

# #1

## NORMAL

The only person who can be loosey-goosey about what a *normal child* is.... is a person who has one. When you don't have one you max out on the word pretty fast. But you shouldn't. It's a trap. I did a lot of reading on the subject from my first baby's birth and I'm still doing it. Twenty-nine years ago I did a lot of observing and some careful watching of mothers around me. I have a theory about the normalcy argument.

I can start by saying that in the mid 1980's just the term "normal" was avoided and that should have been a red flag right there. My sense of the mothering culture at the time was that the whole process from pregnancy on, was of vital interest and it was best if one studied up on it. Fair enough. There were new books, new methods of birthing and early parenting and lots of opinions. There was no computer culture that I knew of then, just reading, talking and support groups. That part of it was healthy and welcomed... to a point.

The pendulum of mothering had swung from my own mother's time (the 1940's and 50's) to my time pretty radically. We tend to categorize mid 20<sup>th</sup> c. women as prudish, cold and in thrall to Dr. Spock. They have been accused of being distant and mostly averse to breast feeding. They scheduled babies by the clock, and rarely carried infants in a sling or on the back of a bike (you've heard it all before). In the early 80's predictably, the trend went the other way. Mothers then seemed to be looking more for support than for facts, more for validation than instruction. They longed to be assured that mommy hood was validating, unrestrictive and fun!

I chose to read Penelope Leach, who was top of the list for "How To" parenting literature. She was honest, direct and clear. In the middle of our hardest first six months together my baby was not thriving and I was frantically feeding her any way I knew how. Her growth curve was consistently and alarmingly under the lowest red line. Nothing got her eating, or sleeping or stopped her crying. My handling and rocking made very little difference. When she got frenzied, my husband would lie on the bed and place her on his chest, wrapping her in his arms and breathing at his normal calming pace. She responded to that. One day in the rocker, I read this from Penelope Leach (in my words)...***It is fairly rare but I think important to acknowledge that some mothers and babies just have terrible timing. Nothing seems to work or coordinate as it should between them.*** When I read this bold and insightful statement I froze. It seemed to describe my first-born and me exactly.

Mothers of unproblematic normally developing babies, toddlers and children could chatter on about how off putting the word "normal" was to them. I could not. The easy going 80's culture was reluctant to identify problematic babies who did not develop normally. They seemed to resist the label and all categorizations of babies

in general. They seemed to know better than the doctors, specialists, therapists, counselors, and God knows, the grandparents. In a group effort to loosen up, be inclusive and embrace everybody they seemed to suggest there *was* no “normal” anymore. It was just too restrictive. There was instead a “range”, a “spectrum”, or a “curve”. In reality, for a few of us, there was something more like a calamity.

The trap for the new mothers of non-normally developing babies, lay in listening *only* to these enlightened new mothers and hearing what we longed so much to hear. It was encouraging for instance for any new mother to consider friendly advice like this:

“All kids do that from time to time

There is such a wide range

I’ve seen much worse

Don’t go by anyone else’s standards

Doctors *love* to scare you

It’s just a stage; they grow out of that in time

My cousin had the same problem with her baby

It’s probably you.... just relax!

(and my all time favorite) ...

Just kick back and be MOM!”

If a new mother’s learning curve was slow or she was committed to the “natural” way of child rearing, and her baby was not developing normally she might, in a different era, have been called irresponsible. Fortunately for my baby this was *not* the case. My instincts spoke differently. Every nerve in my body told me there was something wrong with my baby. And there was. I think back now with some sadness on what I heard from a hundred different non-professional sources, urging me to “just relax”. This mentality and its affect on a terminally sleep deprived and frantic, isolated new mother should be noted. I bristled and rejected the “stay calm, it will work itself out” advice, then fled to the professionals.

This is now *my* advice, if ever I am asked. If your baby is not normal...go quickly to the very best, most highly recommended medical expert in pediatric medicine near you and get to the bottom of it immediately. Establish a baseline and any diagnosis you can force out of the experts at the time (it will most probably change). Take a day to feel sorry for yourself then do what they tell you to do and keep records (you will need them repeatedly). Your baby’s medical file will grow over time to be very large. Keep it with you and in order. “Normal” is not now and never

has been, an accurate measure of health or development. Terms like “thriving” or “failing” work better.

As a new mother under enormous stress, you will need to tighten up. Emotions are not helpful to you now and they can get in the way. Whether it comes naturally to you or not, you will be required to fight for your own strength, clarity and the health of your child. It will take time.

Get back to your friends in 3-5 years. Then you can show them how *relaxed* you are.