

FIRST PERSON

Despite my disability, I learned how to cradle my newborn and bond with my son

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CONTRIBUTED TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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ILLUSTRATION BY MARY KIRKPATRICK

I had wanted to be a dad forever.

There were two small issues: a) I had never found the right partner to have a family, and b) I didn't know how (or if) I would care for a child – I have cerebral palsy, and hence

am a bit unco-ordinated. For example, when I pour a drink, a portion always lands on the kitchen counter.

I still hadn't found the right partner, but biology had other plans. My son's mother had no interest in a long-term relationship, but we did have a baby to care for. We would work in tandem. I sold my Vancouver condo and moved into the same condominium complex as Elliot's mother.

Five hours after his birth, and for a few hours on most days, either Elliot's mom or his maternal grandma would drop him off at my condo. The first time was an unbelievable experience. After we got settled. I took his little hand and said: "Bud, I have been waiting for you for a very long time." To my surprise, he opened his eyes, looked at me, and squeezed my thumb harder than I had ever thought possible. I fell in love at that second and wanted to cuddle him. This is where the second issue arose: I had no experience with newborns, and given the added spasticity from cerebral palsy, I didn't know how to safely pick him up – I was a total amateur.

I was terrified: unsure how my unco-ordinated movements would interact with his tiny body. We just held hands, and I stroked his arms and body, read him stories and sang nursery rhymes.

The moment his diaper filled or he became hungry, a call to Elliot's mom ended our time together. This led to heartache and embarrassment. I wanted to address his needs, but I had no idea how.

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Nine days after Elliot's birth, my mom arrived to meet him. I told her that I wanted to learn how to hold and care for Elliot, to pick him up, cuddle him, bathe him, change his diapers: routine stuff for most parents.

Resisting her own urge to hold her first grandchild non-stop for the entire length of her visit, Mom leaned back and grinned. She had spent much of the last 42 years teaching me total independence, and so this was just a new step.

Mom studied my movements, to remind herself how my body actually worked. Then, as soon as Elliot arrived for his daily visit, we went to work. She showed me how to pick him up, hold him, and support his neck.

Elliot in my arms. I was overflowing with joy.

Elliot had a slightly different reaction. When first scooped up in my arms, he looked at me with total puzzlement. Used to the gentle touch of his mom or grandmothers, the shaking arms of his dad was a noticeably different sensation – kind of like a human vibrator, but significantly bonier.

Fortunately, I had spent the last 10 days talking and singing to him. Within a minute or two, he had connected these new, awkward movements with the loving voice he heard each day. His body completely relaxed, and Elliot rested his tiny head against my chest, contently curled up in my arms, and fell asleep.

Later, a distinct aroma emanated from his diaper. But today was going to be different.

Working with my usual awkward movements, I learned that keeping two diapers on hand is crucial. It was astounding to discover how much liquid a little body can hold. As Mom gave me instructions on changing, she always stood behind me.

“You know, you’re much more co-ordinated than I thought. This is easier than I envisioned.”

As if on cue, Elliot had another, bigger discharge and so we moved on to the bathing lesson. Mom pointed out that while the first diaper change had gone well, bathing safely was critical.

We used an infant-sized plastic recliner, about three inches of warm water, and lots of thick towels around the tub – wet babies are slippery.

Elliot came out of the tub unscathed, sparkling clean, and what appeared to be a smirk.

With another fresh diaper applied, the next task was to learn how to pop a clean and happy newborn into his jumper. This turned out to be the biggest challenge: I hadn’t realized how much a newborn can move. As a paralympic athlete, I was used to challenging workouts, but learning to slip a wiggling, burping, peeing, happy little guy into a onesie was right up there!

When Elliot’s mom came to pick him up, he was contently curled up in my arms, freshly bathed with a clean diaper and in a new jumper. I popped him into his carrier, and he was headed to his mom’s place.

Over the next week, Mom and I spent our time with Elliot practising. By the time my Mom headed home, I felt like a pro. With my new skills, the bonding for a lifetime relationship could commence.

The skills and connection I learned years ago have lasted 17 years so far, but I’m hoping for an eternity.

Halldor K. Bjarnason lives on Saltspring Island, B.C.

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MJsmom

1 week ago

Enjoy Father's Day and many years ahead of discovering and learning experiences 'dadding.' Enjoy every moment - it passes so fast!

ABuddie

1 week ago

(Edited)

Thank you for sharing your wonderful life experience - the lessons you have shared with your son over the years! Demonstrating your determination to learn new skills, that practice is always involved and that measuring success is different for each of us. What an amazing gift to give your son as he adjusts to many life experiences that will come his way. Happy Fathers Day to a Dad that truly deserves the "Best Dad Ever" mug that we see in stores at this time of year!

whine n cheesed

1 week ago

Elliot is so lucky to have you as a dad ! There is so much love in your words. You so vividly describe you and your mother's team effort to be a good parent. You sure got the right stuff from her, and give the right stuff to your son. I equally admire you both !! Nice writing too. Happy Father's Day !!

DeidreV

1 week ago

Beautiful story.