

A photograph of a woman in a kitchen. She is wearing a floral apron over a plaid shirt. She is multitasking: holding a baby in a front-mounted baby carrier, carrying a toddler on her shoulders, and holding a coffee mug in one hand and a bottle of milk in the other. A red toy truck is perched on the toddler's head.

by SHERIL KIRSHENBAUM
photography by SAVERIO TRUGLIA

Kids are messy, exhausting and expensive. But when it comes to parenting, scientific evidence proves that the perks for our health and happiness far outweigh the pitfalls.

chaos THEORY

THERE WAS A fleeting moment in May when I imagined that my 16-month-old son, Atlas, and I resembled the Norman Rockwell painting that used to hang in my grandparents' home. In the famous dinner-table scene, a gray-haired matriarch delivers a golden-brown Thanksgiving turkey to a gracious, smiling family.

I'm no Julia Child, but that evening I chopped and baked a healthy medley of chicken, quinoa, and avocado. Atlas waited patiently in his booster seat and signed "hungry" by touching his fingertips to his mouth. After months of screaming to be fed, this was a milestone. On top of that, our house was reasonably clean, and the boy had already been bathed. I felt relieved, believing I had finally mastered this whole parenting thing.

Seconds later, he reached out to grab the dishes as I carried them to the table, overturning a mountain of quinoa onto the freshly mopped hardwood floor. Our dog greedily gobbled up the chicken strewn across the dining room, unaware of the avocado chunks splotched across her white fur. Atlas tearfully surveyed the mess, then shifted his hazel eyes back to me and signed "hungry."

We had applesauce for dinner that night. Then Atlas took another bath. Hours later, while scrubbing the floor, it occurred to me that in his portrait of familial bliss, Norman Rockwell lied.

Fair Warning

WHEN MY HUSBAND, David, and I announced we were expecting, every "congratulations" came with a polite warning. Other parents cautioned that we would never get a good night's sleep or quality alone time again. Childless couples

lamented that we would be too busy to hang out with friends. Our own parents lectured us on the monumental costs of day care, college, and everything in between. In sum, our impending bundle of joy would leave us exhausted, friendless, romantically starved, and broke.

Soon I learned this list was only the beginning. Before Atlas arrived, my career as a scientist included weekly travel to lecture at universities and museums. After the birth, I felt triumphant when I escaped the house during the hour-long window between feedings and naps. I lost track of world news, and I feared losing myself to the all-consuming particulars of child rearing.

Meanwhile, the sleepless nights and disruption in lifestyle made me wonder: With all the known

drawbacks, why do the overwhelming majority of us have children? For our ancestors, having a brood was necessary for farming, warring, and hunting. But this is the 21st century. Do we feel obligated? Are we acting on a primal instinct? Do we fear regret if we fail to act before that fabled biological clock strikes midnight? If kids wreak havoc on our bodies, our social lives, and our hardwood floors, what do we get out of the deal? As it turns out, plenty.

Your Hug Is My Drug

MANY TODDLERS LATCH onto a favorite object—think blankies and teddy bears. Atlas went a different route. He attached to my hair. He falls asleep only while twirling it between his pudgy

fingers. It's taken a toll. My current hairstyle is a cross between Farrah Fawcett's feathered look and the black tuft of fuzz that sits atop the yellow Angry Bird. But every night when my son reaches out for me, I don't have the heart to turn him away.

Children aren't the only ones who attach. New parents experience a surge of the bonding hormone oxytocin. This chemical is one of the reasons why, after nine months of discomfort and hours of painful labor, women feel jubilant when a red-faced, wailing baby lands in our arms. By dousing our brains in feel-good chemicals, nature tricks us into serving our new, tiny overlord.

As it turns out, oxytocin's impact lasts long after delivery, and it affects both moms and dads.



SPAGHETTI OOPS
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According to research conducted by Yale University, parents experience rising levels of it during the first six months of a child's life. It pulses through our bodies when we hug, kiss, and snuggle with our newborn, and it peaks for mothers when they nurse. We may be exhausted, but we stay "high" on the chemical, which buffers physical challenges like sleep deprivation.

Yet oxytocin is just one among many hormones that foster adoration for a new arrival. Last year, neuroscientists at the University of Montreal discovered that a baby's scent triggers the brain's dopamine response—the same thing that happens when a ravenous person eats food or an addict gets a fix.

The chemical composition of this new baby smell still eludes scientists, and it only seems to cast its spell during the first six weeks of life. Yet dopamine continues to be activated even after the scent fades. According to pediatrician Lane Strathearn at Baylor College of Medicine, a comparable response is triggered when a mom simply sees her child smile. In other words, when our kids are happy, we can physically feel it.

Buckets of Disease, or Bastions of Health?

ATLAS IS GOING through a phase in which he puts his tongue to most any noun—person, place, or thing. He tastes the wheels of his stroller. The dog. My shoes. Recently I glanced down to discover that he'd wrapped his lips around a doorknob—and no, it wasn't our doorknob. Child development experts praise this kind of thing as "sensory exploration," but I see it as one of the infinite ways kids plot to make the rest of us sick.

I'm not alone. My friend Lauren was dining recently with her extended family when her nephew casually mentioned that Everett, her 2-year-old son, had gum in his mouth. When she asked Everett where he had gotten it, he thrust his

hands under the table and eagerly chirped, "Right here, Mommy! They have lots!"

Comic Louis C.K. said it best: "Kids are like buckets of disease that live in your house." Yet a 2012 Carnegie Mellon study revealed that when exposed to a cold virus, parents are less likely to develop symptoms of illness than nonparents.

Even further, a study from the University of North Carolina concluded that acts of altruism and kindness—generally how we behave toward our family—are correlated with a lowered risk of heart disease and other major illnesses. And one Harvard study suggests that men who share strong bonds with loved ones are 82 percent less likely to die from heart disease than those who are socially isolated.

In other words, the close relationships we develop with those we love appear to be as important to wellness as maintaining a healthy body mass index and avoiding tobacco.

Can't Buy Me Love

WHAT ABOUT THE financial toll of children? My husband and I anticipated that a child would impact our bank account, but we didn't realize just how quickly it would add up. Diapers typically set parents back about \$1,000 in the first year alone. The average annual cost of day care approaches \$12,000. Government estimates suggest we spend an average of \$250,000 per child between birth and age 17—a figure that doesn't factor in college expenses.

Good thing money doesn't buy happiness. (At least once we enter the middle class: Harvard psychologist Dan Gilbert's research shows that people who bring in \$5 million annually are not much happier than those who earn \$50,000.) Instead, happiness lies in long-term, meaningful connections. And the Pew Research Center reports that parents describe their ties with children as the most fulfilling of their lives.

FOR HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF YEARS, **nature** HAS BEEN GUIDING THE CHANGES IN OUR BODIES TO MAKE US THE BEST PARENTS POSSIBLE.

A massive, four-year study by the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research surveyed 130,000 adults internationally and found that parents are happier than non-parents. Of course, these results come with qualifications. Parenting doesn't necessarily *make* people happier, but it's clear that parenthood is *associated* with happiness and meaning. Time and again research has demonstrated that parents experience greater depths of joy than nonparents. And sure, the lows are lower too, but like an elite athlete who trains for years to achieve success, the pain and struggle only make the victory that much sweeter.

The Diaper Chronicles

ON MY FIRST date with David, I never could have imagined how much time we would one day spend talking about poop. Whereas we used to wax philosophical about political theory and art, now much of our conversation revolves around Atlas' diaper. Sometimes, it extends to the poop of other tiny beings too.

My friend Vanessa and her husband recently discovered a bright blue bowel movement in the diaper of their 1-year old son, Jonah. Like all proud parents, they shared the news on Facebook, dispatching photo evidence and asking for theories on what accounted for the discoloration.

Suggestions came pouring in: Did he uncork a bottle of food coloring? Eat a Smurf? We settled on ingestion of blue Play-Doh as the most plausible cause, but the case remains open.

The bizarre thing is that neither David nor I find these discussions disturbing. Poop has become just another part of the day, a routine sandwiched somewhere between shopping for groceries and filling up at the gas station.

It may not sound romantic, but it's probably not so bad for our relationship. Long-term data on marriage suggests that parenthood keeps us connected to our spouses. Couples with kids are more likely to stay married, and married people are, on average, happier than their unmarried peers. Sure, some couples stay together for their kids rather than for personal happiness. But here's what I know for certain: Although David and I talk more often about poop than I ever anticipated, we're still



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talking—and laughing—about a common interest.

Survival of the Most Nurturing

IT'S CLEAR THAT parenthood forces us to shift priorities, but less obvious is the fact that our brains are literally being reshaped. Becoming a mother or father facilitates a kind of neural reprogramming that helps us better transition from a world primarily consisting of self to one consisting of both self and other.

"The brain stores the information to help us lead our lives in a pattern set by the combination of our genes, our development, and our experiences," explains neuroscientist Gregory Cogan at New York University. "New situations and experiences rewire brain circuitry in ways that make us best able to adjust."

After I became a mom, I began to recognize changes in myself that I didn't expect. I used to rush through the day from one appointment to another; now I frequently pause to enjoy little things like sipping a cup of tea or watching my son at play. Having a child has made me more present, more alive to each moment.

There's an evolutionary reason for this. For hundreds of thousands of years, nature has been gently guiding the changes that take place in our bodies in order to make us the best parents possible. "Thriving, surviving offspring is the key currency of evolution," explains Duke anthropologist Jenny Tung. "It stands to reason that 'better' parenting evolves over time." Those best able to meet the needs of their children have the greatest chance of passing on their genes, which encourages our most nurturing qualities to persist in future generations.

New research published this year by Michigan State University

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bolsters this theory. Psychologists analyzed the origins of parenting behavior using data from 20,000 families across the world. They concluded that DNA influences how we express warmth, control, and negativity toward kids. But the most interesting find was that parents and children share a two-way exchange: We actively shape who our kids become, and they in turn affect us. In essence, we grow together.

Living with children is messy and loud, complicated and stressful. It can be exhausting and make us feel like we're unraveling. We get overscheduled with music lessons and sports practices and spend countless hours picking up discarded food and toys. Yet these are the things we forget over time. We remember and value the closeness and love—your squealing kid running toward you with open arms, the calm of reading him a bedtime story.

Would we all be better off as parents? Of course not. But for many of us, kids have the capacity to bring out the best. When I reflect honestly on my relationship with my son, I realize that our typical day-to-day existence looks nothing like that scene from Norman Rockwell. That would be boring anyway. Like a pendulum, we swing between highs and lows. Tender moments turn chaotic and back again. We clean up accidents and celebrate milestones. We wade through tantrums and steer toward belly laughs.

Life with Atlas looks a lot more like a Jackson Pollock: messy, unpredictable, and hard to explain. But in the big picture, priceless.

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