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Essays



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THE PARENT JOURNEY STARTS WITH THE BABY'S NAME

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by Janyce Lastman LL.B.
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Rommy and Robert Alpinelli are a young couple in Toronto, Canada expecting their first child. Typical enough, but this pair has become paralyzed by the responsibility of finding the "perfect" name and the fear of choosing the "wrong" one instead. So they turned to the world of social media, creating a FaceBook poll where family and friends, along with perfect strangers, can propose potential names for their daughter-to-be, or vote on those already under discussion. In the process, they connected with FabFind, an online goods and service discounter, who clearly knows good publicity when they see it. They soon struck a deal with FabFind for a whopping \$40,000 of deals and coupons, provided they actually use the name chosen on FaceBook. Don't believe me? See www.facebook.com/FabFind-Toronto

Understandably, their decision has garnered media interest. And although parenting stories often make me shake my head in disbelief, somehow, this one was just too much. Perhaps it reminded me of the ever-increasing section of my clientele who struggle with the need to be the parents their children deserve, which includes making cohesive decisions even if unpopular, and sticking by them. It also includes being open to owning and fixing their mistakes, and modeling resilience in the face of adversity. Whatever the reason, instead of lingering over my coffee and weekend papers, I spent this morning writing this letter to the parents-in-waiting. Having done so, it occurred to me that some of you might appreciate the sentiments expressed in it.

And as always, either way I welcome your thoughts,
 Janyce Lastman

Dear Rommy and Robert -

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I understand you are having difficulty selecting a name for your soon-to-arrive baby girl. So you have turned the decision over to a FaceBook poll instead. And provided you use the name chosen by your social network and produce the birth certificate to prove it, you will even receive a \$40,000 prize from the coupon/discounter website FabFind.

First of all, let me congratulate you as parents-to-be. Becoming parents is truly an awesome experience, but not just in the WOW! sense that you likely know this word. Think of "awesome" in its traditional meaning. Parenting is an awesome experience, because it can be not only wondrous, amazing and beautiful, but also powerful and intimidating, sometimes even a tad frightening.

So here's the reality check. Naming your new daughter is only the start of a long series of bewildering and tough parenting decisions that loom before you, some very big, but most much smaller than they will first seem. Will it be breast milk or formula? Cloth or disposable diapers? Local school, Montessori or private prep? Dance and hockey over ceramics and soccer? Family cottage or summer camps?

When will she be ready to sleep over at a friend's without you? Carry her own cell phone, have a personal laptop or open a FaceBook account for herself? How about hanging out with friends at the mall without parental supervision? You'll need to decide when she's allowed to group-date or explore her first romance before you know it. Should she be able to hold a part-time job during the school year? At which point can she stay out without curfew? Will you permit or forbid her from dropping certain classes in high school - or from dropping out of school altogether to pursue another path?

So, just as surviving your wedding planning was actually an introduction to negotiating your new married life as a couple, choosing your daughter's name is really a starter challenge for you as new parents - but an essential introduction to parenting all the same.

Rommy and Robert, I am sure you hope to be the best parents possible to your little girl whom you likely already adore. Perhaps you even aspire to be her "best friends" - something your parents may not have done for you. You just feel so overwhelmed by the number of choices, and worried about the responsibility of the wrong choice. Given that you apparently had "hundreds" of possible names on a list by the time you turned this over to the FaceBook crowd, you've been doing your homework. So why am I writing to you?

Just in case you feel that your decision to opt out of naming your first-born child is really none of my business, let me assure that it actually is my business - and quite literally so.

I am an education consultant and case manager who deals with parents and their children - tots to young adults - around school-related matters. Some families simply need some clarification or a little professional guidance, and go on their merry ways. A few have been dealt a series of very bad hands in the unfair game of life, and are struggling as a result. But too many others arrive in a state of self-induced distress, having lost the ability to function as a family. Angst-ridden or avoidant of "hard" parenting decisions, these families commonly mistrust their own judgment, so defer to majority rule or randomly-chosen experts when overwhelmed by too much information.

So while my letter to you may not match FabFind's gift either in dollar value or pizzazz, I hope that you find it valuable in its own right. And as you celebrate the arrival in the coming weeks, of your little Aria-Melania-Aubrey-Sophia (the names that top today's poll), please consider my words carefully.

WELCOME TO YOUR NEW CAREER!

Parenting is your newest job. Your post-baby lives will change abruptly. Days and nights will fill with rote, unglamorous and seemingly thankless tasks, whose importance is only realized should you stop doing them. But successful parents are not only workers, but manager-owners. There are times where additional data or expert recommendations can assist any business or family. But eventually a limit will be placed on the gathering of external data, and a decision made. You must empower yourselves to do the same. Finally, parenting is also a profession: just as much "art" as "science". Just like other professionals, parents are sometimes faced with situations demanding more creativity and innovation, foresight and insight, and greater executive functioning, than any of us possess. Professionals get past this by trusting their instincts while acknowledging the intuition of others, as well as knowing the facts.

JUST LIKE YOUR FINANCIAL INVESTMENTS, YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES AND RIGHTS

MUST FIRST VEST IN YOU, BEFORE THEY CAN TRANSFER TO YOUR HEIRS

Human parents bear ultimate responsibility for their young until their offspring mature and (hopefully!) leave the nest. So parents need to have and hold final authority early on. Only then can they gradually turn this over to the "junior partners", as their children approach adulthood. (And these days, "adulthood" is best calculated in reference to a child's stage, not just age.) This is how differentiation from one's family of origin, and ultimate young adult independence occurs.

A PARENT IS NOT A FRIEND FIRST

You cannot and should not strive to be your daughter's friend first. She will hopefully have many friends in her lifetime, but for the moment, you are the only parents she has. Despite the "BFF" acronym in current vogue, best friends aren't necessarily forever, and FaceBook "friends" are something else altogether. There will be times where you won't "like" your daughter much, or at very least, you'll dislike her behavior, and vice-versa. And when you inevitably clash, that parent-child bond of mutual love and respect is what eventually can help heal, or at least bypass these differences.

BE YOUR OWN PEOPLE AND BELIEVE IN YOURSELVES.

Make your own parenting decisions, right, wrong or otherwise. Never abdicate this important role again to anyone, whether FaceBook, your in-laws, Dr. Spock, Dr. Laura, Dr. Phil or any other "expert". These are sources of information and recommendations, but real parents must make real decisions. This allows you to model to your little girl how to become her own person as she grows into a young woman. It's how she'll hopefully learn to combat the unhealthiest parts of peer pressure, to self-advocate in school or at work, and to speak out against injustices in her community and her world. True self-confidence and self-esteem in children will not develop in the presence of paralyzing parental "what if" anxiety or perfectionist expectations.

REMEMBER THAT SOME METAPHORS ARE MORE USEFUL THAN OTHERS IN PARENTING

Own - and own up to - your inevitable mistakes as parents. Be honest with your daughter when you have erred in a decision, or made an ill-advised promise. While most mistakes can be corrected, not all can be erased, but that's okay too. No matter how dedicated you are to this new job, nor how professional a parent you become, not everything will be within your control. Life is truly what happens to parents while they are busy rebooking carpool arrangements or cooking dinner.

Don't expect your daughter (or yourselves) to always make lemonade from the lemons life will give you. Sometimes, the recipe simply fails. It's a complicated world. Life can be nasty, brutal and short; it can also be wonderful, full of opportunity and promise. It will most likely contain elements of both. Teach her through example that anger, frustration, sadness and grief are normal and healthy reactions to life's disappointments and unfair twists, but that self-blame, denial, splitting, entrapment and blaming others are not. So when "soot happens" in your lives, show her how to lean on friends and family for support, to always take deep breaths before reacting, and when ready, to take out the soap, lather off the soot, and emerge ready to face the next day.

Take parental wisdom from The Rolling Stones more than The Spice Girls. Teach your daughter that although she is loved, valued and cherished, she can't always get what she wants, merely because she wants it. Strive instead to provide her with what she needs until she can provide this for herself. Only then will she come to understand true satisfaction. Entitlement (believing that things simply should come their way... not because of hard work, talent and skill, but mostly because it's what they really, really want), is almost impossible to dispel in later life, when it was the reality of childhood and teen upbringing.

AND FINALLY: DON'T SELL YOUR SOULS TO THE COMPANY STORE

(No Matter How Well-Stocked The Shelves)

In sum Rommy and Robert, you don't need more baby name books or FaceBook friends here. You two are perfectly capable of taking the plunge and selecting your daughter's new name for yourselves.

However, if you don't start on the difficult but important new job of being little Aria-Melania-Aubrey-Sophia's parents very soon, you will unintentionally create a much bigger problem for your family down the road. Your little one needs and deserves you to be on the job from the start.

Finally, by choosing to turn the selection of your firstborn's name - meant to be the first step of this awesome journey of parenting - into nothing but a corporate booty call, I fear that you will slowly but surely unleash the negative awesomeness, and lose its positives attributes. I sincerely hope

I'm wrong, but my gut and my experience tell me that I'm not.

Think it over, folks. Surely your little girl's soul and integrity are more valuable than any pile of coupons and discounts could ever be.

The choice is yours to make, of course. So for now, I'm just sayin'....

Wishing you joy and happiness with your daughter's arrival,

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