



A Tale of Two Mothers

The battle began while I was still in the hospital. As I lay in bed, trying to follow the nurse's instructions to shove what seemed like my entire breast into the sweet, rosebud mouth of my two-day-old son, the phone rang. I knew it would be my mother, calling to check on her youngest daughter and seventh grandchild for the millionth time that day. I couldn't fault her itchy dialing finger; Teodor was my first child, and we were more than 3,000 miles away in France. If she could have crawled through the telephone wires to get to us, she would have.

"Hey, Mom."

"Hi, sweetie! What are you up to?"

"Trying to feed Teo," I answered, wincing slightly as my little one latched on and began to suck vigorously. *Too vigorously? Why was he sucking so hard?*

I wondered, frowning down at him. *Was he latched on correctly? Was he getting anything? Was I producing anything? Might I be starving my baby?*

My mother interrupted my silent, spiraling freak-out with a gasp. "What?"

"Huh?" I said.

"You're feeding him again?" She sounded incredulous.

My thoughts changed course so fast, I could almost feel my brain slam into my skull. *Was I over-feeding my baby? Was he eating too much? Would I make him sick?*

I began to babble excuses. "It's been two hours . . . He was crying . . . I don't think my milk has come in yet . . . The nurses say it's good to feed him often at first to get him into the habit of eating." I stopped, confused.

"Well, I don't think you're supposed to feed him that often," my mother said comfortably. "At least, that's not what we did when you were a baby. Every three to four hours, as I recall, is right."

There. Right there. After barely forty-eight hours of motherhood, I had reached the infamous milestone every new parent hopes to skip, the "that's not what we did when you were a baby" tug-of-war. The baby books had warned me. Friends had warned me. Even my prenatal infant care course instructor had

warned me. So, intellectually, I knew that it was very common for grandparents to question the decisions of new parents, from whether to lay a sleeping baby on his back or his stomach, to how warmly to dress the child, to whether to breastfeed or bottle-feed. But actually hearing this phrase had an unexpected effect on me. As she spoke, I could feel my limbs shrinking, my hair twisting into pigtails, and the child in my arms becoming no more than a living doll.

As a thirty-something, married, professional woman, I was shocked that a few casual words from my mother could trigger such a rapid regression. I had thought that my maternal instincts would trump any girlish impulse I had to automatically cancel my own opinion in favor of hers. But I was wrong. I hadn't counted on the fact that my mother's doubtful voice would closely echo the one in my head that told me I wasn't a real mom.

In my opinion, there are a few ways to handle this sort of situation. One is to simply let your parent's words bead up and slide off you, like rain off a slicker. A second way is to gently but firmly say that, while whatever she did was obviously best when you were a child, times have changed. Third, you can become defensive, explosive, and stonily sure of yourself. Me, I went for option three. I was determined to prove to

her—and yes, to myself—that I was no longer a little girl who needed her mother's advice or approval. I was a mother myself now and a very competent one, thank you very much!

My mother, however, remained oblivious to my stampy-foot demand to be treated like an adult. In fact, perhaps having something of her own to prove, she became more opinionated and dogged than ever. Although she wouldn't be coming to Paris for another two weeks—ostensibly to give my husband and me time to get used to being a family—we were on the phone so often, she might as well have been perched on the edge of my bed. I felt as if she had a comment (negative) for everything.

When the nurse brought me paracetamol for my episiotomy pain, she said, "Medicine? Are you sure it won't hurt the baby? That's not what we . . ."

"It's not cocaine, Mom," I snapped. "Just Tylenol."

We began bickering. We began arguing. We shed tears.

"Stop criticizing me!" I wailed, still in my hospital bed.

"I'm only trying to help!" she wept. "I don't know how much you know about all this!"

I began to dread her visit, which depressed me, because even though she was getting on my nerves,

I missed her. There was a part of me that very much needed my mom around for my first baby, I just couldn't remember why.

Before her visit, we made an uneasy truce. She agreed to try not to do what I perceived as criticism so much, and I agreed to try not to view it as criticism. We greeted each other joyfully, and she was full of kisses and hugs for her newest grandson. She used her jet lag to my advantage, holding and watching the baby while I slept. And she tried her best to keep her word. Sometimes I would see her literally biting her lip as I held the baby a certain way or did something that she wouldn't have done.

But one day, as I applied Lansinoh, given to me by the hospital, to my poor sore, cracked nipples, it was all too much for her.

"I don't think," she ventured tentatively, "that stuff is good for the baby."

Then it all started again. "You hold him too much." "You don't use his pacifier enough." "I really, really don't think you should be using that on your nipples."

Knowing that she didn't mean to criticize me didn't make me feel better. Feeling caught between a little girl and my thirty-something self, I split the difference and began to act like a rebellious teen: I slathered on Lansinoh liberally and ostentatiously.

I made whispered, closeted calls to the pediatrician. And, beyond all else, I would not share my confusion, my fears, my absolute vulnerability with her.

The turning point came one day when Teodor, who had been, until then, a fairly easy baby, started crying and wouldn't stop. I rocked him, I shushed him, I nursed him, I changed him, I patted him, and I pedaled his little legs—but nothing doing. He was unhappy and not one thing I did was making him better. For the first time, I began to feel overwhelmed. Every particle of my being was desperate to help him, but I didn't know how.

Finally, I gave up. I simply sat on my bed and held my wailing baby in my arms, trying my best to comfort him without breaking down into sobs myself. My mom, who had been unusually quiet during all this, came into my bedroom, and said, "Let me hold him . . . not that I think I can do it better than you."

As I handed my unhappy baby to my mother, I was ready to acknowledge defeat. I was sure the baby would stop crying in my mother's arms because she was Mom, and—who was I kidding?—I might have had a baby, but I wasn't yet a mother. Teodor, I figured, would know a real mom when he felt one.

But Teo didn't stop crying, even in my mother's arms. After a few seconds, my mother looked at me and gently placed the baby back in my arms. She left

the room without another word, and a moment later, I heard her rattling around in the kitchen. I returned my attention to my baby, feeling vaguely reassured. He was not crying due to my ineptitude.

About a half-hour later, with the baby having finally drifted off into hiccupy sleep, I dragged myself out of the bedroom, exhausted and disheartened. But as I entered the hall, I encountered a familiar, spicy scent. My spirits rising, I followed the fragrance to the kitchen. And there, amid sparkling clean appliances, was my mother, taking a batch of warm, freshly made gingersnaps out of the oven—my favorite cookie, ever since childhood. I was so grateful for this quiet show of support that I nearly burst into tears. This was exactly the kind of mothering that I had needed and craved all along. The mom that was there for me, not only for my son. And for the first time since my mom had come to visit, I thought with shaky relief, *Oh, thank God, my mother is here.*

I'm not sure why, but that crying incident seemed to click something in place for both me and my mother. The rest of the visit was wonderful. As I learned to be Teo's mother, my own mother stood back and was just who I needed her to be—my mom, not a surrogate mom for Teodor. And I allowed myself to be the little girl who still very much needed her mommy to make things okay with a cookie. Finally,

we had found our proper roles, and, as it turns out, they were the same roles that we'd had all along. Despite all our initial posturing, my becoming Teo's mother didn't change that fundamental relationship after all.

During the remainder of her visit, we played with the baby, giggled over romantic comedies, and read my infant care books together. She learned what I was basing my decisions on, and with her showing interest in why I was making the decisions I did, I was relaxed enough to ask her advice about child-rearing and share my insecurities about motherhood. And we ate cookies. My God, did we eat cookies. By the time she left, I had gained five pounds. Seven months later, I'm still struggling to lose them.

But that's a whole 'nother battle.

Barbara D. Diggs