day - to find ways to connect physically. This can be hugs, cuddles on the sofa, holding hands as you go for a walk, or even just putting your feet up on your partner when you need more space generally.
3. Talk about the future. Plan your first date for when you finally get out again. Plan trips or activities that you want to do with your partner when you have the time again. Will they all happen? Probably not, but when we discuss our future plans with our partners, we are making it clear we're in this for the long run (a good sign) and that there will be the time at the end. If we don't know when something is going to end, it can feel a lot more stressful to go through, but planning for the future gives us something good (relationship-wise) to think about when our relationships can feel stressed. Not only that, but it also keeps those future plans on the forefront of our minds so that when you do get the opportunity, you don't forget about it.
4. Be flexible. Often we have this idea that dates and time with our partner has to be a certain way. We may expect dates to be in the evening, sex to be in the bedroom, and so on. If you aren't flexible, you may not get back to prioritizing your relationship for many years. However, if you are flexible, you can find the ways to sneak that time in that helps keep that relationship a priority, even if lower on the totem pole. Some ways to be flexible:
 - Daytime dates. If your kids are comfortable with someone during the day but need you at night, then consider going out during the day together.

Week 1: Welcome to the World of Guilt

- Bring baby. If you can't leave baby yet (reasonable, especially if breastfeeding), leave the eldest with someone they love and go out with baby there too.
- Sex elsewhere. If you're up for it and have the time, do it somewhere else. The bathroom, living room, den, who cares, just enjoy yourselves when/if you can.
- Driving dates. If you need to, get in the car, grab a coffee and drive around to chat with baby in the back. You may not get anywhere but you can talk and catch up and this works well if your baby is one who likes the car (not so well if not).

At the end of the day, if you prioritize your relationship now, you will be able to get it back. You just need to have the right expectations and the time to get to where it's all possible.

This is the end of Parenting Two - Week 1 - Welcome to the World of Guilt. I will see you next week as we delve into that mysterious thing that is the sibling relationship.