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Caring for infants is a huge task

After a weekend of crawling on the floor with our granddaughter, my wife and I support nature's decision to give the joys of parenthood to the young and leave the less strenuous or episodic side of childrearing to those of a certain age. Learning that her mom and dad were conflicted about attending a weekend wedding, we leaped at the opportunity to spend quality time with their 11-month-old ball of energy.

We had an amazing weekend; truly enjoyable but physically demanding. After raising three kids of our own and professionally caring for thousands more, we felt well equipped and up to the task. Bearing responsibility for an infant, however, is an enormous undertaking, frequently taken for granted.

Toddlers are perpetual motion machines, requiring nearly constant supervision, stimulation, care, and feeding. They are prone to tears when hungry, thirsty, wet, or bored. They may conveniently fall asleep, allowing their caregivers to do the same, or may demand to be fed, changed, or entertained at inopportune times. As children mature and families evolve, we are inclined to forget the energy, organization, and commitment necessary for successful parenting.

Children grow and develop rapidly over the first year of life. In the few weeks since we last saw our granddaughter, she has become independently mobile and is eating table food. She can pull herself to standing, allowing access to objects on table tops and low shelves. She explores with abandon, rapidly moving from room to room in search of new experiences. Of course increased mobility is fraught with danger, especially in a grandparent's not-totally-baby-proof home. Small objects present the danger of choking or poisoning, and light plugs and wires are hazardous to kids who like to mouth or chew objects as part of the learning experience. Kitchens can be particularly dangerous if cleaning agents and chemicals are stored within reach of a curious explorer.

Even the most ordinary of events pose hazards. While soft foods that dissolve in the mouth are safe, solid foods can pose real risks for children less than 2 years of age. Objects that remain hard, or may be slippery such as hot dogs, nuts,

and raw carrots are particularly dangerous, as are pitted fruits and hard candy. Grandparents should be mindful of the dangers posed to infants by the many over-the-counter and prescription medications found in their homes. As a pediatrician, I have personally cared for children who had serious or fatal experiences with each of these examples.

While intended to be comforting and enjoyable, baby's bath time can be dangerous, as well. Check to see that the water heater or boiler is not set too hot, since children can be scalded by temperatures over 120 degrees. Never leave children alone in the tub, since, aside from a potential drowning or aspiration, their skin is thinner than that of an adult and playing with a faucet can cause severe burns. Medical histories all too frequently report that parents or caretakers, distracted by the phone, have returned to bath-time catastrophes.

To us, parenting is the world's most important, complex and difficult job; one for which there is little or no training or realistic preparation. Our short caretaking experience reminded us of just how much energy our daughter-in-law and son invest in parenting our grandchild. Our hats are off to them and to all the other parents and caregivers attentively caring for their families' most precious treasures.

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