

WHY
CHICKEN NUGGETS
ARE BETTER
THAN PROZAC

*AND OTHER OBSERVATIONS FROM AN
OVER-CAFFEINATED DAD*

Kirk Enright

Verbal Rebellion
Seattle

Copyright © Kirk Enright

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior permission of the author.

ISBN: 1-4392-5810-4

To order additional copies, please contact us.

BookSurge
www.booksurge.com
1.866.308.6235
orders@booksurge.com

CONTENTS

Why chicken nuggets are better than Prozac	6
It's never too early to teach kids about "tact"	8
The family road trip: <i>then vs. now</i>	9
Medium-bodied with notes of blackberry and bullshit	11
Scenes from marriage, No. 1	13
Hell is the 8-hour service window	14
Meltdowns	16
Addendum to "Meltdowns"	18
Observations on the morning drop-off, Pt. 1	19
Observations on the morning drop-off, Pt. 2	21
Fines and punishments for drop-off violations	22
How can you lose a house?	23
Don't manage your anger, exploit it.	24
How do you know if you're really invited?	25
Pre-school health policies explained	26
Your barista, your friend?	28
Foreclosure etiquette	30
"Oh, so that's why Billy is taking so much Ritalin!"	32
When kids ask uncomfortable questions	33
The return of Rob and Laura Petrie	36
When pre-schoolers learn to rhyme	37
"But that's not fair!"	38
Scenes from marriage, No. 2	40
Putting the "fun" in school fundraisers	41
What other parents really mean	45
Movies from your childhood you won't want your kids to watch	46
What do you say to would-be parents?	50
Porn, but not <i>that</i> kind of porn	53

Sticks and stones...	55
Scenes from marriage, No. 3	56
Better to bend than (spring) break	58
How do you explain St. Patrick's Day to a kid?	59
"So it's okay to lie to the school?"	60
Fees	62
Mother's Day is...	67
How much kids really cost	68
When your first company picnic is your last	69
Anatomy of a credit card bill	70
Fed up	71
Scenes from marriage, No. 4	72
Family game night... <i>or nightmare?</i>	73
Trips	75
Time management tips	77
Happy Father's Day (in the middle of the night)	79
Too depressed to play with your kids?	81
Pee, poop or puke? <i>Pick one.</i>	83
Scenes from marriage, No. 5	84
How to cut back without suffering too much	85
Dirty secrets	87
When the 4th of July blows up in your face	88
To invite? Or not to invite?	90
Observations on the DMV	91
Oprah's (im)practical guide to getting more sleep	93
Observations on "back-to-school" supplies	96
How to explain the economic crisis to your kids	97
Optimism is out, pessimism is in.	98
When you're exhausted...	99

@*%#!	100
When what you said as a kid becomes inappropriate	102
Global warming is no joke	104
Scenes from marriage, No. 6	106
More ways to cut back without suffering too much	107
Don't want to overeat? Go vegan.	109
Things...	110
Washing their mouths out with virtual soap	111
Green with green envy	112
X marks the spot (on their face)	113
Toddler or puppy?	114
What to do if your kids reject your politics	116
Camera shy at the DMV	118
TiVo guilt? What's TiVo guilt?	120
For the 10th time NO!	121
Making a list, checking it twice	122
The scale doesn't lie, but it should do a better job explaining itself	123
Simple things toddlers make difficult	125
Baking with kids	126
Rudolph revisited	127
Little irritations: the paper cuts of everyday life	128
When kids do exactly what they're told	131
How much do you love your dog?	132
Working from home	134
The other 12 Days of Christmas	136
TV Blues	140
Scenes from marriage, No. 7	141
Crappy New Year	142
Realistic New Year's resolutions	143

WHY CHICKEN NUGGETS ARE BETTER THAN PROZAC

Nobody said parenting would be easy, but that's why God (and McDonald's) created Happy Meals: nothing gives you that brief moment of inner-peace and contentment you need to maintain your fingertip-hold on sanity like a colorful cardboard box with some food and a plastic gender-specific toy inside – anytime, anywhere, for any reason, all without a prescription.

Kids fighting over the XBOX? Sure, you could sit down and explain why it's important they respect each other and learn to work things out, or you could just say "If you stop fighting I'll take you to McDonald's."

Same thing with motivating your kids to get their homework done. Or playing with their annoying younger sibling. Or cheering up. Or not causing trouble in the backseat on the way to Target.

Because when kids are happy and content, parents are happy and content. Name 80 mg. of anything you could get at the doctor that does that?

PARENT: I need a prescription for Prozac.

DOCTOR: Why?

PARENT: My kids are driving me crazy.

DOCTOR: Prozac won't help.

PARENT: Paxil?

DOCTOR: No.

PARENT: Zoloft?

DOCTOR: No.

PARENT: Celexa? Cymbalta? Wellbutrin?

DOCTOR: No. No. And no.

PARENT: C'mon, there's got to be something!

DOCTOR: I could prescribe sedatives, but there is one problem.

PARENT: What?

DOCTOR: Kids won't usually take them.

Not that Happy Meals are perfect; they exceed the recommended daily allowance for saturated fat, salt, and just about everything else you're not sup-

posed to have too much of, but that's only a concern if you think of Happy Meals as food: if you think of them as medication, they're side-effect free.

(Just watch one hour of prime time and you'll see drug commercials that warn about bloating, headaches, nausea, constipation, stomach cramps, muscle pain, muscle weakness, fever, dry mouth, bloodshot eyes, involuntary spasms, double-vision and painful erections lasting more than four hours – Happy Meals don't cause any of these.)

The downside to Happy Meals is they're so nutritionally-challenged they're likely to make kids fat.

But while childhood obesity is nothing to take lightly, neither is psychological health and well-being – and isn't it better for kids to carry a few extra pounds than carry repressed memories of their parents being so stressed out and overwhelmed all the time the only thing they ever did was yell and scream?

There are other ways to take the stress out of parenting, of course, but while previous generations relied on the stick, today's caregivers are clearly more comfortable with the carrot – especially when it's breaded, deep-fried and shaped like a nugget.

(Even vegans, who could use actual carrots for the carrot, choose breaded, deep-fried tofu-ken nuggets.)

If there's any real problem with Happy Meals it's the fact that you have to get them from McDonald's, which means half the time you'll get boy toys instead of girl toys, or BBQ sauce instead of ranch, or a cheeseburger instead of a hamburger, or one of those awful, healthy sides instead of french fries. And you won't realize it until you're 10 miles away.

And then not even a Happy Meal is powerful enough to neuter the irritation and frustration that follows.

[WHY CHICKEN NUGGETS ARE BETTER THAN PROZAC]

IT'S NEVER TOO EARLY TO TEACH KIDS "TACT"

4-YEAR-OLD: Is that woman fat?

PARENT: What woman?

4-YEAR-OLD: That woman over there.

PARENT: No, she's fine. *And don't say that kind of thing so loudly.*

4-YEAR-OLD: She looks fat to me.

PARENT: She's not.

4-YEAR-OLD: She's bigger than Mommy, isn't she?

PARENT: Yes.

4-YEAR-OLD: When Mommy looks in the mirror, she says "I'm fat!" So if that woman is bigger than Mommy, then she's fat, right?

PARENT: Look... nobody is fat. Mommy isn't fat. That woman isn't fat.

Nobody is fat. Now... *LET'S TALK ABOUT THIS LATER!*

4-YEAR-OLD: Why?

PARENT: Because.

4-YEAR-OLD: Because why?

PARENT: Because it's not nice to say that about people in public.

4-YEAR-OLD: Why? Don't they know they're fat?

PARENT: I'm sure they know, but sometimes people are self-conscious about their weight because they think other people will look down on them.

4-YEAR-OLD: I won't look down on them. I don't care if they're fat.

PARENT: That's good.

4-YEAR-OLD: Do you think I should go over and tell that woman I don't care if she's fat?

PARENT: No!

4-YEAR-OLD: But then she won't be self-conscious!

PARENT: Too late.

4-YEAR-OLD: Why?

PARENT: See the way she's staring at us? *I think she heard everything we just said.*

4-YEAR-OLD: Hey! Doesn't she know it's not polite to stare?

THE FAMILY ROAD TRIP: THEN VS. NOW

- Nobody wore seatbelts. Babies, infants and toddlers sat on mom's lap in the front seat; the older kids argued over who got to lie on a sleeping bag in the back of the station wagon.
- If you were good, you got to stop at A&W. Otherwise, you ate bologna sandwiches wrapped in wax paper.
- Dad spent most of the trip trying to tune in an AM station that was carrying the game. The signal would come in strong for a while then fade. Sometimes there was no signal at all.
- If you were too loud, your mom would say you were distracting your father, and then eventually he would just reach back and smack whoever was closest in the head, even if they were the one kid being quiet.
- This was one of the reasons the middle seat was the worst place to sit.
- Your station wagon got eight miles to the gallon, but you probably didn't know that because nobody cared.
- If you were lucky enough to have air conditioning, you couldn't use it on long trips because your dad said the car would overheat.
- If you felt car sick, you were supposed to stick your head out the window.
- "He who smelt it, dealt it."
- Dad would only stop for gas or Stuckey's, so mom kept a pee jar under the front seat just in case you couldn't hold it.
- When you passed a truck, you would raise your fist and gesture for the driver to blow his air horn.

[CONTINUED]

- If your dad had a CB radio, he would listen to it to find out where the speed traps were. If not, he would try to follow a truck.
- When another car passed you, a kid in the back seat would sometimes pull down his pants and stick his butt out at you. When this happened, you would say "Looks like the moon's out early tonight."
- Sometimes it was a full-moon, other times it was just a half-moon.
- After driving for six or eight hours, mom and dad would stop at a bar for a drink. They would leave you in the car in the parking lot to wait. After 45 minutes or so, they would come back out, get in the car and then drive for two or three more hours to a Holiday Inn.
- You drove because flying was a luxury.
- You spent 1/3 of your vacation going to your destination, 1/3 at your destination, and 1/3 driving back from the destination.
- If it was Spring Break, the destination was Florida or Arizona. If it was summer, you would go to a cabin in the mountains or by a lake or on the river.
- For reasons that defy logic, you have fond memories of these family trips and think it would be fun to do something like that now.
- Luckily, your spouse remember how awful these trips really were and says "No."

MEDIUM-BODIED WITH NOTES OF BLACKBERRY AND BULLSHIT

Is there really a difference between a Romanée-Conti and a bottle of Manischewitz? Probably, but according to research by Stanford and The California Institute of Technology, just raising the price of Manischewitz a thousand dollars would make it taste better.

A group of scientists – who clearly have way, way too much time on their hands – mapped the brains of people while they tasted wines to see how much their pleasure centers would light up. It turns out that even when two wines were identical, the one people were told was more expensive produced considerably more brain activity, meaning they liked it better.

While this is somewhat surprising, it also makes sense in an Emperor's New Clothes kind of way, and can probably be generalized to all experiences.

Meaning that if you're planning, for example, on getting your wife a diamond ring for her birthday, forget it and just order a cubic zirconia from the Shop-At-Home Network and stick it in a Tiffany's box:

WIFE: Is this what I think it is?

HUSBAND: It's just my way of saying "Happy Birthday."

WIFE: Wow. It must've cost a fortune.

HUSBAND: It doesn't matter what it cost. What's important is the look on your face right now — *that's priceless*.

Or if your husband's snobby wine friends are coming to dinner, just decant a bottle of Two Buck Chuck and tell them it's a rare first-growth Bordeaux. They'll marvel at the complexity and say they can really taste the "terroir," at which point you can say "Terroir is bullshit! — *at least that's what Malcom Gluck says.*"

[CONTINUED]

Not only will you have dropped the name of a wine expert wine snobs love to hate, you'll be 100% correct.

And then you can push things even farther and bring out that can of Spam® they brought as a gag gift last time they came over and tell them it's imported patè.

Best of all, while this kind of sneaky, deceitful behavior might have made you feel guilty in the past, you can now feel good about yourself because you're actually giving everyone a better experience. And what could be wrong with that?

SCENES FROM MARRIAGE,
NO. 1

WIFE: My mom says she'll watch the kids.

HUSBAND: When?

WIFE: Tonight if we want.

HUSBAND: You wanna try and go out?

WIFE: Sure. Any movies playing?

HUSBAND: There's that new action blockbuster.

WIFE: Ha. Ha. Ha. *And nothing subtitled, either. I'm too tired to read.*

HUSBAND: What about dinner?

WIFE: I'm still doing that cleanse diet. We could get a drink?

HUSBAND: If I get a drink I'll fall asleep.

WIFE: Me too.

HUSBAND: Coffee?

WIFE: Then I won't sleep when we get home.

HUSBAND: I gotta get up early and take the kids to baseball, anyway. You wanna just skip it?

WIFE: It's up to you.

HUSBAND: I'm okay with staying in if you are.

WIFE: That's fine.

HUSBAND: But let's definitely try to go out next weekend.

WIFE: Definitely. I'll just call my mom and tell her "Thanks but no thanks."

HUSBAND: I'll check to see if there's anything on pay-per-view.

WIFE: If I fall asleep on the couch, make sure you wake me up before you go to bed.

And still we complain we never get the chance to go out.

HELL IS THE 8-HOUR SERVICE WINDOW

1. Appliance breaks.
2. Appliance store where appliance was purchased less than six months ago says you have to call the manufacturer.
3. Manufacturer's 1-800 operator says "I've never heard of that happening before," transfers call to the service department.
4. Service department says they can fix appliance, but not until next Tuesday.
5. Husband starts yelling at service department.
6. Wife takes over.
7. Wife calmly listens as service department says they'll call Monday night to confirm that the serviceman is scheduled for Tuesday.
8. Service department calls on Monday and says the serviceman will arrive on Tuesday sometime between 8 am and 5 pm.
9. Wife starts yelling at service department.
10. Husband eggs her on.
11. Service department offers to reschedule but husband and wife realize this will only make things worse.
12. Serviceman arrives Tuesday at 4:43, stays for 20 minutes and says he needs to order a part from the parts department.

13. Parts department says the part can't ship until next week.
14. Sensing tension in the room, serviceman says husband and wife don't need to make another appointment and that they can install the part themselves.
15. Husband shakes his head in disbelief.
16. Wife says "fine."
17. Serviceman heads for the door and then, at the last minute, turns and says "Of course, one of you will need to be here to sign for the part."
18. Husband goes for his throat.
19. Wife grabs her 8-iron and beats him until he's unconscious.
20. Both string the serviceman's body from a telephone pole outside the house as a warning to service departments, cable companies and deliverymen everywhere never to give an 8-hour window and then show up during the last 15 minutes without being able to fix the problem.

MELTDOWNS

No age group is immune to meltdowns, with even teenagers releasing their inner Linda Blair every now and then.

If you're lucky, these unprovoked, uncontrollable eruptions occur in the privacy of your own home at the exact moment a parade of siren-wailing fire trucks, ambulances and police cars passes by, so there's absolutely no chance the neighbors can hear anything and report you to the Department of Child and Family Services.

(And if you're really lucky, you're the parent of the one out of 1,000,000,000 kids who just don't melt down. Ever. And not because they're medicated all the time, either.)

Still, some places are worse for meltdowns than others:

Church

God won't care, thankfully, but some of the parishioners sure will. And even though you are in a place of compassion and forgiveness, always remember that none of it will be directed at you if you can't keep your kid quiet during the sermon.

Chuck E. Cheese

It's only bad if your kid is the one who sets off the chain reaction of temper tantrums. And if that happens, get out of there fast.

At home, the minute before the new babysitter arrives

Because even if you manage to calm your kid down, you'll clutch your cell phone the entire time you're out, waiting for the babysitter's exasperated call, making it all but impossible to enjoy the play, movie, dinner, etc. (And if you

don't calm your kid down, you're not going anywhere. Ever. Because now you've scared off the last babysitter in your neighborhood.)

Upscale, urban supermarkets

None of those people looking at you with disgust have kids, so none of them realize you're about as responsible for a meltdown as you are for an earthquake.

School

If you can't get your child out before things get really ugly, count on the fact that from now on, any time your child has trouble paying attention, or doesn't understand an assignment, or gets in even the slightest amount of trouble, the teacher will assume it's because you're a crappy parent.

Around old people

Not because there's anything wrong with old people in general – most are understanding, even indulgent when it comes to kids – but there are two sub-groups you can't always avoid: those who never had kids and hate the fact that part of their taxes go to educate "your" dirty, greasy, uncontrollable monsters, and the "spare the rod and spoil the child" types who look at you like you're weak for not just hauling off and smacking your kid across the face when he or she gets out of line. Sadly, both groups seem to go out of their way to let you know how they feel.

Somebody else's birthday party

This is especially bad if the meltdown coincides with the opening of presents and all the other parents can hear your kid wailing about the fact that the birthday boy or girl is getting lots of cool stuff and your kid isn't.

ADDENDUM TO “MELTDOWNS”

As awful as it is when your kid has a meltdown, another kid's meltdown can be among the more satisfying of parental experiences.

All you have to do to feel really good about yourself is throw meltee's mom or dad an empathetic look that says *“Hang in there, compadre, and don't focus on the fact that everybody in the entire food court is staring at you like you're the worst parent in the history of parenting. Focus instead on the terrific way my kid is behaving and let his or her pleasant and well-behaved exceptionalness remind you that your kid will soon return to his or her normal behavioral state, and within a few weeks even the most shocked and horrified of the bystanders will have forgotten what you look like, at which point it will be safe to return to the mall, where – if you're lucky – you will find yourself standing where I am now, offering a look of encouragement and compassion to somebody who most definitely needs it.”*

OBSERVATIONS ON THE MORNING DROP-OFF, PT. 1

- Before 9 am, nobody is polite.
- If you leave early, something will happen that will make you late – an accident, road construction, freak snow storm, broken water main, etc.
- If you leave really, really early because you expect something will happen to make you late, it won't. But then you will be so early, you'll have to wait anyway because the crossing guards, door openers, teachers monitoring the playground and/or sidewalks will be late.
- The minute after you start screaming and yelling at your kids (for no reason other than you're tired), you will realize the driver in the next car over who's looking at you like you're the worst parent in the world is the principal.
- You can always tell the parents who got a good night's sleep from the ones who were up all night, unless you were one of the parents who was up all night, in which case you can't really tell anything.
- Some parents take their time in the morning and you hate them for it.
- Some parents take their time in the morning and you are inspired by them, even if you have no idea how you could ever be patient and relaxed at this hour.
- When your kid says "I have to go to the bathroom" two blocks from school and you say "just hold it 'til we get there," half the time they won't be able to and the other half the time they won't be able to because going those last two block will take 25 minutes thanks to sewer maintenance.
- If there is a convenient, quick, easy place to stop and get coffee on the way to the drop-off, it will close just when you come to depend on it.

[CONTINUED]

- Even if you stop in the drop-off lane because your child has just thrown up all over the backseat, the car behind you will honk and/or flip you off.
- The only thing worse than being late is being late on a day when the principal is standing on the sidewalk opening doors.
- If four parents come to an intersection at the exact same time, the one with the most kids will go first.
- When you see a parent juggling a dog, a double-stroller, a cell phone and a coffee cup, watch out, because they aren't.
- When you see a parent juggling a dog, a double-stroller, a cell phone, a coffee cup and a 5-year-old, get your Handicam out because you're about to witness an "America's Funniest Home Video."
- For some kids, being a crossing guard is their first taste of power, so don't give them an excuse to flaunt it.
- For some kids, being a crossing guard is their last taste of power, which explains why so many will need therapy later.
- Your SUV may look like a school bus, handle like a school bus, and be as big as a school bus, but it's not a school bus. Which means that empty stretch of curb conveniently located directly in front of the school's main doors is off limits until the big, bright, yellow sign that reads "School Buses Only 7 am to 10 am" gets removed (during the day, by workers from the Department of Transportation, not at night by a couple of dads with a hack saw and a crow bar).

OBSERVATIONS ON THE MORNING DROP-OFF, PT. 2

- All schools have a very specific procedure for dropping off kids in the morning.
- Some parents don't realize this.
- Some parents realize this, but don't actually know what the official procedure is.
- Some parents realize this, but don't care.
- The more complicated the procedure, the more likely it is to change.
- The more complicated the procedure, the more likely it is to be written down, but since it will have been written by the same people who write those bizarre standardized testing story-problems, it won't make any sense.
- The more time you spend trying to understand the procedure, the less time some other parent at the school will spend trying to understand the problem, thus maintaining equilibrium and ensuring that the drop-off will never, ever go smoothly.
- Parents who don't follow the drop-off procedure always think they have a good excuse, but they don't: "I'm running late" isn't a good excuse, "I drive a Mini so I'm not really getting in anyone's way" isn't a good excuse, "I haven't had my coffee yet" isn't a good excuse, "It's just this one time" isn't a good excuse, "I forgot" isn't a good excuse, "I've read the procedure a hundred times but I just don't understand it" isn't a good excuse, "My wife usually drops the kids off" isn't a good excuse, and "the person in front of me did the same thing" isn't a good excuse.
- Saying "sorry" doesn't help, but it's better than giving somebody the finger.

FINES AND PUNISHMENTS FOR DROP-OFF VIOLATIONS

You'd think dropping your kid off at school in the morning would be easy, but it's not. There is a specific procedure that you and everyone else is expected to follow, regardless of how illogical (or illegal) it seems, because when you do, there is (in theory) less chaos.

The problem is that some parents don't. Ever. Which is why these insurgents should be fined and/or punished:

1. Parents who let their kids off at the corner instead of at the designated "drop-off zone" should be fined \$100.
2. Parents who linger in the drop-off lane after dropping their kids off to talk to parents walking their kids to school should be fined \$150.
3. Parents who linger in the drop-off lane to talk to *other* parents lingering in the drop-off lane should also be fined \$150, but they should be forced to come early the next day to personally apologize to every single other driver, too, and the other drivers should be able to throw food at them.
4. Parents who pull out, stop, and then back up because "my son forgot his lunch" should be forced to display a bumper sticker that reads "My child goes to Ronald Reagan Elementary, but not for long if I keep driving like an idiot."
5. Parents who park in the drop-off lane and run inside the school for any reason should have their cars impounded for 30 days.
6. Parents who enter the drop-off lane from the wrong direction should have their cars impounded for 30 days and then sold at public auction, with the proceeds going to buy new library books.
7. Parents who screw anything else up should be sent to the principal's office.

HOW CAN YOU LOSE A HOUSE?

KID: How can you lose a house?

PARENT: What?

KID: How can you lose something as big as a house?

PARENT: No, you can't really lose a house. When people say that they don't mean "lose" like when you lose your shoes or a DVD case, they mean they're going to have to give the house back to the bank.

KID: Why does the bank get it?

PARENT: Well... when people buy a house, they go to a bank and borrow the money they need to pay for it.

KID: Oh.

PARENT: So even though they live in the house, it's technically "owned" by the bank until they pay the money back.

KID: Did we borrow money to pay for our house?

PARENT: Yes.

KID: So then it's technically "owned" by the bank, too, until we pay them back?

PARENT: It is.

KID: Awesome. *Do we have any orange paint?*

PARENT: Why?

KID: 'cause even though Mom won't let me paint my room orange, I bet the bank would since that's one of their colors.

DON'T MANAGE YOUR ANGER, EXPLOIT IT

When characters in cartoons get angry, smoke comes out of their ears, their heads explode or they undergo instantaneous genetic mutations that turn them into aliens, gigantic, green-skinned freaks, uncontrollable ninja-warriors, ghost-demons, magical giants, etc.

While young kids believe this kind of thing is possible in real life, older kids eventually learn it's not.

Or is it?

As bad as it can be for a parent to have a massive, screaming, meltdown – something that happens to everyone eventually, thanks to too little sleep, too much caffeine, and a child with bad timing – allowing your offspring to glimpse “the monster inside” can ultimately be good, because if you play it right they'll wonder if maybe, just maybe, you might turn into some kind of mutant humanoid if they really, really piss you off.

All you have to do – and this is probably harder than it seems – is let your rage build almost to the breaking-point but then suddenly stop, turn, and walk briskly to the kitchen, hall closet, laundry room, etc. and grab the unlabelled bottle of vodka you keep hidden in there “just in case.” Pour yourself a shot, and then just before you knock it back, check to make sure your kids are close enough to “accidentally” overhear you as you say something like “That was close. *Too close.* I was able to stop the transformation this time, thanks to the antidote, but if something like that happens again, who knows. When the kids are older I'll tell them the truth, but for now, it's got to be my secret.”

If you're lucky, the next time they decide to have an indoor water fight or shave the dog, they'll maybe – just maybe – think twice.

(Although probably not.)

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU'RE REALLY INVITED?

Thanks to voicemail, caller ID, certified mail, e-mail tracking, and online invitation services that tell you if an invitation was sent, received and responded to, it's hard to run into somebody who didn't invite you to something (regardless of whether or not you would have gone) and believe them when they say you "weren't home" when they called, or that the e-mail invitation they sent "must've been flagged by your spam filter and trashed."

Which means you often get a courtesy invite to things your would-be host doesn't really want you to attend. But how can you tell?

It's safe to assume that you're not *really* invited if:

- the invitation has your address but somebody else's name
- you're suddenly cc'd on an e-mail invitation that goes back nine weeks and has 57 responses from everybody in the neighborhood except you
- you call to RSVP and they say "Oh... um... er... okay"
- your invitation arrives the day after you ran into the host at the liquor store buying enough beer, wine and margarita mix for 300 people
- your invitation arrives with no postmark three days after the RSVP cut-off and you swear you just saw the host speeding away from your mailbox
- the host calls the morning of the party and casually mentions it's "adults only" (because let's face it, even non-parents know you'd have a better chance of winning the lottery than finding a sober, responsible babysitter with less than two day's notice)
- your kids "swear" their friends "promise" their mom and dad "said" you could come "for reals"

PRE-SCHOOL HEALTH POLICIES EXPLAINED

1. If your child is running a fever, your child will be sent home.
2. If your child is vomiting, your child will be sent home.
3. If your child is sneezing anything yellow or green, your child will be sent home.
4. If your child "isn't acting like himself," your child will be sent home.
5. If your child "looks like" he's getting sick, your child will be sent home (even if he's not sneezing, coughing or vomiting).
6. If another child is sick but that child's parents can't be reached, your child will be sent home.
7. If your child is fine but three or more other children in the same class get sent home, your child will be sent home.
8. If another child coughs and sneezes on your child, your child will be sent home.
9. If you have a meeting or appointment you absolutely can't miss, your child will be sent home.
10. If your child is tired and cranky, your child will be sent home.
11. If the teacher is tired and cranky, your child will be sent home.
12. If you don't conceal your dislike for your child's teacher because they're tired and cranky all the time, your child will be sent home.

13. If you usually rely on your parents to watch your child when your child is sick and they go out of town, your child will be sent home.
14. If you came promptly to pick up your child the last time your child was sent home, your child will be sent home.
15. Once your child has been sent home, your child must stay home for a minimum of either 48 hours from the onset of the first symptom, or 24 hours after the last symptom subsides, whichever is more inconvenient.

YOUR BARISTA, YOUR FRIEND?

Like many adults, even when you get up too early, you are already running late. So that by the time you get showered, get dressed, get the kids ready, get in the car, get the kids to school and get to Starbucks, you have used up what little energy you began the day with and what you really want is your venti extra-shot latte.

Now.

In the old days, intimidating baristas would roll their eyes at anyone who ordered wrong – a “vanilla sugar-free grande triple latte” instead of a “triple grande sugar-free vanilla latte” – and then make them feel so bad the poor, ignorant soul would take their drink and slink away in shame, silently vowing to avoid such humiliation tomorrow by going somewhere else and leaving Starbucks to the serious caffeine addicts.

But now that even McDonald’s has gotten into the espresso business, Starbucks has responded by – shock of all shocks – being nice, *even accommodating*.

It’s the “Hold the pickle, hold the lettuce, special orders don’t upset us” approach, without the catchy jingle:

*“Make it no foam
or sugar free
whatever you want
we’ll serve with glee
our stock is down
so we can’t be
snobs anymore.”*

Which means all the people who used to stay away from Starbucks because they were afraid of being yelled at are now standing in line right in front of you,

asking what the difference between a misto and an americano is and trying to decide if they'd like to try Starbucks new Breakfast Burrito Latte.

Worse, the baristas are not just being polite to them, they're being friendly. Which means that in addition to wanting to know exactly how they can make the customer's drink exactly the way they'd like it, they want to know how their day is, what kind of plans they have, how their family is, etc.

And when you finally get to the front of the line, they want to know that about you, too.

Except at 7:40 in the morning, after having been up all night with, say, a vomiting toddler or because your teen decided to sneak out and "go to the party anyway," you don't want to be friendly to anyone – not your kids, not your spouse, not your neighbors and certainly not your barista.

But as much as you want to respond to "How's your day going so far?" by saying "It would be a lot better if I didn't have to wait in line for 25 minutes to get a cup of coffee," you don't because there's always a chance the barista will get even with you by substituting decaf for the five shots of pure espresso you need to wake up.

Because whether it's crack cocaine or caffeine, addicts will do anything to get their fix – even smile and be chatty.

FORECLOSURE ETIQUETTE

1. No gloating.
2. If you must ridicule your neighbors for being stupid enough to get an adjustable rate mortgage, do so in private.
3. And before you ridicule your neighbors in private for being stupid enough to get an adjustable rate mortgage, check your own mortgage to make sure you didn't do the exact same thing.
4. Keep in mind that while neighbors should try to help each other out in times of trouble, this does not mean you should offer to buy their almost-new home theater set-up for 10 cents on the dollar. (Unless they are moving out of the area, in which case, go for it.)
5. To get back any tools, toys or lawn furniture you've loaned them, take the indirect approach. Start by saying, "Oh, say, did we ever return that lawn aerator we borrowed? We should both probably check our garages, just to make sure nothing gets left behind."
6. Don't drop off a tuna casserole. They are not infirmed.
7. Do bring liquor.
8. If you're so inclined, pray (*for them*, not that the same thing won't happen to you).
9. If your kids ask you why the neighbors are losing their house, just say "They're not losing their house – it's right there where it's always been." And then tell them to get ready for bed before they ask a lot of questions that even the world's foremost economists couldn't fully explain.

10. If anyone from outside the neighborhood asks what happened, lie and tell them the neighbors are trading up, relocating for business, downsizing and moving to a small town in Ohio, getting divorced, etc. – anything but the fact they're being foreclosed on, as that information could have a negative effect on property values.
11. Always remember that it could just as easily have been you.
12. And still might be.

**“OH, SO THAT’S WHY BILLY IS
TAKING SO MUCH RITALIN.”**

According to a recent research study, one in five adults who responded to a survey admitted to using Ritalin or Adderall to boost their brain power.

When asked where they got the drugs, most just mumbled and said “I can’t remember,” but speculation is they simply raided their kids’ medicine cabinet. And while this clearly breaches the bonds of trust between parent and child, when you consider how often kids raid their parents’ liquor cabinet, it seems only fair.

WHEN KIDS ASK UNCOMFORTABLE QUESTIONS

What's sex? Did you take drugs in college? Why did you vote for George W. Bush the second time?

Take a cue from politicians, their press secretaries and the so-called "bi-partisan" pundits you see on TV and use these simple strategies for *answering without answering*:

1. Give a detailed, thoughtful response, just not to the question they ask.

Campaigning politicians are particularly good at this, and the trick is to remember that your answer can be anything, just as long as you can loosely relate it to the original question.

For example, if asked about drugs, begin by saying "*I'm glad you asked me about smoking pot in college...*," which makes it sound like you're going to admit that for most of your sophomore year your best friend was your bong, but then say "*...because I think it's important that we be open and honest with each other, especially now that you're older and starting to ask hard questions. It seems like only yesterday when the most important thing on your mind was which Power Ranger you wanted to dress up as, or if a certain Pokemon could beat a certain other kind of Pokemon. I have to admit that watching you grow up has been one of the most satisfying experiences of my life, and I look forward to helping you continue on that journey towards adulthood by providing you with the information and insight I myself have gained over the years...*"

If you haven't lost them by then, just keep talking.

2. Focus on "the larger issue."

Which can be pretty much anything you want it to be.

[CONTINUED]

3. Ask your kids what they think the answer is.

Also known as the therapist approach.

This works well for things you don't really know how to explain, but not-so-well for things you're just not comfortable talking about.

4. Lie.

Time was that people who didn't tell the truth were called liars and they were looked down upon, but thanks to all the CEO's, athletes, politicians and celebrities who've been caught with their pants down (or off, or filled with drugs, etc.) those days seem to be over.

The best thing about this approach is that if your lie is later exposed, you can claim you just "misspoke." As in *"Yes, I can see how my response to the question 'Did I vote for George W. Bush?' might have been confusing, because when I said 'No,' I actually misspoke. In point of fact – and because it's important to me that the record accurately reflect my views – I didn't mean 'No' in the traditional sense of the word, and I can see now how my incorrect use of that word might have been somewhat misleading, because what I, in fact, meant was that I felt that in light of the specific challenges facing the President at that time, it was important for me – and really, all of us as a nation – to remain united and strong, and because of that, I did my duty as an American by going to the polls and casting a ballot so my voice could be heard, and even though that ballot was nominally in the affirmative, it was really more a show of support for the country as a whole than a specific endorsement of any one candidate. I voted because it's the duty of every citizen to vote, and for that I will never apologize."*

5. Use a spokesperson.

Either a hired professional or your spouse, if he or she has the BS skills required.

This has the added benefit of distancing you from your answer, whatever that might be.

Plus, if you are later confronted about the answer your spokesperson gave on your behalf, you can say you didn't actually mean whatever it was they said and that you must have been "quoted out of context."

THE RETURN OF ROB AND LAURA PETRIE?

Network censors demanded separate beds for “The Dick Van Dyke Show” because they felt it was inappropriate for the married couple portrayed by Dick Van Dyke and Mary Tyler Moore to sleep together.

(Raising the question of exactly how son Richie came about, but never addressing it.)

It seemed silly at the time, and even more silly when the 70s hit and the sexual revolution took hold, but now more and more couples are starting to think “Hey, maybe those network censors had it right after all!”

According to experts, the main benefit of a couple having separate bedrooms is they both get more sleep because neither gets awakened by the other’s snoring... getting up every hour to pee... tossing and turning... general inability to tip-toe... and so on.

On the negative side... well... *when you’re getting more sleep, is there really anything negative?*

Note: While there is concern that separate bedrooms could impact intimacy and romance, that’s only for couples without children, as couples with children almost certainly gave those up shortly after their first child was conceived, and now fully embrace the idea of separate bedrooms if for no other reason than when you both sleep in the same bed, *both* of you wind up with no room to move around when your kids file in after dark because they had a bad dream or heard something scary in the closet.

WHEN PRE-SCHOOLERS LEARN TO RHYME

PRE-SCHOOLER: Hit. Bit. Fit. Shit. Hit. Bit. Fit. Shit.

DAD: What?

MOM: Did he just say what I think he said?

PRE-SCHOOLER: Hit. Bit. Fit. Shit.

MOM: Sweetie, you shouldn't say that.

PRE-SCHOOLER: Say what?

DAD: That word.

MOM: Especially around Grandma – *God knows she thinks I'm a bad enough parent as it is.*

PRE-SCHOOLER: What word? Hit? Bit? Fit? Shit?

DAD: That's enough.

MOM: How are we gonna tell him *not* to say S-H-I-T without saying S-H-I-T?

DAD: Why don't you make a different rhyme?

PRE-SCHOOLER: Mass. Class. Bass. Ass.

MOM: I have a better idea. Have a seat and let's talk about this. See, there are some words you can't say out loud.

PRE-SCHOOLER: Why?

MOM: Because they're bad words.

PRE-SCHOOLER: Why are they bad? Did they do something to get in trouble, like leave their toys in the hallway?

MOM: No, the words didn't do anything, they're just bad.

DAD: And if you say them you'll get in trouble.

PRE-SCHOOLER: Why are you using your angry voice?

MOM: Daddy's not using his angry voice. He's just trying to tell you there are some words that are bad and good boys don't say them.

PRE-SCHOOLER: But Daddy says them when he drives us to school, and sometimes after he talks to Grandma.

MOM: Look... Let's just take a break from rhyming and you and I will go play with your fire truck.

PRE-SCHOOLER: Okay – Truck. Duck. Muck. F –

MOM & DAD: NOOOOO!

“BUT THAT’S NOT FAIR!”

Our legal system guarantees the accused a fair and speedy trial, proof of guilt “beyond reasonable doubt” and punishment that isn’t “cruel or unusual.” Fortunately, these same rights don’t extend to children — *something every parent who’s ever come home stressed, worried, angry or anxious about something else and just exploded at their kids can take comfort in.*

(As if parenting wasn’t hard enough, just imagine what it would be like if you had to be fair and reasonable every minute of every day.)

In light of that, a short, incomplete list of crimes, punishments and the real reason parents are over-reacting:

Crime: Cheetos

Punishment: brown rice, tofu and vegetables for dinner every night for the rest of the month

Real reason: mom started a new diet, has somehow gained 3.5 pounds

Crime: putting hotels on Boardwalk and Park Place just before dad lands on it

Punishment: game over, everybody sent to bed

Real reason: one of dad’s fraternity brothers just made the Forbes 400

Crime: putting hotels on Boardwalk and Park Place just before dad lands on it

Punishment: game over, everybody sent to bed, dad sits in living room drinking whiskey

Real reason: one of dad’s *brothers* just made the Forbes 400

Crime: acting like a 4-year-old

Punishment: no more Chuck E. Cheese’s, ever

Real reason: as if an hour at Chuck E. Cheese’s wasn’t bad enough, you’ve now been there for three

Crime: one sibling violates another's personal space by "not touching"

Punishment: turn car around, go home

Real reason: dad just got the taxes back from the accountant, who said "child care" wasn't deductible

Crime: answering the phone

Punishment: fined \$50

Real reason: it's fundraising season and charities are exempt from the "Do Not Call" registry

Crime: leaving a single cookie crumb on the kitchen counter

Punishment: helping clean the entire house from top to bottom, including the back yard

Real reason: mother-in-law coming, will mentally perform "white glove test" the second she arrives

Crime: getting out dad's "Stripes" DVD

Punishment: no TV for the rest of the week

Real reason: it's not really a "Stripes" DVD (wink, wink, nudge, nudge)

Crime: missing the toilet

Punishment: a good talking-to

Real reason: mom and dad spent the day cleaning up somebody else's mess at work, just can't handle doing it at home right now

Crime: not finishing food

Punishment: 20-minute lecture on how food costs a lot of money that we can't afford to be wasting right now

Real reason: employment figures released, stocks plunged, housing market dropped even lower, etc.

SCENES FROM MARRIAGE,
NO. 2

HUSBAND: Ready?

WIFE: I was waiting for you.

HUSBAND: Oh... I was waiting for you.

WIFE: Well... I'm ready.

HUSBAND: Great. Shall we go?

WIFE: Yes, let's go – *just give me five minutes.**

*When male readers were asked if they thought this joke was mildly-to-moderately amusing, 84% said "yes;" when female readers were asked the same question, 91% said "What joke? You think it's easy getting ready? We can't just hop in the shower and be done. We have to do our hair, put on our make-up, and then clean up the bathroom before we leave because men NEVER do. Do they want the babysitter to think we're slobs? And how hard is it to hang up a towel and wipe down the sink, anyway? When it comes to getting ready to go out, men are the joke — and women don't think it's funny," and the other 9% were too angry to talk.

PUTTING THE “FUN” IN SCHOOL FUNDRAISERS

Let's first acknowledge that it sucks our schools even need to have fundraisers in the first place. In an ideal world they'd all be flush with cash and competent teachers who could guarantee our kids would do so well they'd all get academic scholarships to Harvard and become doctors, lawyers or (ethical) venture capitalists.

But until that happens... *What level of Hell is the school fundraiser/auction anyway? And do we really have to subject ourselves to it?*

For as long as there have been schools there have been school fundraisers, but where we once had bake sales and carnivals we now have auctions. (Not that we could have something as simple as a bake sale or carnival today anyway, even if we wanted to, given laws that prohibit the sale of home-baked foods and liability issues that would require waivers and multi-million dollar carnival insurance policies.)

The beauty of these types of events was that you could easily sneak in and sneak out; with an auction, thanks to assigned seating and a carefully planned-out agenda, it's impossible to slip away when it gets boring or uncomfortable without being glared at – *“Oh, look at so-and-so! I can't believe they're leaving! I just knew they didn't care about their kids. What phonies!”*

To some, the most unsettling part of the school fundraiser is the gut feeling the money they donate won't ultimately benefit their offspring nearly as much as, say, using it to bribe an SAT proctor would. (Even though that might result in one of those uncomfortable conversations where they have to explain how their dumbshit kid got into Princeton while the captain of the Academic Olympic Team got rejected.)

For most, however, what makes these events so painful is the realization that after you've introduced yourself, gossiped about one of the “bad” teachers,

[CONTINUED]

and bitched about the ever-increasing amount of time you've got to spend helping your kids with their homework, you not only have nothing in common with the other parents, you don't really like them, either.

And you'll be sitting together for the entire evening, thanks to the moron who screwed up the seating.

If you're liberal, they're conservative. If you're pro-arts, they think science and math are the only things that should be taught. If you don't get involved in school politics, they're jockeying for a seat on the PTA and would really, really appreciate your support "*because, let's face it, the people running it now just don't have the right priorities.*"

And then there's their gifted and demonstrably superior kids.

If it turns out you know their son or daughter and think he/she's a selfish, spoiled, bullying, mean, dirty, dumb, disruptive, annoying little shit who might make you reconsider your position on corporal punishment (even abortion), they think he/she's an angel, and then spend the entire evening proving it to you with impressive and touching tales of his or her exploits – "*So then, for the second year in a row – which they never, ever do – the Camp Wannamakaducka counselors named our child Most Improved Camper!*"

The only positive thing is if the event is held outside of school grounds and somebody's had the foresight to include a bar, where – ideally – the drinks are free and all the "tips" go straight to the school, which means you can easily explain away your behavior in the later part of the evening by saying "*I'm not getting drunk, I'm raising extra money so the school can buy those new computers for the science lab.*"

Besides numbing you, alcohol has the added benefit of providing the night's only real amusement; near the end of the night, just as the last few items are

coming up in the live-auction, a couple of the tables near the front start to get competitive. Fueled with booze and a need to make sure everyone in the room knows that money is never an object for them, they casually trade off raising whatever the last bid was until they're the only two bidding.

The fact that they're not really sure what they're bidding on doesn't matter.

"Five hundred? Do I hear five hundred? Five hundred to the gentleman at table three."

"Six hundred!"

"Six hundred to the gentleman at table two. Do I hear seven hundred?"

"Seven hundred!"

This goes on and on until finally the guy at table three assumes the I'm-so-generous-I-can-afford-to-lose role and "lets" the guy at table two have the Women's Size 4 Suede Vest for \$4500.

This is good for the school, of course, and for a few moments the winning bidder wallows in the admiration he imagines everyone in the room is sending his way, but then the loser at table three's ego kicks in and he says – just a little too loudly – something like *"I'm glad he won. But I'm curious if he'll give the vest to his wife or to his girlfriend!"* or *"I'm glad because the school can always use the money – they just better make sure he gives 'em cash, 'cause from what I hear his checks will probably bounce."*

Proving that if it's a school function, somebody will eventually act like a child, the guy at table two jumps up when he hears this and goes after the guy from table three, saying "What's that? What did you say? You wanna step outside and say that again: this time to my face?"

[CONTINUED]

The room grows silent as all eyes focus forward (most hoping the two biggest asses in the school will have it out once and for all).

But before anything can happen, the principal does what he does on the playground every day and intervenes, separating the “boys” and then making a face-saving joke about having to send them to detention if they can’t play nice – “*and as your kids can tell you, detention sucks.*”

Shortly after that, the evening ends. The Chairperson of the Fundraising Committee takes the mic and says a few words of thanks and everybody shuffles home, surely – if reluctantly – to return next year, comforted to a degree by the fact that at least it’s all tax deductible.

WHAT OTHER PARENTS REALLY MEAN

They say: We don't eat anything that's not organic.

They mean: ...except McDonald's, KFC, Taco Bell or anyone else who gives a toy with a meal.

They say: I never spank my kids.

They mean: ...unless they talk back, won't listen, embarrass me in public or just piss me off.

They say: I only let my kids watch educational programming.

They mean: *Cinemax is educational, right?*

They say: My kids brush and floss their teeth every night without being told.

They mean: I think my kids brush and floss their teeth every night without being told, but I'm not really sure because I fall asleep on the sofa at 7:30.

They say: I never lie to my kids.

They mean: ...unless I have to.

They say: My kids are really good eaters.

They mean: ...as long as they get food they like, otherwise, just forget it.

They say: My kids are responsible.

They mean: ...for leading all the other kids in the neighborhood astray.

MOVIES FROM YOUR CHILDHOOD YOU WON'T WANT YOUR KIDS TO WATCH

“Chitty Chitty Bang Bang”

Sure, it's fun and the songs are catchy, but the bad guy's main henchman tricks kids into thinking they're getting free candy, then locks them in a jail wagon and takes them away. You could argue this provides a much-needed opportunity to talk to kids about the scary realities of the world we live in (and the people who live in it with us), but not at 3 am when your kid's crying hysterically because the “candy jailer” is hiding in the closet.

“Old Yeller”

Not only does beloved dog Old Yeller get rabies and die in the end, the kid has to kill him. *Talk about issues.*

“The Cowboys”

John Wayne needs help. John Wayne can't find cowboys. John Wayne gets kids instead of cowboys. John Wayne teaches kids to be cowboys (and by extension, men). John Wayne dies. YES, DIES. (Brutally, too, in a totally un-heroic way.) How can John Wayne die? If John Wayne can die, anyone can die? To a generation raised on The Duke, this was more traumatic than walking in on your parents having sex. The only thing that made John Wayne's death okay was the fact that the kids avenged him by killing the outlaw who killed him. But unfortunately for today's kids, John Wayne isn't an icon, he's just an old guy from old movies they don't show on Nick, so the scene where the kids take turns putting bullets into his killer is kind of extreme.

“West Side Story”

Gangs, turf wars, racial tension (the Sharks are Puerto Rican), a girl who's almost raped... *all set to music.* When you watch this with your kids, explaining why the hero dies in the end will be the least of your concerns.

“Brian’s Song”

Even though we now know that it’s okay for kids to see their fathers cry, it can be confusing for kids if they also see their mom standing in the doorway rolling her eyes at the sight of dad crying over something as dated and melodramatic as this.

“Heidi”

In the Shirley Temple version of the classic book, a mountain girl with an unbreakable spirit gets shuffled between various sets of cranky grown-ups, eventually winning them over but nearly dying in the process. It’s kind of like the ultimate DCFS nightmare, only everybody ends up happy and not in jail or Family Court.

“The Wizard of Oz”

Flying monkeys were creepy then, they’re creepy now.

“Journey to The Center of The Earth”

“You can’t lead a dangerous expedition to the center of the earth,” says scientist James Mason to Arlene Dahl, *“you’re just a woman – and as everyone knows, women are frail, weak and stupid enough to wear bloomers on a trip like this.”* Add to that Pat Boone singing, lots of completely unprepared and irresponsible spelunking, a pet duck that gets eaten by the bad guy (who is subsequently killed by “Gertrude the Duck’s” owner) and a giant lizard at the end that tries to eat everyone, and you’ve got a movie that irritates women, gives boys bad ideas (*“We should see if that sewer down on the corner leads to the center of the earth!”*) and makes little kids of either sex have nightmares.

[CONTINUED]

“Charlotte’s Web”

Oh, look... it’s a cute little spider that can read and write! And what’s this? She uses her talents to save a pig from being slaughtered? How noble and touching! But then she dies, because that’s the natural order of things and God-forbid we spare kids that (unfortunate) truth.

“Grease”

Good girl moves to town. Good girl falls in with “wrong” crowd. Good girl takes up smoking and learns to dress like a 1950s slut. Good girl becomes bad girl and gets the boy of her dreams, becomes insanely popular, lives happily ever after. Now that’s a message you want to send to you kids, right?

“Boy’s Town”

An entire town full of priests and young boys? Wasn’t there a lawsuit about this? Haven’t there been a lot of lawsuits about this? As innocent and uplifting as this movie was at the time, it takes on an entirely different subtext now.

“Pollyanna”

This movie should be avoided if there’s any chance any of your kids will watch it and then try to be like Hayley Mills, because that would be really, really annoying.

“Captains Courageous”

Boy falls off boat. Boat doesn’t stop. Abandonment issues follow.

“Mary Poppins”

PARENT: Wanna watch Mary Poppins?

KID: Sure, what’s it about?

PARENT: It’s about a governess who –

KID: What’s a “governess?”

PARENT: A governess is like a nanny, only... er... uh... well, I guess a governess is a nanny – only this one has magical powers.

KID: You mean like Nanny McPhee?

PARENT: No, not like Nanny McPhee. Or maybe a little like Nanny McPhee. Only Mary Poppins is beautiful and Nanny McPhee is... *not*.

KID: You know, you shouldn’t judge people by the way they look.

PARENT: I wasn’t judging.

KID: It sounds like you were judging.

PARENT: I wasn’t.

KID: She can’t help the way she looks.

PARENT: I know that.

KID: Why are you getting upset?

PARENT: Do you want to watch the movie or not?

KID: Not if you’re gonna get mad at me.

“Willy Wonka”

Gene Wilder is great, but as responsible parents, do we really want to give our kids the message that if they do what they’re told they’ll be rewarded, and if they act spoiled, have no self-control, are too demanding, too self-centered, etc. something bad will happen to them? *On second thought, maybe this is a movie all kids should see.*

WHAT DO YOU SAY TO WOULD-BE PARENTS?

"So... *what's it like having kids?*" the would-be parent asks.

"It's great," you say, *"Having kids is the best thing that's ever happened to us. They're a lot of work, but when you see the way they smile and laugh and take in the world, it's definitely worth it."*

And then maybe you chuckle and offer to let them stay over and take your kids for a weekend "test drive," knowing they probably won't but hoping they will so you and your spouse can get away for that "romantic weekend" you've been talking about since pretty much your kids were born (with the term "romantic" being parent-code for *"getting some sleep and being able to watch pay-per-view movies all the way through, in one sitting, without being interrupted a dozen times because 'I'm hungry' or 'I had an accident' or 'I spilled jam on the carpet,' etc."*).

You may suggest these would-be parents pick up a movie or two, too. But while many recommend something like "Parenthood" for its funny and touching insights into the ups and downs of, well, *parenthood*, there's another movie that gives a fuller and more complete picture: 1970s horror classic "The Exorcist." Here's why:

Demonic possession is just another name for a weekday morning.

As every parent knows, at random and unpredictable intervals, your little angel will wake up snarling and nasty like a beast from Hell. Foul-mouthed? Before you even get through the door to say *"Good morning, I made you breakfast,"* you find yourself assaulted with *"GET OUT! Can't you see I'm sleeping? You always wake me up like this. I hate you. I hate you. I HATE YOU."* And their appearance? Definitely something unholy (though, to be fair, not because they're suddenly sporting horns, scales and some grotesque demon pig-nose, but because nobody looks good when they don't shower for three days – why *is* personal hygiene such a difficult concept for kids to get,

anyway?). As for being able to crawl across the ceiling? Well... maybe not the ceiling, but when you consider the gravity-defying ways kids flip around in their beds while they sleep, it's not such a stretch to think they might somehow end up on the ceiling.

Green puke? *How about orange puke, yellow puke and blue puke, too?*

It's not called "The Technicolor Yawn" for nothing, something parents usually find out fast. Often, these multi-colored hues can be traced back to two types of foods: foods consumed in excess, like artificially-flavored fruit punch, Halloween candy and birthday cake; and foods consumed under protest such as salad, non-breaded fish, and brussels sprouts (with the eventual volume of puke increasing exponentially if you happen to say something like "I don't care if you don't like it. Nobody ever threw up eating brussels sprouts, so finish your plate!" first).

You know a child's head can't spin completely around... but a 5-year-old doesn't.

And no matter how quickly the parent dashes into the other room to get the phone or answer the door or shut the oven off before dinner burns, it's five seconds more than the 5-year-old needs to twist the 2-year-old's head around to the point where it's about to snap. "But we were just playing owl," the child protests.

You don't need an exorcist, but a child psychologist might be a good idea.

What parent hasn't thrown up their hands at some point and said "I can't do this anymore!" before turning to an expert for help? Whether it's the therapist, the math tutor, the reading coach, the college placement counselor or even the pitching specialist, all these experts are trying to do is exactly what Father

[CONTINUED]

Merrin was trying to do to Linda Blair's Regan: make the kid "normal" again.

There can always be a sequel because evil – like parenting – goes on forever.

Which means the moment parents think they're done and their kids are on their own, they move back home. Or go into therapy. Or just stop calling. This can happen at any time, for any reason (though it's often financial), and it's generally a lot worse than the original, just like "Exorcist 2 – The Heretic," "The Exorcist 3," and both versions of "Exorcist – The Beginning."

And if that isn't scary, nothing is.

PORN, BUT NOT THAT KIND OF PORN

Growing up, “porn” was short for “pornography,” which was the high-falutin word the Meese Commission used to describe the dirty magazines your uncle hid in his sock drawer because he thought nobody would ever find them there.

(As impossible as that is to believe.)

Now “porn” means something different: it’s any kind of compilation of air-brushed, commercial-perfect images of something that make that something seem more appealing, more desirable and more attainable than it really is.

This is why sleek, sexy images of iPhones or MacBook Airs are “gadget porn,” sadistic horror movies like “Saw” and “Hostel” are “torture porn,” glossy foodie magazines are “gastro-porn” and pristine pictures of cute, cuddly Polar bears who will die-off if you continue driving your SUV are “eco-porn” (or in certain circles “Gore porn”).

Parents aren’t exempt from the onslaught, of course, and are frequently targeted with specific kinds of porn:

- “Theme Park Porn,” where happy, contented, loving families frolic in the sun at Disneyland, Six Flags or the local water park without ever experiencing long lines, over-priced food, dehydrated toddlers, temper tantrums or any of the other things that make theme parks suck.
- “Backseat Entertainment Unit Porn,” where peaceful kids quietly enjoy movies and music as the miles roll by, never fighting, spilling drinks, jamming crackers into the DVD player, getting car sick or having to pee every 15 minutes because they drank too much Gatorade.
- “Baby Genius Porn,” where sticking your infant in front of the TV for a few

[CONTINUED]

hours each day (while you sleep, try to catch up on laundry, go slowly insane, etc.) constitutes cognitive development instead of neglect.

- “Self-Help Porn,” where the secret to inner beauty, weight-loss, getting the career you want, raising smart kids, living your best-life now, having a purpose, finding yourself, being a better parent, fixing your marriage, and overcoming anxiety and depression will be revealed to you if you “attend our free seminar,” or make three easy payments of \$29.95 each, or turn to page 187 in the must-read book by the newest would-be world-famous motivational speaker (who’s main motivation seems to be getting suckers like you to finance his luxury lifestyle).
- “Time Porn,” which is anything that gives you the impression you will ever have any of it to yourself, ever again, for as long as you and your kids are living under the same roof.

Naturally, none of this gets discretely tucked in a sock drawer, either, but clutters the TV, computer and even cell phone 24 hours a day.

STICKS AND STONES...

... can break your bones, but words can never hurt you. (Unless you're a pre-schooler.)

SON: WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!

DAD: Why are you crying?

SON: Mom said I wear the same pants she does.

DAD: *What?!?!?!?*

SON: But I don't wear girl pants, I'm a boy! WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!

DAD: Of course you are. And boys only wear boy pants. (Usually, anyway.)

SON: What?

DAD: Never mind. I'm sure Mom was just teasing.

SON: She wasn't teasing. We were drawing and she said the reason I write with my left hand is 'cause I wear the same jeans she does.

DAD: The same jeans?!?!? Oh, now I understand – she didn't mean "jeans," she meant "genes."

SON: Huh?

DAD: J-E-A-N-S are what you wear and G-E-N-E-S are what makes you who you are.

SON: J-E-N-G-N-E... *what?*

DAD: "Jeans" and "genes" are two different words that sound the same.

SON: Oh. So does that mean I have the same ones as Mommy?

DAD: Yes.

SON: But I don't want girl pants. WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!

SCENES FROM MARRIAGE,
NO. 3

WIFE: Do these pants make me look fat?

HUSBAND: A little.

WIFE: *What?!?!?*

HUSBAND: I mean... No.

WIFE: Then why did you say "Yes?"

HUSBAND: I didn't say "yes," I said "*a little*."

WIFE: No, what you said was "*Oh my God! You look like a cow. Your butt is bigger than your aunt's.*"

HUSBAND: I did not.

WIFE: But that's what you meant.

HUSBAND: I think I know what I meant and it wasn't anything like that.

WIFE: Fine. Then what did you mean?

HUSBAND: Um... er... uh... I meant... um... uh...

WIFE: You're trying to think of a way out of this, aren't you?

HUSBAND: No.

WIFE: I can see it in your eyes.

HUSBAND: I am not trying to... THE CUT!

WIFE: What?

HUSBAND: It's not your butt, it's the cut. The cut of those pants is... is... is... unflattering.

WIFE: Really?

HUSBAND: I swear.

WIFE: See... that's what I thought, too. And then the sales associate started hovering and she said they looked great, so I felt pressured and I got them but I never wear them because I think they make me look fat.

HUSBAND: They do – *but only because the cut is so bad*.

WIFE: It is, isn't it?

HUSBAND: I bet that sales associate just wanted her commission.

WIFE: That's why I like to shop online – *I can try everything on and return what doesn't fit*.

HUSBAND: Makes perfect sense to me.

WIFE: So let me change and then we'll go.

HUSBAND: SIGH.

WIFE: What?

HUSBAND: I didn't say anything.

WIFE: You sighed.

HUSBAND: I don't think so.

WIFE: You let out a big sigh.

HUSBAND: No.

WIFE: Like you dodged a bullet or something.

HUSBAND: No.

WIFE: You're not lying about the pants, are you?

HUSBAND: No.

WIFE: Then why did you sigh?

HUSBAND: I didn't... *Oh that*. That was a burp. I should probably take some Prilosec before we go, just in case.

WIFE: Oh. Why don't you do that while I change.

HUSBAND: *Into something with a flattering cut*.

WIFE: Right.

BETTER TO BEND THAN (SPRING) BREAK

Time was, Spring Break was a blurry, booze-fueled week where you tried to cram in as much fun as possible before returning to class – usually more tired than before you left.

But now you have kids, which means Spring Break is still a blurry, booze-fueled week (how else are you going to survive?), but the fun you try to cram in is your kids', not yours.

And while you still end the week far more tired than you were before it even started – *Why is there no absolute limit to sleep deprivation, anyway?* – at least you can take comfort in the fact that you won't have to fill up an entire week again until summer.

HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN
ST. PATRICK'S DAY TO A KID?

KID: Why's Dad throwing up in the bathroom?

MOM: Um... he's not feeling well.

KID: Is it because of St. Patrick's Day?

MOM: What do you mean?

KID: Well, when I walked into the kitchen last night, I saw him putting green food coloring in his beer and when I asked him what he was doing he said he was celebrating St. Patrick's Day.

MOM: Um... uh... that's right – sometimes adults drink green beer to celebrate St. Patrick's Day.

KID: *And they wear green clothes.*

MOM: Yes, and they wear green clothes. When I was a little girl, we used to drink green milk, too.

KID: You're kidding right?

MOM: No. Why?

KID: Duh – green food coloring obviously makes you sick. *Why else would Dad be throwing up?*

“SO IT’S OKAY TO LIE TO THE SCHOOL?”

We teach our kids to always tell the truth, just like our parents taught us, even though we know this advice is impractical after a certain age, and maybe even foolish.

How many marriages would survive without the occasional “*No, nothing’s bothering me.*” or “*Sure, I’d love to have your parents come and stay for a long weekend*”?

Would your job last if you said to your boss “*No, I thought that was the dumbest idea you’ve ever come up with, so I just ignored it because, frankly, I thought it would go away when the company realized you were incompetent and let you go*”?

And what about your self-esteem? Could anybody look in the mirror? Step on the scale? Or dance in public without a certain amount of self-deception?

No.

And yet we can’t explain this to our kids – not until they’re older, anyway – because they wouldn’t understand the subtleties of “acceptable lying” the way adults do (adults not in politics, marketing or the entertainment industry, anyway).

Plus, it would make our job as parents so much harder if the guilt and fear of telling a lie didn’t manifest itself externally in kids in some kind of “tell” or nervous twitch.

But then one day, the adult world of shades of gray meets the kid world of black and white, and we tell a lie, say, to our kid’s school, and our kid catches us in it – “I thought you said not to lie, not ever, under any circumstances, so how come you’re doing it? Is it okay to lie to the school?”

Uh... Well... Um...

If your kids are young enough, you can just confuse them with an explanation that's so obtuse they can't follow it.

And if they're older – assuming they're still even listening to anything you have to say at this point – you can take your cue from Washington D.C. and “rephrase” yourself, saying “I didn't lie, I misspoke.”

The real question in all this, of course, is why “never tell a lie” sinks in so deeply while far more important rules like “always hang up your towel after you shower,” “don't hit your sister,” “wipe,” “don't say 'shit' in front of the grandparents,” etc. don't.

FEES

Everybody else charges 'em, so why not you?

The “OOPS” fee

“Honey, did you pick that sweater up from the dry cleaners like I asked? Cause I’m planning to wear it tonight.” If the answer is “Oops,” the fee is they have to watch the kids for as long as it takes you to go to the store and find something else to wear, even if it takes, say, an entire Saturday.

The “FALSE ALARM” fee

If daycare calls and tells you to pick up your kid because he or she has a fever, only they’re wrong, you get one month free tuition.

The “I HAVE TO PEE” fee

If you are on a road trip and you stop at the gas station and tell everyone to make sure they go, only somebody doesn’t (or does but drank too much Gatorade), and then 10 miles down the road they say *“I have to pee,”* they have to pay you one week’s allowance or give you a neck massage for the next 25 miles.

The “LATE” fee

Not what daycare charges you, what you charge parents who say they’ll pick their kids up from a playdate at 5:00, but then don’t show up until 7:00. You get \$21 per hour or three times the going babysitter rate, whichever is greater.

The “SMELLY 9 TO 13-YEAR-OLD BOY” fee

Ever let your kid go five days without showering and then send him off to a sleepover at a friend’s? If your kid smells worse than their house (which,

sadly, isn't always the case) you have to pay for a professional fumigation service. If their house smells worse than your kid, you probably shouldn't let him go over there.

The "BAD NEIGHBOR" fee

If you're late for an appointment and you come up behind a car that's stopped in the middle of the road because the driver is chit-chatting with somebody, the other driver has to pay to repair the damage on both cars that's caused when you ram them.

The "KEEPING THE SERVICE WINDOW OPEN" fee

"The serviceman will be there between 8 and 12." Yeah, right. The fee is a \$10 credit for each minute they're late, increasing exponentially so that if they show up at 12:48 you basically get the company.

The "I MISSPOKE" fee

This is for politicians who clearly and obviously make some controversial statement, and then later claim they "misspoke." If the politician in question is a Republican, they have to donate \$10,000 to the ACLU, and if they're a Democrat, the money goes to The George W. Bush Presidential Library Foundation.

The "WHILE WE'RE STILL YOUNG" fee

Ever have an excited conversation with a pre-schooler who just can't seem to get to the point? For every minute of your time they waste, you get to just stare off blankly into space.

[CONTINUED]

The “BACK-CHANNELING” fee

If your kid is trying to tell you something, only you're pre-occupied (or tired) so you only pretend to listen, the fee you have to pay is whatever the consequences are of you missing the warning signs, whether that's bailing them out of jail, being forced to send them to Military School for a year, getting them an appointment at Planned Parenthood, etc. (You are guaranteed to only have to pay this fee once, however, but that's hardly a consolation.)

The “I DON'T LIKE TO YELL, BUT SOMETIMES YOU MAKE ME” fee

When you yell, if the first thing that comes out of your mouth is “*How many times have I told you...*” and you actually have told them, you are entitled to a free Anger Management seminar (for you, obviously, since there's no way they'll remember no matter how many times you tell them, but at least you can learn how to cope with your frustration).

The “BAD CHOICE” fee

Even smart kids make dumb choices from time to time – “*Let's have an indoor water fight!*” or “*Wanna see me juggle mom's ceramic figurines?*” or “*Dad won't mind if I use his computer, as long as I clean up some of his files, first.*” The consequence of such lapses in judgment varies depending on the extent of the damage, but should be having to type “*I will not have a water fight/juggle/delete Dad's computer files.*” at least 100 times (assuming the computer's not completely screwed up).

The “HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO TELL YOU!” fee

Researchers claim that kids need to hear something 100 times before it sinks in. Assuming they don't mean 100 times under laboratory conditions – i.e. kids are strapped into some kind of special “attention” chair where their mouths

are shut, their eyes are open and there are no distractions whatsoever – then there should be a fee for when they make you tell them the 101st time. Unfortunately, to get them to remember such a fee would take you telling them 100 times, and given all the other things you have to tell them 100 times, it's just not worth the effort.

The “BROKEN PROMISE” fee

You may have a perfectly good reason for not keeping your promise, but no matter what it is, your kid will not see it that way. The fee is you have to explain to them – each time, every time, until they have kids of their own – that sometimes adults can't keep promises, even though they want to, and that this does not make them “mean.”

The “CRANKY PARENT” fee

You are irritated because (a) you have to work over the weekend to revise something you could have done during the week if a certain somebody had their shit together; (b) your spouse is mad at you for something, but won't tell you what it is; (c) you are mad at your spouse for something, or; (d) you are always irritated, so you take it out on your kids by yelling at them. First offense: you must take your kids to get ice cream (or Starbucks, depending on their age). Second offense: trip to the toy store (or skate shop or teen boutique). Third offense: Disneyland (or Las Vegas).

The “NEEDLESSLY COMPLICATING THINGS” fee

Some things *are* actually that simple. And anyone who makes them otherwise should pay for it. Rather than put a monetary value on this special kind of frustration, the fee is that anyone who regularly does this has to attend a monthly meeting where the sole purpose of the meeting is to decide on a procedure for conducting the meetings, and they have to continue attending until they

[CONTINUED]

agree on a procedure or they all die of old age, whichever comes first.

The “WHY AREN’T YOU READY YET?” fee

The fee is that when they’re in college and you drive there to pick them up at the end of the semester, they have to wait on the curb for one second for every hour they ever wasted, wearing a sign that reads “*I wasted my parent’s time when I was a kid, and now they’re getting even.*” (While a one-minute-to-one-minute ratio might seem more appropriate, it would turn college from a four or five year proposition into one lasting a decade or more since the first semester would almost certainly be followed by five to eight years of standing on the curb. On the other hand, maybe that’s not so bad.)

MOTHER'S DAY IS...

...a day when you should be able to do what you want except you have kids so you can't.

...a time to realize what your mother went through and cut her a little slack.

...a time when mothers pretend to like things they'd never pick out for themselves, not in a million years.

...the one day of the year mothers genuinely feel appreciated.

...the one day of the year mothers genuinely feel appreciated – so how come nobody feels so guilty for not appreciating mom the rest of the year, they get her, you know, a new car?

...not like other holidays where you get the day off because that's what being a mother means – never having a day off.

...a lot like Father's Day, except when a mom jokes about spending the day by herself she's actually joking, while a dad thinks that sounds like a pretty good idea.

...a time when kids think about all the things their mothers do for them every day without being asked or thanked.

... a time when kids think "blah blah blah things mom does blah blah blah thanks, here's your card blah blah blah can I go back to playing video games now?"

...a day grandmothers thank God they're grandparents because they remember how much work being a mother used to be.

[WHY CHICKEN NUGGETS ARE BETTER THAN PROZAC]

HOW MUCH KIDS REALLY COST

It's been estimated that the hourly cost to parents for raising a child from birth through age 18 is \$1.58. Whether this is shocking or pleasantly surprising depends on individual circumstances, but it certainly is useful, allowing parents to calculate – down to the penny – how many hours their kids will need to work around the house or in some illegal, downtown sweatshop in order to pay for themselves. *

For comparison, other hourly costs:

- \$125 – therapy
- \$2.86 – housing a prisoner
- \$14.21 – camp
- \$12 – babysitter (licensed, adult)
- \$6 – babysitter (irresponsible teenager)
- \$0 – babysitter (grandparent)
- \$5.35 – going to see a movie (excluding trailers, time spent waiting in line, \$110 at the concession stand, etc.)
- \$38.51 – going to see a Bon Jovi concert
- \$200 - \$600 – criminal defense attorney specializing in juvenile offenses
- \$0.37 – hi-def television
- \$7,400,000 – Iraq
- \$21 – maid
- \$14.85 – gardener

**When calculating, please keep in mind that in most states parents can legally take any money their kids earn until age 18, so those that pimp their kids out to Hollywood and wind up with the next Hannah Montana could enjoy a substantial return on their \$1.58 per hour “investment.”*

WHEN YOUR FIRST COMPANY PICNIC
IS YOUR LAST

BOSS: So... are you having a good time?

EMPLOYEE'S KID: I dunno. Are you gonna yell at me if I'm not?

BOSS: What?!?!? Why would I yell at you?

EMPLOYEE'S KID: Because you yell at everyone, so I wasn't sure if that meant me, too.

BOSS: I don't yell at everyone. Who says that?

EMPLOYEE'S KID: My dad.

BOSS: Is that so?

EMPLOYEE'S KID: Yeah, he says you could spend 10 years in Anger Management class and still never graduate.

BOSS: And what else does he say about me?

EMPLOYEE'S KID: Well... I can't really say because I'm not supposed to swear. But my dad could tell you. You want me to go get him?

BOSS: No, thanks. *I'll get him tomorrow at work.*

ANATOMY OF A CREDIT CARD BILL

Clearly we can't agree on anything.

SUMMARY OF TRANSACTIONS

<i>Previous Balance</i>	<i>Payments & Credits</i>	<i>Cash Advances</i>	<i>New Purchases</i>	<i>New Balance</i>
\$1871.23	\$1871>23	\$500	\$1491.43	\$1991.43
05/01	OBAMA FOR AMERICA Campaign Contribution		100.00	
05/01	MCCAIN Campaign Contribution		100.00	
05/01	TARGET Sundries and misc. impulse items		432.78	
05/01	HOME DEPOT Power Tools		119.21	
05/01	VICTORIA'S SECRET Lingerie, size 8		51.03	
05/01	VICTORIA'S SECRET Return: Lingerie, size 8		-51.03	
05/01	VICTORIA'S SECRET Lingerie, size 12		51.03	
05/01	STARBUCKS Personal Gift Card Re-fill		100.00	
05/01	WHOLE FOODS Groceries		387.25	
05/01	THE PARTY STORE Over-priced birthday party supplies		78.27	
05/01	MCDONALD'S Happy meals		18.03	
05/01	KIDZ KUTZ Express Cut		35.00	

HUSBAND: You're a size 8, right?
WIFE: Usually. *Why?*
HUSBAND: It's a surprise.

WIFE: Well... when I said "usually" I meant before kids, when I had time to exercise and wasn't stress-eating.

How to stop kids from fighting in the car.

FED UP

PRE-SCHOOLER: I'm done.

PARENT: But you haven't finished your vegetables.

PRE-SCHOOLER: I know, but I'm full.

PARENT: Well... I guess it's okay. When I was a kid, parents made kids finish their plates and I think that's part of why we struggle with our weight so much, and I don't want to repeat that mistake.

PRE-SCHOOLER: Huh?

PARENT: Never mind.

PRE-SCHOOLER: So can I be done?

PARENT: Yes, you can be done. Hey! Why are you getting out the ice cream?

PRE-SCHOOLER: You said I could have ice cream when I'm done eating dinner.

PARENT: But you didn't finish.

PRE-SCHOOLER: But you said I could be done.

PARENT: *BECAUSE YOU SAID YOU WERE FULL!*

PRE-SCHOOLER: Full of dinner, not of ice cream.

SCENES FROM MARRIAGE,
NO. 4

HUSBAND: What are you doing?

WIFE: Watching TV.

HUSBAND: I can see that, but why aren't you watching in Hi-Def?

WIFE: I dunno. Do we get this channel in Hi-Def?

HUSBAND: Yes!

WIFE: Oh.

HUSBAND: See... this is what you were watching and this is the same channel in Hi-Def.

WIFE: What's the difference?

HUSBAND: *What's the difference?!?!?!?*

WIFE: Aside from the three grand you spent on that flat screen, instead of a regular TV, that could have gone into the college fund?

HUSBAND: Can't you see how much better the resolution is? This is a 720p HD signal on a 1080p monitor, not that up-converted 480i crap you were watching.

WIFE: I don't even know what you're saying. And even if I did, I don't care about the resolution; I just want to watch the show.

HUSBAND: I can't talk to you about this.

WIFE: Suit yourself. But while you're standing there, go into the closet and grab my gray cashmere sweater, will you?

HUSBAND: Fine. Here.

WIFE: I said "gray cashmere."

HUSBAND: That's what this is.

WIFE: It's not gray, it's charcoal.

HUSBAND: Huh?

WIFE: And it's not cashmere, it's wool.

HUSBAND: What's the difference?

FAMILY GAME NIGHT OR NIGHTMARE?

Gathering around the table. ✓

Spending some quality time together. ✓.

Taking a break from DVDs, movies, video games and other passive forms of entertainment. ✓.

Reliving fond memories of playing Monopoly as a kid. ✓.

Trying to figure out which version of Monopoly to play. ✓.

Fighting over who gets to be the racecar. ✓.

Fighting over who gets to roll first. ✓.

Threatening to send everyone to bed if they don't behave. ✓.

Enjoying five minutes of stress-free game play. ✓.

Trying to explain to a younger sibling why they have to give their older sibling money just because they landed on Marvin Gardens. ✓.

Wiping away the younger sibling's tears. ✓.

Using the parent voice to tell the older sibling not to gloat. ✓.

Getting competitive. ✓.

Mentally adding up the cost of therapy if you bankrupt your kids. ✓.

Reminding yourself the point is to have fun. ✓.

[CONTINUED]

Letting your kids win. √.

Hoping Family Game Night will be better next week. √.

Fearing that it won't. √.

Wondering if your kids will just forget about playing games together if you don't mention it ever again. √.

TRIPS

Here's the secret: successful family vacation = unconditional surrender.

By you.

There was a time when parents got a break each summer by going somewhere they could pretty much abandon their kids each morning and not have to interact with them until it was time to make s'mores at night, like a campground, a mountain resort or a motel at the shore.

True, it was sometimes hard on kids, but eventually they learned to steer clear of the creepy guy in the tent behind the shower room, ignore the threats of the kid-hating Assistant Activities Director, or just run away when the psychopath in "2C" wanted to "play."

The important thing was parents got some time to play bridge and drink Gin 'n' Tonics.

So what about today's parents?

Clearly, you're not going to let your kids run around unsupervised until they're at least 21, which means any attempt to "get away from it all" means you're bringing at least some of "it" with you. In fact, you'll likely spend more time together as a family on vacation than you do when you're home, which can be a challenge.

Survival is possible, however, even probable, by doing three simple things:

1. Give up any illusions you might have of getting to do anything for yourself, like going to the spa, playing a relaxing round of golf or tennis, or just getting stupid at the pool-side bar.

[CONTINUED]

2. Bring along plenty of portable media devices so you can watch something in one corner of the hotel room while your kids watch something entirely different in the other corner.
3. Do whatever your kids want during the day so they'll be so exhausted at night they'll fall asleep at 7:30, at which point you can raid the mini-bar and get sloppy.

Sound good? Probably not.

But since unrealized expectations are the cause of most disappointment and dissatisfaction, having no expectations ensures you'll have a good time.

Happy trails.

TIME MANAGEMENT TIPS

As a parent, time is precious. So how do you make the most of it? Time management experts offer the following advice:

1. Prioritize.
2. Delegate/outsource.
3. Set time limits for tasks.
4. Establish routines and stick to them.
5. Don't waste time waiting.

At first glance, these suggestions seem simple and straight-forward, but when you actually try to implement them you quickly realize they are better suited to some kind of parallel "self-help dimension" where the laws of time, space and sibling in-fighting don't apply.

1. Prioritize.

In theory, yes. In practice – *forget it*. Take, say, the tasks of treating an injury versus giving a toddler a bath. Typically, bleeding kids come first, unless they're bleeding because they did the thing you told them not to do five times, in which case the toddler would get the bath. If the bleeding kid is bleeding on furniture, however, then the furniture needs immediate attention.

On the other hand, if there's only a little bleeding and it's not on any furniture, then that might not be as important as preventing the toddler from trying to bathe himself.

2. Delegate/outsource.

Which means what? Parents are supposed to ship their kids off to India to get help with their homework?

[CONTINUED]

3. Set time limits for tasks.

Okay. But what is the appropriate time limit for a temper tantrum? And if getting everybody ready in the morning takes 15 minutes longer than whatever amount of time you set aside – whether it's 40 minutes or two hours – how are you supposed to limit that? Or if you make reservations for that one night out a year you get a leisurely three hours to eat, what happens when the babysitter is 20 minutes late and the restaurant gives up your table?

4. Establish routines and stick to them.

Most parents already do this, but it doesn't seem to help. For example, a typical morning routine would be telling the kids to get up, get in the shower, get dressed, get some breakfast and get in the car, then repeating this three or four times over the course of 20 minutes before threatening them with some kind of bodily harm if they don't do all of the above right this minute.

This is followed by the nagging suspicion that something that was supposed to have been done last night wasn't, and the sudden realization that this "something" was making lunches for all the kids.

As there is now not nearly enough time left to do everything and still get off on time, vows that "*This will never happen again!*" must be shouted so that all in the house can hear, spouses must be silently cursed for not helping, and God must be asked "*Why me? What have I done to deserve this?*"

5. Don't waste time waiting.

Clearly this was not written by anyone living in a small house with kids. How else is a parent supposed to get into the bathroom?

HAPPY FATHER'S DAY

12:01 am

KID #1: Dad? Dad? Are you awake?

DAD: What? Huh? Who's there?

KID #1: Me.

DAD: Why are you still awake?

KID #1: I wanted to wish you "Happy Father's Day."

DAD: Oh.

KID #1: Happy Father's Day!

DAD: Oh... right... thanks. Now get some sleep. We've got a big day tomorrow.

4:20 am

KID #2: Dad? Dad? Are you awake?

DAD: Huh? What!?!? What time is it?

KID #2: I dunno. But the sun's just coming up.

DAD: Did you have a bad dream?

KID #2: No.

DAD: Did you have an accident?

KID #2: No.

DAD: Why did you wake me up then?

KID #2: I just wanted to be the first to say "Happy Father's Day."

DAD: Why don't you do it in the morning?

KID #2: It is morning.

DAD: Well then... Thanks. Now why don't you go back to bed, it's way too early to get up.

4:25 am

KID #1: Dad? Dad!

DAD: WHAT!

KID #1: I was the first to wish you "Happy Father's Day," right?

DAD: I guess.

[WHY CHICKEN NUGGETS ARE BETTER THAN PROZAC]

[CONTINUED]

4:31 am

KID #2: Dad? Dad!

DAD: WHAT!?!?!?!?!?!?!?

KID #2: I was the first to wish you "Happy Father's Day" because if you do it before you go to sleep it doesn't count.

DAD: Huh?

4:47 am

KID #1: Dad?

DAD: What?

KID #1: It does count because it was today when I said it, right?

DAD: I don't know.

KID #1: But it was.

DAD: Okay, fine. Whatever you say.

4:54 am

DAD: Why are you crying?

KID #2: Because I wanted to be the first to wish you "Happy Father's Day."

5:02 am

MOM: Why are you getting dressed?

DAD: I'm going to Starbucks.

MOM: I thought you were going to sleep in?

DAD: I was.

MOM: Oh... well... as long as you're going out, will you get me a grande non-fat mocha?

DAD: Sure. Anything else?

MOM: *Donuts*. I didn't think you'd be up in time for breakfast, so I didn't get anything special.

DAD: I don't need anything special, I just need coffee.

MOM: And... Happy Father's Day!

DAD: Gee, thanks.

TOO DEPRESSED TO PLAY WITH YOUR KIDS?

Don't let the credit crisis, the housing slump, gas prices, global warming, the cost of groceries, layoffs or the generally sad state of world affairs stop you from enjoying quality time with your kids.

Instead, let these troubles inspire you with the following games:

Mortgage, Mortgage, Who's Got The Mortgage?

Kids sit in a circle with their fists closed, pretending to hold a button, which in this case represents a mortgage. As you go around the circle, everybody says "Mortgage, mortgage, who's got the mortgage?" and then whoever's turn it is says "Billy has the mortgage." Billy must then open his fist to show everybody if he has the button/mortgage or not. The joke, of course, is that he doesn't. In fact, nobody does, because credit is still so tight nobody can get one.

Stock Market Limbo

How low can it go? There's one way to find out: put on "The Limbo Song" and see if you can make it under without collapsing.

Time Travelers

Take an imaginary trip to the future without leaving home. Just unplug the air conditioner, shut off the water main, and set the thermostat as high as it will go. The first person to pass out from heat stroke loses, the last one standing gets a half-glass of dirty water and a chance to play "An Inconvenient Truth: The Home Edition."

The Crumbling Infrastructure Game

Just like "London Bridge is Falling Down," only substitute something local.

[CONTINUED]

U.N. Election Monitor

Help ensure the spread of democracy with this variation on “Kick The Can.” Select one U.N. Election Monitor, then divide everyone else up into two groups: voters and henchmen. While you turn your back and pretend everything is going really, really well, “voters” try to run up and kick the can before “henchmen” stop them.

Magic 8^{1/4} - Ball

Buy? Sell? Forget your broker’s “opinion” and just ask the Magic 8^{1/4} - Ball. *It couldn’t be any worse.*

Filibusted

Pretend you’re Congress and you’re trying to do something to re-ignite the economy, only you get so bogged down in partisanship you just stand around calling each other names.

The Coupon Game

What kid doesn’t like to cut things out? Here, you put yours to work helping you find enough coupons to make up the difference between what you make and what you spend. (While technically not a game, it would probably be helpful. Plus, you can give your kids bonus points if they find any coupons that are good for discounted liquor or anti-depressants.)

Chinese Toy Russian Roulette

Toxic? Non-toxic? Line up the toys and use a home lead-test to find out.

PEE, POOP OR PUKE? PICK ONE.

As every parent knows, that's actually a trick question because when it comes to being peed on, pooped on or puked on, you don't have a choice: it's not a question of *if* it will happen or even *when* it will happen – though probably in the middle of the night, right after you've put on your last clean shirt, or just as you're rushing off to an important meeting that you're already 20 minutes late for, etc. – but *how often* it will happen.

(Not to mention whether or not all three will happen at the same time, which is the parenting equivalent of hitting the "Trifecta," even though – sadly – it isn't nearly as rare.)

While the idea of being splattered in your child's pee, poop or puke makes non-parents squirm (and probably resolve to remain non-parents), most of us eventually come to accept it – even welcome it – because no matter how disgusting that is, it's not nearly as gross as being splattered with some *other kid's* pee, poop or puke – something that's also not a question of if or when, but how often.

SCENES FROM MARRIAGE,
NO. 5

HUSBAND: Hey.

WIFE: Back already?

HUSBAND: Yeah, traffic wasn't too bad.

WIFE: Did you get eggs?

HUSBAND: Yup.

WIFE: Toilet paper?

HUSBAND: I knew there was something I forgot.

WIFE: That's okay, I'll just get it when I take the kids to piano.

HUSBAND: Or I can get it when I take 'em to karate?

WIFE: Or I can... er... uh... I was gonna say I can get it when I take 'em to swimming, but I have to stop at the drug store.

HUSBAND: If you do, will you pick me up some shaving cream?

WIFE: Sure, but I thought you used an electric... Hey! When did you grow a beard?

HUSBAND: March.

WIFE: Really?

HUSBAND: Yeah, when we were finally getting around to making our New Year's Resolutions. You said "*I'm gonna change my hair color to red!*"

WIFE: I did.

HUSBAND: And I said "*I'm gonna grow a beard.*" Wait. You did?

WIFE: See?

HUSBAND: Wow. How could I have missed that?

WIFE: Same way I missed your beard.

BOTH: We've got to make more time for each other.

WIFE: Let's check our schedules. How's August for you?

HUSBAND: Crazy. September?

WIFE: Maybe, but all the kids' school activities will be starting, so October would be better.

HUSBAND: How about Thursday the 9th?

WIFE: Or Monday the 13th?

HUSBAND: Are you free from 7:00 to 8:15?

WIFE: AM or PM?

HOW TO CUT BACK WITHOUT SUFFERING TOO MUCH

With the economy getting worse by the minute, more and more people are looking for simple ways to cut back:

Cut: Health Club Membership.

Substitute: Sam's Club Membership, where you can burn off calories wandering up and down the poorly-marked aisles looking for something specific, hoisting 50 lb. boxes of bulk items from the display to your cart, and standing in line for an hour to pay for everything.

Cut: Holiday vacation.

Substitute: A holiday *desperation*, which is where you cash in your American Express Points for five free nights at a resort you hope won't be the dump you fear it is.

Cut: Insurance.

Substitute: Praying you don't hit anyone.

Cut: Buying new clothes.

Substitute: Wearing old clothes, because if enough people do this it will become the trend, and you'll suddenly be back in fashion again.

Cut: Starbucks.

Substitute: Cheap, instant coffee, but every once in a while just mess it up – make it too cold, pour it down the sink and pretend you “misplaced” your own order, randomly stir in some bizarre flavoring, substitute soy milk for half 'n' half, accidentally make yourself a decaf, etc.

Cut: Dieting.

Substitute: Not being able to afford food.

[CONTINUED]

Cut: Blackberry.

Substitute: Coleco Electronic Football Game circa 1978. True, it doesn't have e-mail, a web browser or the ability to make calls, but it is every bit as addictive, so after a few days you'll become so obsessed with it you'll ignore everything else that's going on in your life and spend all your waking moments punching keys with your thumbs, just like a Blackberry.

Cut: Expensive wine.

Substitute: Cheap wine, just more of it, because there's no better way to cope with a recession than with alcohol. *Plus, everything pretty much tastes the same after three glasses anyway.*

Cut: Organic groceries.

Substitute: Non-organic groceries – because really, what's so bad about a few extra growth-hormones in your system?

Cut: Christmas presents.

Substitute: Christmas-in-July presents – because if retailers can do it, why not parents? Besides, the economy will be in such bad shape by then you could probably get everyone in the family a flat-screen TV for a couple hundred dollars.

Alternately, if your kids are young enough to still believe in Santa Claus, you could substitute nothing and just lay the blame on Santa.

Cut: Babysitter.

Substitute: Recently laid-off co-workers.

Cut: House cleaning service.

Substitute: Kids.

DIRTY SECRETS

If it's the cleaning lady's job to clean the house, why do we always pick up before she comes?

(Usually *just* before she comes, too, with one of the kids stalling her in the foyer as we scramble to do the upstairs.)

It would be one thing if we were motivated by conscience, believing it unfair to have her clean everything, but this doesn't seem to be the case. Are we worried she'll realize we're really just a family of slobs? She can probably tell that already, thanks to dishes that occasionally end up under the bed and the collection of crumbs, coins and God-knows-what-it-is she regularly unearths from beneath the sofa cushions. Do we think she'll tell the H.O.A. how much more disgusting our house is than, say, the neighbor's down the street?

(It is, but only because they have no kids.)

Or do we just not want anyone — even a nice, hard-working illegal alien from South of the border who most definitely wouldn't care — to find out how much of our lifestyle is an illusion, and how the only parts we have the energy to maintain week in, week out, are the ones that other people will see.

WHEN THE 4TH OF JULY BLOWS UP IN YOUR FACE

KID: Did you get fireworks when you were a kid?

DAD: Are you kidding? That was the whole point of the 4th of July – we got all kinds of fireworks: ladyfingers, roman candles, M-80's...

KID: What's an M-80?

DAD: An M-80's like a little bomb.

KID: Grandma let you have a little bomb?!?!?

DAD: No, not Grandma; Grandpa got it for me – he just made me promise not to tell Grandma.

KID: Oh.

DAD: He got me ladyfingers, too, which were these really, really tiny, really, really loud firecrackers. What we'd do is sneak up behind where, say, my aunt and uncle were sitting and then toss a few under their chairs. BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! They'd jump 10 feet in the air.

KID: I bet they were pissed.

DAD: Yeah, but they couldn't do anything 'cause it was the 4th of July.

KID: Wow – you didn't get in trouble!

DAD: The best things were Roman candles, which were these tubes that shot out flaming balls of fire when you lit 'em. Me and my friends used to run around the backyard and shoot 'em at each other.

KID: You shot each other with flaming balls of fire?!?!? Awesome!

DAD: It was awesome...

KID: Hi Mom.

DAD: ...er... uh... um... and stupid.

KID: Dad was just telling me about the 4th of July.

MOM: Yes, I heard.

DAD: I was just saying that fireworks are stupid and dangerous, and we were stupid and dangerous for playing with them.

MOM: I see.

KID: Why are you using your angry voice?

MOM: I'm not using my angry voice. Yet. Now why don't you run along and watch TV while I talk to your father.

KID: Uh-oh.

MOM: In private.

DAD: *Big uh-oh.*

KID: Okay, but when you're done, can we get some fireworks so Dad and I can shoot each other and blow stuff up?

[WHY CHICKEN NUGGETS ARE BETTER THAN PROZAC]

TO INVITE? OR NOT TO INVITE?

The Cold War had “Détente.” The military? “Don’t ask, don’t tell.” But what about you and those neighbors? Call it “smile and nod,” the unwritten policy whereby you acknowledge their existence, but not much else (except for once a year or so, when you stop and chat about the weather or some change in your town’s zoning laws).

It’s not because they’re especially weird or creepy (if they were weird the policy would be “pretend you don’t see them,” and if they were creepy it would be “I wonder if I should call the police now?”), it’s just that you don’t – and won’t ever – click with them, so what’s the point?

The problem, of course, is that the 4th of July is traditionally a time for neighbors to get together, and if it’s your turn to have everyone on the block over for watermelon, BBQ and bacteria-friendly potato salad, how can you not invite them?

Sadly, you can’t.

But just because you “invite” them doesn’t have to mean you’re actually *inviting* them (see page 25).

OBSERVATIONS ON THE DMV

- Even if you are the first person in line, first thing in the morning, you will end up waiting an hour and a half.
- Anything that can be screwed up will be.
- Just because you are blind, senile, psychotic or drunk doesn't mean you can't renew your license.
- The fact that you're supposed to take a number when you walk in only confuses the people in front of you who never learned to count.
- Instructions are in Albanian, Arabic, Bosnian, Cambodian, Chinese, English, Farsi, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Korean, Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Somalian, Spanish, Turkish, Thai and Vietnamese, but stupidity seems to be the same in any language.
- If your car gets stolen, it is likely the person who stole it is waiting in line in front of you.
- Saying you "work at the DMV" is kind of misleading – a more accurate description would be to say you "do as little work as you possibly can so you don't get fired from the DMV."
- If you thought inbreeding was confined to Appalachian Mountain shacks and Mormon Fundamentalist compounds, guess again; at the DMV it seems to be thriving, not just in front of the counter but behind it, too – "First she was my sister, then she was my wife, and now she's my supervisor."
- No matter how fat you are, there will be a woman ahead of you who weighs at least 100 pounds more than you do. (This may be the one positive thing about the DMV.)

[CONTINUED]

- One couple waiting in line will get into a huge, screaming argument.
- One couple waiting in line will dry hump each other until a DMV employee asks them to stop.
- Somebody will video the couple and post it on Youtube.
- If you think a set of instructions are so simple even a moron could follow them, the moron in line in front of you will prove you wrong, and require up to 25 minutes of redundant, repetitive picture-based explanation before he or she realizes you can't just take the driver's test and get a license, you must actually pass it first.
- If you accidentally marked "A" even though you know the answer is "None of the above," you still have to re-take the test.
- If the fee is \$25 and you only have \$23, you are \$2 short no matter how many times you say "Please" or "Couldn't you just cut me a little slack?"
- Even if there are 50 open seats, somebody will sit down right next to you.
- The person who sits down next to you will make you consider leaving and coming back tomorrow, even if you have already waited two hours and are next in line.

OPRAH'S (IM)PRACTICAL GUIDE TO GETTING MORE SLEEP

God bless Oprah and all the good she does in the world, but sometimes she – or, perhaps more accurately, her editors – get it wrong.

Case in point: the 10-point family guide to getting more sleep, which starts out sensibly enough, but quickly takes an impractical turn:

1. Make sleep a family priority.
2. Recognize sleep problems in your children.

For most parents, the problem isn't recognizing the problem – it's pretty obvious that kids don't like going to sleep, ever, no matter how late it is or how tired they are – it's figuring out what to do about it, other than turning to Benadryl.

3. Parents need to work together.

But we don't.

It's not "divide and conquer" so much as it is "You deal with it while I relax for a while and watch TV 'cause I've had a rough day."

4. Be consistent.

Ha.

5. Set a regular bedtime and wake time.

Parents already do this all the time, we're just not very good at it. Because while most of us realize that bedtime should be 15 to 30 minutes before we finally reach the breaking point, and wake time should be whenever we finally

[CONTINUED]

get enough sleep to feel rested and alert – say 8:09 pm and 7:51 am – the reality is that bedtime is usually 15 minutes after the breaking point, and wake time is whatever time you absolutely, positively have to leave the house in the morning so you're not late minus half the time you need to make breakfast, make lunches, make coffee, take a shower, get everyone dressed, settle whatever random fight breaks out that morning and kiss your spouse. (Unless you're still fighting because you didn't work together.)

6. Routine. Routine. Routine.

In your dreams. In your dreams. In your dreams – unless a "routine" can consist of a carefully planned series of random, unpredictable events to which no timeframe can ever logically be applied.

7. Dress and room temperature – not too hot, not too cold.

Oh, please – if one kid is too hot, the other is too cold, and if they're fine, you're uncomfortable. The only one who ever got anything "just right" was Goldilocks and she was make-believe.

8. Transitional object to ease separation – doll, stuffed animal, blanket.

Okay, but what do you do when the "transitional object" is mom?

9. Don't share your room or your bed with your child.

Anyone with parents who weren't hippies has heard this, but let's examine the way it works in real life:

CHILD: Can I sleep with you?

PARENT: No.

CHILD: But I'm scared.

PARENT: No.

CHILD: And I don't like being by myself.

PARENT: No.

CHILD: Why not?

PARENT: Because Oprah says you can't.

CHILD: I hate Oprah. Oprah is mean. I'm never going to watch Oprah on TV again. (Unless she gives me a car*.)

Worse, the next night when your kid comes in it won't be because there's a monster under the bed, it'll be because Oprah is there, too.

10. There's always one last thing with kids, so anticipate.

Anticipate? One last thing? How about 10 last things? Or 20? Any parent who can do that is clearly psychic and should just hit the Atlantic City casinos and hire an army of nannies with the winnings.

For most parents, the most practical suggestion for getting more family sleep is to just be patient for 18 years or so, at which time the kids will finally be old enough to move on and sleep by themselves.

*Or recommends her audience checks out www.deathbysuburb.com.

OBSERVATIONS ON “BACK-TO-SCHOOL” SUPPLIES

- By the time you get around to getting them they're already sold out.
- At least 10% of all kids will lose everything before they even make it back to school, which is why teachers always ask parents to send extra supplies.
- At least 10% of all parents will forget to buy them before kids go back to school, too.
- With it's sharp point, doesn't a protractor count as a weapon? And doesn't that mean any child who brings one to school will be sent home under the "zero tolerance" policy?
- What is a No. 2 pencil and why is it preferable to, say, a No. 9 pencil?
- When you ask a teacher what he or she needs, why don't they just be honest and say "A bottle of vodka – two if I get that Johnson kid."
- If school wanted your kid to have a cell phone, they would have put it on the list.
- On the other hand, cell phones now come with GPS locators, so it won't be long before they do.
- Bad teachers require the same supplies as good teachers, they just won't do anything worthwhile with them.
- Send a man to the Moon? Yes. Make a composition notebook with a cover that won't fall off in three weeks? No.
- Teachers are bummed the summer is over, too, but not as much as kids.
- Parents, on the other hand, are usually relieved.

HOW TO EXPLAIN THE ECONOMIC CRISIS TO YOUR KIDS

KID: Are you sick?

PARENT: No.

KID: Then why do you look like you're gonna throw-up?

PARENT: The President is talking about the economic crisis again.

KID: What's an economic crisis?

PARENT: Well... Basically, it's when everybody in the country suddenly realizes we're fucked.

KID: GASP! You said a bad word.

PARENT: I'm sorry.

KID: You're not supposed to say bad words.

PARENT: You're right. Even with a situation as bad as this, I shouldn't swear.

KID: Why is the situation so bad, anyway?

PARENT: The cost of living is going up. Real wages are going down. People's houses are worth less than they owe on them. Nobody can get credit any more. We can't seem to find a way to use less energy. And now the experts are saying the very foundation upon which our entire economy is based is cracked at best, and may actually be broken beyond repair.

KID: Wow. *We are fucked.*

PARENT: No shit.

OPTIMISM IS OUT,
PESSIMISM IS IN.

- Every time God closes a door, he opens a window. *So you can jump out of it.*
- Every cloud has a silver lining. *Unfortunately, silver is down 50% from January, so you're still pretty much screwed.*
- It's always darkest before the dawn... *of a new day that will probably be even worse.*
- It doesn't matter if the glass is half-full or half-empty if it's been smashed into a thousand pieces.
- The only thing we have to fear is fear itself. *And creditors.*

WHEN YOU'RE EXHAUSTED...

...the answer is "NO!," regardless of whether the question was "Are you upset?" or "Can I go to the potty?"

...you call your kids by the wrong names. Or worse – by the dog's.

...simple things become infinitely complicated, to the point where microwaving chicken nuggets takes an hour.

...you can't remember if it's your day to do the pick-up, and if you think it is, it isn't, and if you think it isn't, it is.

...you try to play hide 'n' seek but fall asleep in the upstairs hall closet.

...your spouse is "in the mood" and doesn't understand why you're not.

...somebody throws up, bleeds on something, or has "an accident."

...non-parents suggest you just put the kids to bed early and get some sleep, but you're too tired to tell them what a massively stupid and unrealistic idea that is.

...telemarketers call every few minutes asking you to donate.

...helping your kids with their homework proves so stressful and challenging, it makes you cry, even though it's just addition.

...you don't realize you're yelling at your kids until everybody else in the supermarket aisle starts to stare.

...you push on, because you're a parent and that's what parents do.

@*%#!

CUSTOMER: Hi, I have a complaint.

CUSTOMER SERVICE DEPARTMENT: I'm sorry to hear that.

CUSTOMER: Really?

CUSTOMER SERVICE DEPARTMENT: No, we're just trained to say that. Our real goal is to do the very least we can, in the least amount of time, and make sure you don't throw a fit.

CUSTOMER: But aren't I a valued customer?

CUSTOMER SERVICE DEPARTMENT: "Yes" in the sense that without our customers we'd go out of business, but "No" in the sense that we don't care about you personally.

CUSTOMER: But I spend over a thousand dollars a month here!

CUSTOMER SERVICE DEPARTMENT: That might sound like a lot, but our margins are so tight, the profit on that thousand dollars probably won't even cover what the company has to pay me to talk to you right now.

CUSTOMER: So the company is losing money on this conversation?

CUSTOMER SERVICE DEPARTMENT: Yes.

CUSTOMER: *Good.*

CUSTOMER SERVICE DEPARTMENT: Not really, because we then have to make cuts in other departments to make up for it.

CUSTOMER: Are you suggesting that the more I complain, the more other departments suffer, which means the more likely there are to be things to complain about?

CUSTOMER SERVICE DEPARTMENT: Yes. I'm saying this is actually all your fault.

CUSTOMER: My fault?!?!?!?

CUSTOMER SERVICE DEPARTMENT: Truth hurts, don't it?

CUSTOMER: But all I did was buy a chicken from you – a chicken that was rotten.

CUSTOMER SERVICE DEPARTMENT: That's right, *you* bought it. And now you're complaining about it. Which means instead of having somebody in the poultry department making sure the chickens aren't green and spoiled, we have to have somebody standing here belittling your complaints.

CUSTOMER: But that doesn't make any sense.

CUSTOMER SERVICE DEPARTMENT: We're the Customer Service Department, we don't have to make sense.

[WHY CHICKEN NUGGETS ARE BETTER THAN PROZAC]

WHEN WHAT YOU SAID AS
A KID BECOMES INAPPROPRIATE

PARENT: Why are you fighting?

KID #1: He started it.

KID #2: He pushed me first.

KID #1: I did not. He pushed me first.

KID #2: Did not.

KID #1: Did, too.

KID #2: Did not.

KID #1: Did, too.

KID #2: Liar.

KID #1: Butthead.

PARENT: Stop. What happened?

KID #1: I was playing downstairs.

KID #2: With my toys.

KID #1: They're not your toys. They're my toys.

KID #2: No they're not.

KID #1: You gave them to me for my birthday.

KID #2: That's right: *I* gave them to you, so they're mine.

KID #1: That's not fair. He can't do that... *can he?*

PARENT: No, he can't do that. When I was a kid and somebody did that, we called them an Indi... er... uh...

KID #2: A what?

PARENT: Oops.

KID #1: What's an "Indi... er ...uh?"

PARENT: Forget it.

KID #1: Why?

PARENT: I misspoke. Just forget what I said and go back downstairs and play.

KID #1: We can't.

PARENT: Why?

KID #1: Because he's being a – what did you call it? An "Indi... er... uh?"

KID #2: I'm not an "Indi... er... uh," you're an "Indi... er... uh."

PARENT: Oh, God.

KID #1: "Indi... er... uh."

KID #2: "Indi... er... uh."

PARENT: Enough! Look... I said something I shouldn't have, okay? So just forget it. What I said was wrong, so don't say it.

KID #2: Why? If you called kids "Indi... er... uh" why can't we?

PARENT: We didn't call kids an "Indi... er... uh," we... um... we said something else that's probably offensive now, but I... uh... I can't remember what it is, so what I need you to do is play nice or you're both going to be sent to your rooms for the rest of the day. Understood?

KID #2: Yes.

KID #1: Fine.

15 minutes later

KID #1: That's mine.

KID #2: Is not.

KID #1: Is too.

KID #2: Is not.

KID #1: You can't take it back like that.

KID #2: Can too.

KID #1: Mom, he's being an "Indi... er... uh!"

GLOBAL WARMING IS NO JOKE

For parents, Earth Day is a time to feel guilt and shame for driving an SUV and having too many flat-screen TVs. For kids, it's a time to learn that the psychological problems they'll have later in life because of the way mom and dad treat them are nothing compared to the environmental problems they'll have later in life because of the way mom and dad treat the planet. (Assuming, of course, life is still around later.)

"Thanks for ruining the planet!" they say.

"It's not just us," you respond. "It's Grandma and Grandpa, too. And the Chinese!"

And then they share the environmental tips they claim to have learned in school:

- "You're supposed to turn lights off unless you need them, which means it's okay to read in the dark."
- "You should recycle everything, even clothes, so when I wear the same shirt, pants and underwear all week, I'm not being gross, I'm being green."
- "Everybody should start a compost pile. Mine will be in the back of my closet or underneath the bed."
- "We should all conserve water. This means that a shorter shower is better than a longer shower, but no shower is best of all."
- "One way to help the planet is to buy less stuff, which means no more boring, stupid trips to Target."
- "We should all eat less. I will do my part, starting with vegetables."

- “When possible, eat local – like at the McDonald’s that’s just down the street.”
- “Americans waste 5.8 billion gallons of water each year flushing their toilets. So when I don’t flush, I’m not being a slob, I’m being environmentally friendly.”

For more Global Warming humor, look for the next installment of “An Inconvenient Truth” — “*An Inconvenient Truth 2: A Funny Thing Happened on The Way to Carbon Neutral...*”

SCENES FROM MARRIAGE,
NO. 6

WIFE: How was your day?

HUSBAND: What's that supposed to mean?

WIFE: Yikes. Must've been bad. *Sorry.*

HUSBAND: Sorry? Why would you say that?

WIFE: Because you had a bad day.

HUSBAND: No I didn't. My day wasn't bad. It was good... or at least fine.

WIFE: Oh, okay. Then I'm glad.

HUSBAND: You don't look like you're glad.

WIFE: You don't look like you had a good day.

HUSBAND: Are you calling me a liar?

WIFE: With the way you're acting, I'm not calling you *anything*.

HUSBAND: Oh, so now I'm "acting?"

WIFE: Is there anything I can say that you won't take the wrong way?

HUSBAND: I'm not taking things the wrong way, you are.

WIFE: I just asked you how your day was.

HUSBAND: And I told you.

WIFE: Yeah, you said it was good.

HUSBAND: No I didn't.

WIFE: Uh... I said "Sorry you had a bad day," then you said, "I didn't have a bad day, I had a good day."

HUSBAND: I think I know what I said better than you.

WIFE: Then tell me: how was your day?

HUSBAND: What does it matter? You'll just hear what you want to hear anyway.

MORE WAYS TO CUT BACK WITHOUT SUFFERING TOO MUCH

Cut: Keeping up with the Joneses.

Substitute: Keeping up with the Joneses (though in this case, it's because they're just ahead of you in the unemployment line).

Cut: Using credit cards.

Substitute: Using credit cards quickly, before the credit card company finds out you have no money and cuts you off.

Cut: Neiman-Marcus.

Substitute: Macy's (not shopping there, of course, working there part-time over the holidays).

Cut: Weeklong vacation.

Substitute: Weeklong *accusation*, which is where you and your spouse cancel your trip to Hawaii and spend the whole time at home arguing over who's more to blame for the state of your household finances.

Cut: 2-for-1 drinks at Happy Hour.

Substitute: \$2 buffet at Happy Hour, since it's a great way to eat cheap.

Cut: Style.

Substitute: Substance* (as in "controlled," since when you're high you can't feel anything, even the pain of your complete failure).

Cut: Coupons.

Substitute: Editor's note: there isn't really anything you can substitute for cutting coupons, except for maybe food stamps, but that's too depressing to be funny.

*For those who indulge in such things; for the rest of us, there is only booze.

[CONTINUED]

Cut: Materialism.

Substitute: Pessimism. (See page 98.)

Cut: Hi-Definition cable.

Substitute: Regular cable + HD antenna. (Unfortunately, this isn't an option for some, as a frighteningly high percentage of HDTV owners don't actually realize they need HD cable service to get an HD signal on their TV, and that what they're watching now on their 1080P flat screen is crappy, old 480i.)

Cut: Heat.

Substitute: Thinking about stuff that makes your blood boil, like bailouts for Wall Street millionaires, hedge fund billionaires, and car company CEO's who still fly private jets.

Cut: Donating money to charities.

Substitute: Donating money to banks, Detroit car companies and large, multi-national insurance conglomerates, because (if you believe them and Congress) they need it more than, say, Unicef or The United Way.

DON'T WANT TO OVEREAT? GO VEGAN.

With a single Thanksgiving meal packing a full day-and-half's worth of calories, it's easy to see why so many of us find ourselves slumped on the sofa in front of the TV after everyone has gone home, groaning, bloated, unable to move and wondering why we feel so bad.

Fortunately, there is a simple way to prevent this kind of excess on Thanksgiving: go vegan.

While many can't imagine Thanksgiving without turkey, gravy and sausage-based stuffing, that's the whole point: if you fill your table with stuff you don't like and normally wouldn't ever eat, you can't possibly eat too much.

True, nut roll, tempeh and all-the-vegetables-you-can-eat might not sound very appealing, but keep in mind that you can still booze it up, and while that, too, may leave you slumped on the sofa in front of the TV after everyone has gone home, you won't be groaning, bloated, unable to move and wondering why you feel so bad, you'll just be passed out.

And for those of you who are already vegan, the key here is to just stop being vegan for the day.

Not only will the shock of all that animal flesh make you instantly sick – and therefore unable to overeat – puking right at the table will also help your friends and family, as the sight, sound and smell of your vomit will likely cause them to vomit, too, and then not be able to overeat either.

(And probably not want to invite you over for Thanksgiving ever again as well, but you'll have the whole year to convince them it was just a one-time thing.)

THINGS...

... you want but don't need:

1. More choices
2. The complete season of anything
3. iPod Touch
4. New neighbors (they don't say "The devil you know..." for nothing)
5. Sleep (though you might not feel that way today, the fact that your eyes are still open proves it)

... you need but don't have:

1. Time
2. Enough space in the hall closet
3. Healthy, all-natural, organic snacks that don't taste like shit
4. Somebody to validate your decisions
5. Perspective (which, like car keys and DVD cases, is easy to misplace and doesn't usually turn up until you stop looking for it)

... you have but don't use:

1. Offers from childless friends to baby-sit
2. Half of whatever you got at your school's last silent auction
3. A fondue set
4. Kid coupons for "15 minutes of quiet," "a free back rub," "breakfast in bed," etc.
5. Control over what you do with your life (even though it doesn't feel that way)

WASHING THEIR MOUTHS OUT WITH VIRTUAL SOAP

PARENT: Hey... why's your computer off? I thought you were on that internet kid's club?*

KID: I was. But I got kicked out.

PARENT: What?!?!?! Why?

KID: Well... you know how you tell me I shouldn't say bad words?

PARENT: Yeah.

KID: You never told me I shouldn't type them, either.

PARENT: Oh.

KID: You're not gonna wash my mouth out with soap like your mom would have done, are you?

PARENT: No, that only happened when we said bad words.

KID: Good, 'cause that sounds gross.

PARENT: *But I am gonna make you get some soap and scrub under your fingernails.*

KID: 'cause I used them to type a bad word?

PARENT: No, because they're dirty.

*That was thoroughly researched to be 100% free of porn, pedophiles and all the other internet-related things that give modern parents nightmares.

[WHY CHICKEN NUGGETS ARE BETTER THAN PROZAC]

GREEN WITH GREEN ENVY

According to psychologists, Prius envy refers to the reaction of parents to the realization that they do not drive a Prius or other environmentally-conscious automobile, and are instead ruining the planet with their massive, hulking SUV.

Many consider this realization to be the defining moment in the development of “green” consciousness or “environmental identity,” leading these previously carbon *non-neutral* suburbanites to at least half-heartedly embrace the principles of sustainable living.

(Though not *all* the principles, of course, as that would be much, much too difficult — especially when it comes to hardships like unplugging plasma TVs, cell phones and other household electronics to stop them from being energy vampires, limiting showers to five minutes or less a day, drinking tap water, composting, getting rid of the second refrigerator, etc.)

X MARKS THE SPOT
(ON THEIR FACE)

KID: Look at me. I have a beard!

PARENT: Wow. You do have a beard. You look like Grizzly Adams.

KID: I made it myself.

PARENT: I can see that. It looks like... *Hold on... Come a little closer so I can get a better look.*

KID: I did a good job, didn't I?

PARENT: You didn't use the permanent markers from my drawer, did you?

KID: I did, but it's okay because I put them right back where I found them when I was done.

TODDLER OR PUPPY?

It's not always easy to tell the difference:

- Both like fire trucks
- Both like dog food
- Both like the toilet – the toddler to splash in, the puppy to drink from
- Both have chew toys
- Both use a leash (and can't stand it)
- Both look at you with “puppy dog” eyes when their feelings get hurt
- Neither understands “No,” even though they hear it more than any other word in the English language
- Both like to sit in your lap
- Both bite
- Both think that everything in the house is theirs
- Both go outside in the dead of winter without a coat (though, admittedly, this is more of a concern for toddlers)
- Both jump on the furniture
- Both chew on the furniture
- Both pee on the furniture

- Both vomit if they eat too much chocolate
- When you get mad at them, neither really understands why
- Both think they can hide when they're in trouble – *the dog under the sofa,*
the toddler under the bed
- Both end up sleeping in your bed, whether you like it or not

[WHY CHICKEN NUGGETS ARE BETTER THAN PROZAC]

WHAT TO DO IF YOUR KIDS REJECT YOUR POLITICS

As a parent, you know what's best. That's why you're raising your kids to be God-fearing conservatives or free-thinking liberals, just like you.

Or so you thought until you came home one night to find an Obamarama going on in your living room, or caught one of your kids watching Fox News wearing a Glenn Beck Fan Club t-shirt.

Fortunately, there are ways to deal with this unsettling situation:

1. Ground them until after the 2012 election.
2. Force them to live their politics. This means that if your Little Limbaugh objects to your anything-goes liberal ideology, remind him that conservatives are against welfare of any kind (except corporate), so he needs to either pay his own way or go live in a homeless shelter with all the other free-loaders. Or, if your Lil' Nancy Pelosi condemns your unwavering support for God, guns and unborn babies, remind her that come Judgment Day, she'll be the one burning in Hell.
3. Move somewhere so far to the Left or to the Right that your kids won't have anyone to join them when they pass out fliers condemning Barack Obama or stage a sit-in against the evil influence of Big Oil.

For liberals, this means moving to Berkeley; for conservatives, try Oklahoma City, OK or Cincinnati, OH (or if you're a Mormon, try Provo, Utah, which is regularly ranked the most conservative city in America).

4. Have them deprogrammed by either sending them to an Evangelical Christian Boot Camp or making them watch Oprah all day, every day until they come around.

5. If you're a conservative, blame Bill Clinton.
6. If you're a liberal, blame Ronald Reagan.
7. If you're either, blame George W. Bush (as the least-liked president in modern history, he's become the official scapegoat for everything).
8. If all else fails, break out the big guns of parenting – guilt and shame – and let your kids have it until their fragile egos are so crushed and broken the Stockholm Syndrome kicks in and they begin to love and embrace you and your ways once again.

CAMERA SHY AT THE DMV

Everybody makes fun of Driver's License photographs, but how good could anyone look after spending three hours and 19 minutes at a place like the DMV?

The walls are painted a government-approved shade of beige that seems to have been chosen for its ability to induce nausea. God only knows what kind of deadly germs and pathogens are breeding freely on the furniture (which looks like it was bought on the cheap at a Nixon Administration yard sale and then left in a basement storage room for three decades). And if you think tin-titus is irritating, it's a lullaby compared to the hum given off by row after row of cheap fluorescent lights.

Still, that would all be tolerable if you could just take a number and wait by yourself.

But you can't.

If you've ever wondered what the people on "Cops" do when they're not getting arrested, or what somebody who considers personal hygiene to be optional looks like, all you have to do is turn to either side of you and say "hello."

Clearly, somebody has been peeing in the gene pool.

How else can you explain the toothless, tattooed biker chick/meth addict taking the motorcycle test who doesn't see the problem with asking the proctor if he can give her a hint? Or the old lady renewing her license who insists she doesn't need a vision test, but then can't even find the line she's supposed to stand behind to take it? Or the guy at the center of a booze-cloud you can smell from 20 feet away who gets upset because they won't let him re-take his driver's test?

As bad as it is to be near people like this, however, it's a whole lot worse when you realize you're no different than people like this – because when you get up to the window and the clerk says you need two additional pieces of ID, not one like you thought, you protest...

And say nobody told you...

And say you've been waiting all morning already...

And say that they should make an exception...

And say the rules are stupid...

And say they are stupid for enforcing them...

And say just about every idiotic thing you can think of, until you finally realize you are saying every idiotic thing you can think of.

At which point you go home, get another ID, and wait in line all over again.

And then they take your picture.

Click.

TIVO GUILT? WHAT'S TIVO GUILT?

If you've never heard of "TiVo guilt," you're not alone. It's a strange, new affliction where people feel bad because they don't watch the shows they're "supposed" to watch like "Meet The Press," "60 Minutes" or "Planet Earth" and instead opt for, say, "The Biggest Loser" – not so much because they like the show, but because it just happens to be on when they hit the "power" button on their remote and if watching that show means they don't have to deal with their TiVo's "Now Playing" cue, that's perfect, because seeing just how many important, educational, award-winning, timely, informative, critically-acclaimed shows they've saved but haven't gotten around to yet makes them feel like the biggest loser.

What's worse than "TiVo guilt" is the fact that it isn't new. And given how many people suffer from it, it's not all that strange, either. In fact, it's so pervasive and well-documented, googling "TiVo guilt" generates 231,000 results, which almost certainly include at least a dozen ways for sufferers to cope with "TiVo guilt," a handful of "TiVo guilt" support groups, and at least one "TiVo guilt" 12-step program.

Which raises the question: if not keeping up with your "Now Playing" cue makes you feel guilty, how does not keeping up with your "What's Happening in the Outside World" cue make you feel?

Depressed, probably.

And to make matters worse, if you're like most, you'll deal with being depressed by indulging yourself with comfort food and classic movies, except that all the classic movies you saved on your TiVo for a crisis just like this were deleted a long time ago to make room for all those "TiVo Guilt" shows mentioned earlier, which means you're stuck with "The Biggest Loser" again, only now you're watching it with a half-gallon of Ben & Jerry's in front of you, so not only do you feel like the biggest loser, you're a few thousand calories closer to actually being able to qualify as a contestant, too.

“FOR THE 10TH TIME, NO...”

...I can't play catch with you right now, I'm trying to sign you up for summer Little League.”

...We can't watch a family movie with you right now, we're busy talking. Now... Where were we? *Oh, yeah – figuring out ways to spend more time with our kids.*”

...I can't read to you right now, I'm trying to catch a CNN Special Report on illiteracy in America.”

...We're not walking to the park – and if you don't get in the car right now we won't drive there, either.”

[WHY CHICKEN NUGGETS ARE BETTER THAN PROZAC]

MAKING A LIST, CHECKING IT TWICE

It used to be the only one who “made a list and checked it twice” was Santa Claus, but now that job has been taken over by parents – *not to see who’s naughty or nice, but to make sure we get absolutely everything our kids said they wanted for Christmas.*

Are we over-compensating for our own childhoods, when we’d ask for five things and be lucky to get one?

Probably.

But if there’s one day of the year you’re allowed to indulge your kids, it’s Christmas.

(And if your parents or in-laws roll their eyes at all the excess, just add a couple extra shots of rum to the egg nog and make sure they – or you – drink up.)

THE SCALE DOESN'T LIE, BUT IT SHOULD DO A BETTER JOB EXPLAINING ITSELF

YOU: So... how much do I weigh?

YOUR SCALE: You don't want to know.

YOU: C'mon, it can't be that bad.

YOUR SCALE: Not if you're an offensive tackle.

YOU: What?!?!?

YOUR SCALE: Just think of yourself as being "fat but fit."

YOU: *Fat but fit?* I think I'm gonna cry.

YOUR SCALE: Well... each ounce of tears weigh .0652 pounds so let it out.

YOU: You make it sound like I'm grossly overweight.

YOUR SCALE: See that mirror over there?

YOU: You mean the one I covered with a towel so I wouldn't have to look at myself?

YOUR SCALE: If that's not a cry for help, what is?

YOU: You try losing weight at my age!

YOUR SCALE: Your age has nothing to do with it — besides the fact that whenever you think about it you get depressed and eat a gallon of Ben & Jerry's.

YOU: I do not.

YOUR SCALE: You think I'm lying?

YOU: It wouldn't be the first time.

YOUR SCALE: *Please... Scales do not lie.* That's a lie people like you spread so they don't have to face the truth.

YOU: How else can you explain my weight?

YOUR SCALE: *Uh... maybe the fact that you've been taking in more calories than you burn?*

YOU: I know for a fact that's not true. Just look at what I eat? Fruit. Vegetables. Chicken. Fish. Whole grains.

YOUR SCALE: Yeah, plus ice cream and cookies when nobody is looking, whatever you make for your kids but they don't finish, wine...

YOU: Wine is good for you.

YOUR SCALE: *A glass, not a bottle.*

YOU: Sometimes I just need something to help me relax at night.

[CONTINUED]

YOUR SCALE: Or at lunch.

YOU: That only happens every once in a while. And that doesn't...

YOUR SCALE: You were gonna say "count," weren't you?

YOU: No.

YOUR SCALE: I'm not judging. I get it. Sometimes you just need a double-chocolate brownie before you go to bed... Or a mocha frappuccino... Or some of that spinach dip from Bristol Farms. My point is that all those calories count, even if you don't count them.

YOU: Says you.

YOUR SCALE: Do you really think that every time you step on the scale I'm secretly adding 20 pounds?

YOU: No, not 20 pounds... *25 pounds.*

YOUR SCALE: You're hopeless.

YOU: And you're a liar. So now I'm putting you back in the closet until you learn to be accurate.

YOUR SCALE: That's what you said last month.

YOU: Yeah, and clearly you haven't learned your lesson — *last month you were only off by 20 pounds.*

SIMPLE THINGS TODDLERS MAKE DIFFICULT

Showering.
Getting dressed in the morning.
Punctuality.
Watching a TV show all the way through in one sitting.
Airport security checkpoints.
Walking through the house without tripping over a toy (or a toddler).
Talking on the phone.
Going to the toilet by yourself.
Peace and quiet.
Driving anywhere more than 15 minutes away.
Scheduling.
Maintaining order.
Arguing with your spouse. (Especially because swear words tend to get repeated over and over by the little ears that hear them.)
Dinner (because they want to help make it and/or because they hate everything you suggest).
Administering oral medications.
Keeping your shoes in order on the floor of your walk-in closet.
Logic and reason.
Staying in bed all day when you're sick.
Keeping food off your clothes.
Keeping make-up in the top drawer of the vanity.
Vacuuming.
Sex. (Which you're probably too tired to want, anyway.)
Talking to other adults like they're adults.
Working from home.
Writing anything longer than a list.

BAKING WITH KIDS

Sometimes it's easy to forget that kids have to be taught pretty much everything, so even if something seems as if it would be self-evident to even the littlest of minds, it probably isn't.

For example:

- Even though Play-doh is a lot like cookie dough, and can easily be cut into holiday shapes that look exactly like the sugar cookies Grandma makes, you can't bake it.
- And if you do, it smells really, really bad for days.
- Magic Marker shouldn't be used to decorate Christmas cookies.
- Or the baby.
- Or mommy's new Christmas dress.
- Taking a bite of raw dough is probably not going to make you sick, but eating all the raw dough in the bowl probably will. (Although probably not until 3 am.)
- Santa is not fat because he's so stressed out by the economy he's eating too much.
- On the other hand, he will be cutting back a little this year, so you might not get absolutely everything you put on your list.
- "I don't care how much the dog likes it, NO MORE EGG NOG!"
- Ditto for Aunt Lou.

RUDOLPH REVISITED

DASHER: What's wrong? *You look pissed.*

COMET: Did you see the memo? "To reindeer, from Santa: due to unforeseen weather conditions, effective immediately, Rudolph will assume responsibility for sleigh navigation and team member management."

DASHER: *Rudolph's gonna lead the sleigh tonight!?!?!?* But Rudolph doesn't even have any experience.

COMET: I know: how can somebody who's never even been on the team step in and lead it?

DASHER: I guess if you kiss the right ass, anything's possible.

COMET: Yeah, forget "red nose," they oughta call him "brown nose."

DASHER: Doesn't Santa realize there's a reason we never let Rudolph join in any of our reindeer games?

COMET: You know Santa as well as I do: he only cares if you're "good" or "bad," not if you're bossy, manipulative, selfish and conniving.

DASHER: Personally, I find the whole thing insulting. *I mean, have we ever let Santa down before? Doesn't he believe in us?*

COMET: Sometimes I think Santa's not just thick around the middle, he's thick in the head, too. But what can I say? The fog's got him worried.

DASHER: What he should be worried about is Rudolph getting a DUI.

COMET: Huh?

DASHER: *C'mon – "red" nose? That lush drinks more spiked egg nog than an elf.*

COMET: I had no idea.

DASHER: And the worst part is we'll all just go along with it because that's what good reindeer do. And then, when Christmas is over and all the children of the world have their toys, everybody will say it's all because of Rudolph.

COMET: Oh, c'mon. We'll get some credit.

DASHER: Mark my words: *Rudolph will go down in history.*

LITTLE IRRITATIONS: THE PAPER CUTS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

- Door dings.
- Trash bins that are supposed to be animal-proof but aren't.
- Dropped calls.
- FEDEX drivers who double-park.
- Stores that post the wrong hours online.
- Meter maids.
- Parents who bring their kids to daycare when they're sick.
- Traffic.
- Drivers who make phone calls instead of turning.
- Construction delays.
- Drivers who don't wait their turn at 4-way stops.
- Tele-marketers who claim they don't have to heed the "Do Not Call" registry because you're a customer of their subsidiaries' off-shore cousin's shell company.
- SUVs parked in compact spaces.
- Chatty baristas who don't seem to care/realize there are now 37 people in line.
- The drive-thru (especially McDonald's).
- Golf.
- People who don't pick up after their pets.
- News promos that use the words "deadly," "outbreak," and "protect yourself" when all they're actually talking about is the flu.
- Parents who call before 8:30 am.
- Activities that are canceled or postponed by e-mail a few hours before they're supposed to start.
- Radio stations that have 25 minutes of commercials every hour.
- Things at the supermarket that are still on the shelves days, weeks or months after their expiration date.
- Cable-company DVRs.
- Apple Airport Extreme Wi-Fi.
- Universal remotes.

- Spellcheck.
- When your kids hide your keys.
- Saran Wrap.
- etc.

If Eskimos have a thousand words for snow, shouldn't we have a thousand words for life's little irritations?

For most of us, a day doesn't go by that God, the universe, fate, karma, quantum physics or all-of-the-above don't needle our emotional well-being, usually when we're running late, just had an argument with our spouse or suddenly realized we forgot to get a babysitter for tomorrow night so we could go to dinner and a movie and finally get a break from all this crap.

It doesn't help that these cosmic paper cuts never seem to be isolated one-offs, either, but instead come in sets, like celebrity deaths and unsolicited parenting suggestions from opinionated strangers – it's not just the long line at Starbucks, it's having them mess up your order twice and then spilling your extra-hot, half-caf hazelnut mocha down the front of your shirt as you pull out of the parking lot.

The impact of these little irritations – and they are little, even if we can't figure out how *not* to sweat them – increases exponentially as the day progresses, to the point where we find ourselves cursing some 82-year-old women with a walker because she's not crossing the street fast enough, or threatening to ground our kids for the rest of their natural lives if they ever give the dog another peanut butter and jelly sandwich again, or contemplating divorce because our spouse forgot (again) to fill up the car when it got close to empty, leaving us in the position of having to coast down the hill to the Shell.

Psychologists say the only reason any of this stuff annoys us the way it does

[WHY CHICKEN NUGGETS ARE BETTER THAN PROZAC]

[CONTINUED]

is because it reminds us that we're not really in control, no matter how thoroughly we've managed to convince ourselves otherwise, and that ultimately mastering the moment isn't nearly as important as just being in it, regardless of whether that moment is good, bad, satisfying, awful, rewarding, stressful, happy, sad, amusing, aggravating, etc.

But as nice as that sounds (in a zen-like, higher-consciousness kind of way), who has the time to learn how to do that? Or the energy? Or the patience?

If learning to live in the moment can't be accomplished in one 30-minute session two times a week, in the car on the drive home from work, or during one of those rare moments when every kid in the house is quietly pre-occupied, then it just becomes one more thing we don't have time to squeeze in but try to do anyway – *or would try to do if we didn't have to wait for the dipshit in the car ahead of us to get off the phone and go.*

Note: It's easy to complain about life's little irritations, but it's also important to point out that we could probably eliminate entire categories of irritation if we really, really wanted to – just moving to a remote cabin in Montana and living off the land, for example, would instantly rid us of driving-, shopping-, neighbor-, school- and work-related annoyances (though it would probably more than make up for that by adding starvation-, bear attack-, hypothermia-, and isolation-related irritations, so maybe that's not such a good trade-off. Plus, let's not forget that Unabomber Ted Kaczynski moved to a remote cabin in Montana so he could get away from it all and look what happened to him).

WHEN KIDS DO EXACTLY
WHAT THEY'RE TOLD

PARENT: What are you doing?

3-YEAR-OLD: Mom said I should write a letter to Santa Claus.

PARENT: Can I see?

3-YEAR-OLD: Sure. Here.

PARENT: It says "A."

3-YEAR-OLD: Yeah, I was gonna write a "G" but I couldn't remember which way the opening went.

[WHY CHICKEN NUGGETS ARE BETTER THAN PROZAC]

HOW MUCH DO YOU LOVE YOUR DOG?

When the doctor needs a urine sample from you, you pop into the bathroom and aim for the little, plastic cup. But what happens when the vet needs a urine sample from your dog? Dogs don't have bathrooms, and while they do sometimes aim, it's only at fire hydrants, telephone poles and unfortunate family members.

So what options does that leave?

1. Ask.

We all talk to our dogs as if they understand us, and sometimes it seems as if they really do. "Go bark at the neighbors. Go on. Bark. BARK! That's a good boy!" But while they may understand "sit," "heal," "fetch" and up to 600 other simple words and phrase (if dog experts are to be believed), the chances that "Here... take this cup outside and fill it half-way up with your pee" are among them is astronomically small.

2. Turn your Basset Hound into a Booze Hound.

When humans drink too much they pass out on the kitchen floor and soil themselves, so why not try that with your dog? Just keep filling your dog's water bowl up with beer and see what happens.

(Even if it doesn't work, you could post your "Drunk Dog" video on Youtube and get a few laughs – at least until PETA crashed your server.)

3. Rent "Cujo."

Ever been so frightened you wet yourself? *Same principle here.*

(Though there is the possibility your dog will be inspired instead of scared, and do to you what Cujo did to the people in the movie, in which case you'll

end up being the one who's so frightened you wet yourself.)

4. Use the element of surprise.

Go to an army surplus store. Get a Ghillie suit (like the ones snipers wear). Then sneak out into your backyard and hide just downwind of where your dog usually does his or her business. When your dog comes out and starts to pee – assuming the pee isn't, say, splattering your forehead – gently reach out and slip the cup under the stream.

(So you're not being too wasteful, once you're done getting the sample you can wear the suit for Halloween and tell everyone you're Sasquatch.)

5. They make doggy diapers, don't they?

Apparently they do.

But unless you plan on wringing out the contents into the sample cup, you're much better off with a doggy bed pan.

And if none of these work, you can take your dog for a long, hot run, let him drink plenty of water when you get home and then make him sit on one of those rubber mats you put underneath the dish rack to catch run-off – Gross? Sure, but what part of getting a urine sample from your dog isn't?

WORKING FROM HOME

Why does it seem...

KID: Can I have a cookie?

PARENT: Sure.

Why does it seem...

KID: Can I have some milk?

PARENT: Sure.

Why does it seem...

KID: I can't find the book I was reading last night.

PARENT: Did you look for it?

KID: No. Can you help me look for it?

PARENT: I'm kind of busy.

KID: What are you doing?

PARENT: I'm trying to write something funny for the book.

KID: Oh.

Why does it seem...

KID: Knock, knock.

PARENT: What?!?!?

KID: I know something funny.

PARENT: Huh?

KID: For the book.

PARENT: Can you tell me later?

KID: It's a joke: Why did the psychologist go to the newsstand?

PARENT: I don't know.

KID: 'cause he had issues.

PARENT: Thanks for sharing that. Now can you just give me 20 minutes?

KID: Sure.

Why does it seem...

KID: Has it been 20 minutes?

PARENT: No.

Why does it seem...

KID: How about now?

PARENT: No.

Why does it seem...

KID: I'm not bothering you, I just want to see what you're doing.

PARENT: I'm trying to write something about how hard it is to get work done when your kids are home.

KID: That doesn't sound very funny.

PARENT: It's not.

KID: Is that why you look like you're about to yell at me?

Why does it seem like it's impossible to get anything done at home?

KID: Are you done?

PARENT: No.

KID: But it's been over 20 minutes.

PARENT: I give up.

It doesn't *seem* like it's impossible to get anything done when the kids are home, *it is impossible*.

[WHY CHICKEN NUGGETS ARE BETTER THAN PROZAC]

THE OTHER 12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

*On the first day of Christmas
My true love gave to me
The worst cold I ever did have.*

*On the second day of Christmas
My true love gave to me
Two hours of sleep
And the worst cold I ever did have.*

*On the third day of Christmas
My true love gave to me
Three last-minute invites
Two hours of sleep
And the worst cold I ever did have.*

*On the fourth day of Christmas
My true love gave to me
Four wound-up kids
Three last-minute invites
Two hours of sleep
And the worst cold I ever did have.*

*On the fifth day of Christmas
My true love gave to me
Five no-show sitters
Four wound-up kids
Three last-minute invites
Two hours of sleep
And the worst cold I ever did have.*

*On the sixth day of Christmas
My true love gave to me
Six pleas to grandma
Five no-show sitters
Four wound-up kids
Three last-minute invites
Two hours of sleep
And the worst cold I ever did have.*

*On the seventh day of Christmas
My true love gave to me
Seven cups of egg nog
Six pleas to grandma
Five no-show sitters
Four wound-up kids
Three last-minute invites
Two hours of sleep
And the worst cold I ever did have.*

*On the eighth day of Christmas
My true love gave to me
Eight off-color comments
Seven cups of egg nog
Six pleas to grandma
Five no-show sitters
Four wound-up kids
Three last-minute invites
Two hours of sleep
And the worst cold I ever did have.*

[CONTINUED]

*On the ninth day of Christmas
My true love gave to me
Nine disagreements
Eight off-color comments
Seven cups of egg nog
Six pleas to grandma
Five no-show sitters
Four wound-up kids
Three last-minute invites
Two hours of sleep
And the worst cold I ever did have.*

*On the tenth day of Christmas
My true love gave to me
Ten accusations
Nine disagreements
Eight off-color comments
Seven cups of egg nog
Six pleas to grandma
Five no-show sitters
Four wound-up kids
Three last-minute invites
Two hours of sleep
And the worst cold I ever did have.*

*On the eleventh day of Christmas
My true love gave to me
Eleven silent curses
Ten accusations*

*Nine disagreements
Eight off-color comments
Seven cups of egg nog
Six pleas to grandma
Five no-show sitters
Four wound-up kids
Three last-minute invites
Two hours of sleep
And the worst cold I ever did have.*

*On the twelfth day of Christmas
My true love gave to me
Twelve nasty looks
Eleven silent curses
Ten accusations
Nine disagreements
Eight off-color comments
Seven cups of egg nog
Six pleas to grandma
Five no-show sitters
Four wound-up kids
Three last-minute invites
Two hours of sleep
And the worst cold I ever did have.*

(Which is probably why we're not talking to each other right now.)

TV BLUES

According to researchers, the biggest difference between happy people and unhappy people is that happy people don't watch much TV.

Before you turn off the TV, however, keep in mind that the study didn't specify what percentage of those classified as "unhappy" just happened to have watched a weepy Lifetime movie-of-the-week right before they took the happy/unhappy test, or account for the fact that so much of what's on during Prime Time these days is so stupid it's enough to make anyone depressed.

If the problem is that TV makes us unhappy because the way it portrays everyday life makes our *actual* existence seem boring by comparison, what's the solution?

Book a flight to Fiji and hope the plane mysteriously crashes on a mystical island filled with polar bears, smoke monsters, and a secret, 30-year-old experiment that may (or may not) be keeping the planet from imploding? Wait for some hot, new neighbor to move in down the street and gingerly initiate a Wisteria Lane-type love triangle? Put yourself in a position where you only have 24 hours to save the country from some kind of terrorist attack, eight years in a row?

Besides what else are we going to do? *Read*? Surely if TV makes people unhappy, books do, too — anybody read "The Road" by Cormac McCarthy? Or anything in the self-help section that promises to turn your life around but ultimately just convinces you that you have none of the talents it takes to succeed in today's world? Or the essay on page 128?

Maybe all those people who are so much happier because they don't watch TV just don't have any idea what they're missing? And that one look at "Army Wives," "Deal or No Deal" or "House" and they'd be just as hooked — and just as unhappy — as the rest of us apparently are, too.

SCENES FROM MARRIAGE,
NO. 7

WIFE: What's all this stuff?

HUSBAND: I went shopping – that box over there is a home theater system... that's a Blu-Ray DVD player... that's a new gas grill...

WIFE: Are you out of your mind?!?!?!?

HUSBAND: Don't get mad – I got stuff for you, too. Look: *10 new pairs of shoes!*

WIFE: Did you win the lottery?

HUSBAND: No.

WIFE: Did some long-lost uncle die and leave you \$100,000.

HUSBAND: No.

WIFE: Then how the heck are we gonna pay for all this? We can barely afford groceries.

HUSBAND: Easy, we'll just take out another Home Equity Line.

WIFE: But we don't have any equity left!

HUSBAND: Sure, *now* – but Obama's being sworn in next month, which means the economic crisis is over and everything will go back to the way it was.

WIFE: Are you serious?

HUSBAND: Of course I am.

WIFE: Didn't the economic crisis teach you anything?

HUSBAND: Yeah: *vote Democrat.*

CRAPPY NEW YEAR

"10... 9... 8... 7... 6... 5... 4... Hey! No Fair!" — *only kids could fight over who gets to do the New Year's Eve countdown first.*

REALISTIC NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

- To go to the gym three days a week for two weeks, then once a week for the next three to five weeks, then three times a week for a week or two, then twice a week for one week before stopping entirely and resolving to resolve to go to the gym more next year.
- To go on a diet for three days, at which point something will happen that will necessitate a massive intake of comfort food that will lead to the slow, steady return of the bad eating habits that become entrenched last year.
- To talk about going on vacation someplace new and different, like the tropics, Europe, perhaps even South America, but then go to the same place as last year and the year before and the year before that because it's easy and cheap and who needs the stress and uncertainty of a big trip anyway?
- To buy a lot of books about getting organized, but never have time to read them, let alone utilize any of their tips and suggestions.
- To spend more quality time with the kids, but only when it's convenient and/or they're not being needy, loud, destructive, insolent, pouty or pains in the ass, which is probably never.
- To be greener, but only in ways that don't involve hardship, self-sacrifice or extra work because, let's face it, the environment is important but there's just too much going on right now.
- To try to cope with the stress of modern life in a productive way, but eventually give up and just over-eat, drink an extra glass of wine or two each night, and take a variety of prescription medications.

[CONTINUED]

- To save more and spend less, unless there's a really great sale or you're bored or you just really, really feel you *need* to have a new 52" flat-screen TV because the old 42" flat-screen TV is just too small.
- To be anxious about the economy, the housing crisis, the Bailout, your family's health and well-being, work, marriage, saving for college and the future, but hopefully not all at once.
- To come home after a difficult day at work and yell at the kids for no apparent reason, but then feel just a little more guilty about it than normal.
- To tell the kids again and again to "be careful" and then *not* be completely surprised when they aren't and must be rushed to the emergency room for stitches and/or a cast.
- To worry less about what other people think, unless those other people are neighbors, selected co-workers or people you want to impress.
- To find meaning and purpose in life, but then forget what it is thanks to chronic sleep deprivation, the never-ending demands of work and the household's perpetual state of chaos.

ABOUT

Kirk Enright writes the popular parenting blog www.overcaffeinateddad.com. He lives with his wife, three children and dog in Seattle.

