

A Letter to My Unborn Child
(First published in *Infants to Teens Magazine*, Fall 1986)

Dear Baby,

You're getting pretty big these days, tap-dancing away inside of me. Does this mean you're really going to be here in a couple of months? I'm not sure I'm ready for parenthood. I'll admit that the prospect of discovering that whole new part of me scares me a little.

I'm supposed to know all about being a good parent. I've been working with families as a counselor for years. I've taught parenting classes and I host a TV show where experts talk about child rearing. But, the more I learn, the more I don't know. It's a complicated, wonderful mystery how children grow.

Some parents seem to do a better job than others. Maybe they just had good kids. (You see, baby, I have lots of excuses already.) I'm an expert in helping people to change, not an expert parent. I guess I'm writing this letter to get my thoughts together about what I do know and to make some promises to you about what I'm going to try to do.

I want you to be mentally healthy. I want you to think very highly of yourself, to be responsible, flexible and successful in the goals you set for yourself. I want you to be able to love someone deeply and to be able to hold your own in social situations. If you turn out that way, I'm going to feel I was a good parent (whether I had anything to do with it or not).

I've done a lot of reading, taken classes, and I think I know all of the techniques (how to set rules, how to be consistent, what to do when you cry). It's reassuring, but not the whole answer, I know. The more families I see, the more I begin to think that those day-to-day parenting decisions are not the essential ingredient of good parenting. Children seem to learn more from who their parents are than from what their parents teach them. That's a scary thought! Will you have all my weaknesses? Am I going to have to very carefully live up to my values in order to set a good example for you? No wonder every parent I've ever met feels guilty!

Okay, let's look at it another way. There's a good chance you'll pick up my strengths along the way. My mother embarrassed me to tears when I

was a teenager (I guess I'll have to get ready for that), but I think I have her ability to feel deeply, to be able to give and receive. I learned her values about money (pinch those pennies 'til they bleed!), the feminism she embraced in the Seventies. She also taught, through example, the importance of taking care of those less fortunate than oneself, in one's extended family and in the community. She wasn't a perfect mom, but she was a good one. I hope I'll be able to follow her example.

I'm glad I won't be alone in this job. Whenever I begin to feel too guilty, I can always blame your dad, heredity (from his side!), our declining culture, punk rock, etc. Seriously, I promise I'll work hard to keep our relationship a good one. I want you to learn how people can love one another and live together, how they can argue and come out whole, and how they can survive the responsibility of commitment.

I'm going to do my best, Baby. Some days I will make mistakes. And, you'll have your own unique set of neuroses to struggle with. But I'm going to love you and be the best person I can be. It's the only thing I can do. Good parenting is being able to live with not having all the answers.

Love, Mom

AUTHOR'S NOTE (1998): MY FIRST BOY WAS BORN A FEW WEEKS AFTER I WROTE THIS ESSAY. HE'S NOW 17, SIX FEET TALL AND CAPTAIN OF THE VARSITY FOOTBALL TEAM. I'M MORE PROUD OF HIM THAN I CAN TELL YOU – AND PROUD OF MYSELF, TOO. SO FAR, SO GOOD.

Beth Proudfoot is a Marriage and Family Therapist in Los Gatos, CA - www.bethproudfoot.com. Please feel free to share or reprint this article. Include the author's name and website and let us know so we can celebrate the spreading of the words.