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introduction:
power-sharing parenting

For years I've promised (or threatened) to write a book about parenting. Yes, I know the genre is over-filled to bursting. Besides, it's hard to improve on Dr. Spock. I raised my own kids with his Baby and Child Care tucked under my arm. One long night in a village in India, pacing back and forth to comfort my four-month old first-born as he coughed with what I guessed must be whooping cough, I survived by reading what the phlegmatic doctor had to say. As I remember it: Don't panic, it's no big deal, just make sure the kid is breathing and let nature take care of the rest.

So if the advice you want is focused on what's going on with your child, read Benjamin Spock, or one of the many more recent manuals for raising kids. The advice I've given to my counseling clients over the years is much more about what's going on with them. Children, I believe, grow up; they do what they need to do. Parents, on the other hand, struggle to keep up, often uncertain what they're supposed to do. If the developmental tasks presented to kids are natural, the choices facing parents are largely social in nature.

My son was born in India. I had married into an extended family in a rural area north of Calcutta. I adored my mother-in-law and many of the other older women who lived nearby. Collectively, they had birthed and reared scores of children. Nobody could be more expert.

It had taken me many months to conceive; each time I bled was a time of grief. On one of those days, as faith in my fertility seeped away, I was leaving my house to go to market when the matriarch next door called from her veranda, "When are you due?"

"I'm not pregnant," I replied testily, all too aware that my body had just announced that fact. What a sore spot she'd touched!

"Yes you are," she disagreed. "When your time comes, just call out the window. We'll be there in a flash."

She was right. Despite evidence to the contrary, I'd conceived. Eight-and-a-half months later, Tuhin was born.

So expertise aplenty lived close by. But raising a bi-cultural child quickly taught me something about the nature of expertise.

"Lay the baby down on his back," my neighbors counseled. "He can smother on his stomach."

"Lay the baby down on his stomach," my American mother insisted. "He can choke on his back."

"We'll do his first-rice ceremony at nine months," said my mother-in-law. "Until then, breast milk only."

"I'm shipping you a case of Pablum," wrote my physician father from Texas. "Start him on solids no later than three months; it helps develop his digestive system."

"Dress that baby more warmly!" "What are you trying to do bundling him up like that – smother him?!"

"Let him cry himself to sleep." "The baby's crying; pick him up!"

"Let him sleep in your bed as long as he wants." "He needs to be in his own crib; you don't want to promote dependence, do you?"

The contradictory advice went on and on, each voice as confident as the other. The only thing I knew for sure was that I didn't know a thing. I'd never been very interested in babies until my own was born, and so I'd learned little in advance by observation. Spock was good but a limited vehicle. Much of his advice gently assumed an American, not an Indian, cultural environment. Reading his book, I understood that

expertise is highly contextual. Different people deal with very different demands, needs, and cultural frameworks. My father had also sent me crates of diapers and plastic pants; very helpful in a cold urban climate, totally counter-productive, indeed cruel, in the tropics. Whose know-how was I to trust?

Pretty quickly the answer presented itself: the true expert was the baby. Once I got the hang of interpreting his body language and sounds, I discovered I could use an experimental method: If I formulated a hypothesis, he'd present the data. I put him on his stomach and saw how he slept. Then I tried him on his back; he seemed more comfortable that way, but still fidgety. It turned out he was a side-sleeping infant, happiest when curled in a graceful arc on his right side.

My father's baby food arrived. I gave Tuhin a little on a spoon; he spat it out. I waited a week or two and tried again. One day he made a face of disgust and bounced around seeming to be eagerly seeking more. I gave him more. By five months he was reaching for the spoon.

I felt his skin to tell if he was cold and adjusted clothing accordingly. Mosquitoes answered the question about the family bed. Malaria protection ached theoretical risks to his future independence.

By the age of two weeks, Tuhin had taught me my first crucial lesson of parenting:

Childhood is a natural process; parenting is learned activity. Your child is an expert on her or his needs. Observe closely and s/he will tell you what to do, although probably not how to do it.

Simple as it is to state, this premise is fairly stuffed with ideology. It assumes that the nature of children is essentially positive. It runs counter to many philosophies positing in one form or another – original sin or aggressive instincts, for example – that children left to their own devices will be little beasts, that they must be controlled and molded and socialized if they are to grow into virtuous and capable adults.

Beholding the beauty that was (and still is) my son, I didn't know for sure which notion was correct: was he a seed pre-programmed to

grow into a glorious oak with only the most essential nutrients, sun, and water provided by me? Or was he a bomb waiting to go off if I weren't alert constantly to defuse him?

I'll write more as we go along about philosophic, religious, cultural, and political underpinnings of different parenting approaches. For myself, all I knew at the time was that I didn't know which view of children's nature was "correct." Once again, conflicting viewpoints confused more than they clarified. But I did know the first alternative—baby as seed—filled me with positive anticipation, while the second raised my dread level intolerably. I'm much happier gardening than policing. So I followed my feelings and very soon discovered that honesty about my ignorance and trust in my baby's capacity to recognize and communicate his needs established a certain power balance in our relationship. From this perception I articulated a second guiding principle:

Cooperation matters: your cooperation with your child. Cooperation is one of those words that can be descriptive or injunctive, depending on whether it's a one-way or two-way street. "Cooperate!" as a command usually means, "Do what I want." It is a corruption of the descriptive meaning: to act together, or to share power.

Children are natural brokers of power. Understandably they, like adults, want as much control over their lives as they can muster. Sharing power to the greatest extent possible makes for successful relationships, and that is as true between grown-ups and kids as among peers, although it is a good deal less obvious what sharing power means across generational divides.

Children have all kinds of powers that adults may not recognize. Recently my brother was exercising his bragging rights as a second-time-around father of an almost-two-year old, Lucy. "Lucy said her first four-word sentence yesterday," he told me proudly when we talked long distance across the continent that separates our families.

"Oh yeah? What did she say?"

"She said, 'Swing push now, Dada.'"

Immediately, I heard from the background Lucy's confident voice: "No no, Dada. 'Swing push more, Dada.'" Not yet two and correcting her father's failing memory! She clearly had power in the sense of capability, many capabilities in fact: to listen, to remember, to recognize a difference between her sentence and his, to speak out at the appropriate moment. She also demonstrated an understanding of her rights: to be understood, to have an independent point of view, and to give voice to her opinion.

That Lucy asserted all those powers was no accident, no quirk of individual temperament. To the greatest extent possible, Lucy's parents make a practice of according her the power of decision making about her own needs. When they visited me in California, we drove to the Pacific coast, Lucy and her mom in the back seat of the car. In the rear view mirror, I could see the baby struggling to stay awake, and we could all hear her beginning to get cranky.

"It would be a pretty good time for a nap," her mom said reasonably. "Would you like to sleep a little while? That way, when we get home in an hour you'll be wide awake and ready to play with the puppy."

Lucy shook her head no and promptly fell asleep.

A clever framing by a perceptive mom who knew just when her kid was about to pass out? Maybe. But it was also establishing a particular kind of dialogue, one in which parents have the power to make wise suggestions based on experience, but kids have the power to determine their own course. Lucy's mom also recognized the limitations of her own power: How do you force a two-year-old in a car seat to take a nap?

Negotiations like this one may be easy in theory, you might protest, but get real! How far will a policy of negotiation take you when you have to get the kid out the door and to childcare on time so you won't get docked a day's pay at work? And if the kid gives me attitude, you ask? Do I have to be "reasonable" or do I get to discipline her?

The practicalities of life do matter, including parents' needs for respite, respect, and relief. When I talk about "power sharing" I really do

mean “sharing.” Parents have rights, too. My sister-in-law might equally have said, “Lucy, I’m beat. Do me a favor and go to sleep.” It may not be obvious how to reconcile adult needs with responsible parenting. That’s not easy; not only because of the “laws of parenting” that we all absorb through our pores, but also because of limitations imposed by the conditions of our lives. For the moment, I ask you to trust that my discussion will get down to the nitty-gritty of the “how to” as we go along.

Right now, though, I want to make three arguments for “why to,” share power, resting in four different time perspectives.

1) *The present*: Declining the role of control and command allows for a surprising amount of space for fun and love. Grown-ups may be called upon for a bit more forbearance, but children recognize and respond to respect just as the rest of us do. They like adults better. They want to play with us. Sometimes, they even want to be kind to us. It’s a really nice way to share family life.

Quite seriously, learning early on how to negotiate differences diminishes those far more disagreeable forms of conflict: temper tantrums (yours as well as your child’s), stubbornness, and the myriad of other creative forms of power struggle that both kids and adults use. The family is a microcosm of our diverse society. Kids and grown-ups have different interests, cultures, languages, and styles of conflict. Just as in the big world out there, respecting differences requires some work but pays off in more peaceable and interesting relationships.

2) *The past*: Childrearing, like all human activity, has a history. Like much of human history, it is laced with violence. Corporal punishment is an obvious part of coercive parenting. If authoritarian parenting is your bent (you’ve probably figured out that it is not mine), then you’d better break a child’s will very early in life—which is to say, instill fear of physical harm—or you’re likely to find yourself resorting to actual harm right up until the time when the child suddenly realizes s/he has a height advantage over you.

There are different theories about the roots of violence on a societal level—wars, homicide, and so on—in childhood experience. Books have been written giving evidence that vast majorities of convicted murderers were violently abused themselves as children. I believe these linkages contain truth, but I also think that blaming violence in the home for every possible social ill is too simple and places far too much responsibility on parents. All sorts of institutions are coercive and, depending on definitions, violent, from the presence of danger at work to the absence of social supports for people who are ill and in need. At the same time, I believe violence at home is both consequence and at least one thread of cause in the history of violence in the world. The family is a social institution as well as a personal domain. The past is a story of violence running through virtually all human institutions.

Having lived with the fear of punishment, children grow into adults with little faith in alternatives: either punish or be punished. Moreover, coercive parenting teaches children to belie their own wants and perceptions and to place faith in those with greater power. Populations lacking self-determination are unlikely to build societies based in wise and skilled civic participation. Where, after all, do citizens learn those skills?

3) *The future*: The more autonomy a child is allowed in the present, the more responsibility the child will demonstrate later. In other words, a stitch in time saves nine. That's the pragmatic argument for allowing kids as much leeway as possible to make their own choices—including mistaken ones: "Remember how unhappy you were yesterday when you didn't take a nap, Lucy? Might be better to doze a bit now."

I've practiced counseling and mediation in the same community for over thirty years. I've had the rare privilege of working with people when they were eight and now when they are thirty-eight. Some parents whose parents I counseled now come to me with their children. I haven't done a scientific study, but it is my strong impression that little kids who have experienced respect for their rights and powers grow into teenagers who respect the rights of others, including their parents.

They are the easiest of adolescents. Having learned how to exercise power responsibly as two-year-olds (in two-year-old terms), they have no need to seize it crudely later. So much of that dreaded adolescent behavior—what gets labeled “acting out”—is, I believe, an abrupt and inexpert assertion of rights and power that have historically been denied. Kids who have lived those rights and powers right along not only know how to continue in teenage mode but also are more apt to feel the security and confidence to do so with compassion for others. They know how to negotiate—and so do you.

4) *The far future*: Change begins in the places where we can accomplish it. Those of us who are adults today inherited a world of war and injustice. I want to bequeath to my grandchildren something very different. Humans clearly have the capacity to do some vicious things to each other. I deeply believe that we have just as great a capacity to do good as well as a clear inclination in that direction given half a chance. Indeed, I think it takes a lot of doing to corrupt love and turn it into violence and hate. If I aim to parent in ways that allow my kids to be the best people they can be, then I'm doing what I can to introduce them to a world of justice. I want my family to be a microcosm of the world I wish we all inhabited, and that means that I, as a parent, need to be attentive to the ways I use my power and to the justice of my actions.

A belief in goodness is fundamental to my approach to relationships between adults and children. I appreciate that others may feel morally bound to emphasize discipline and control as responsible parenting and that those directions proceed from a belief that there is something inherent in children that needs to be disciplined and controlled.

There is an alternative basis for authoritarian parenting: that children need to learn self-control in order to negotiate a world that is out of control. The more oppression people experience as a group—those subject to racism or classism—the more urgency they may feel to protect their children by controlling them.

So is it possible to parent in an injurious world without doing injury to our own loved ones? Can parents raise children justly in an unjust world? To predict “badness” in children is, in my experience, to elicit it. A form of that same principle operates about other people: seeing the world divided into good and bad leaves one with little recourse but to expect the worst from others—also not a stance that is likely to help children develop good judgment about other people’s trustworthiness. If I believe not in a purely beneficent world out there but in my own goodness along with my children’s, then the next step is also to believe in my power to elicit the best from my kids through my good example and my persuasiveness. And “the best” includes knowing how to negotiate a less-than-kindly world out there.

All of which is fine and good in theory, but how does one implement such high-flying principles in practice? The lives of most parents are over-crammed with busy-ness. Full time work, if one is lucky enough to have it as opposed to a maddening series of part-time jobs, leaves little time or energy for patient negotiation with a two- or a fifteen-year-old. For all the labor-saving devices of modern life, a typical parenting day in America involves an average of somewhere around six hours of domestic work (still unevenly divided, by the way, between men and women)—laundry, shopping, cooking, cleaning, bookkeeping, helping with homework, and schlepping children from one place to another—in addition to at least eight hours (more commonly these days ten to twelve hours) of paid labor, in addition to an hour or two or more of commuting. Add up those figures and you get sleep-deprived, stressed, irritable, depressed, and anxious parents trying to do the best they can to raise children according to the advice of “experts” like me: not a pretty picture. That workload also adds up to isolation. Where is the time to visit with friends, to organize cooperative childcare, or to help a neighbor clean a house that’s gotten beyond her control?

This brings me to my third guiding principle of parenting:

It takes a village to keep a parent functional. Isolation is a par-

ent's greatest peril. Yet it is built into the structure of today's family life. Not only do parents have too little help, but they also lack the emotional support, the encouragement, reassurance, and old-fashioned love needed to sustain them in one of the hardest tasks any of us does: raising kids. Then too, children are isolated as well, and the consequences make parents' jobs harder. Kids may have friends at school, but few children can access those friends after school hours without transportation help from an adult, and school itself is often so structured that kids have too little opportunity to build their own relationships with peers. Nor do children have much chance to experience positive relationships with a variety of adults. Extended kin often live at some distance and their friends' parents are often as busy as you are. All these deficits show up in terms of youngsters' unfulfilled needs being brought home to their own families. They show up, for instance, as competitiveness with siblings for parental attention. I'm not aware that anyone has researched how many hours of parents' time goes into mediating fights among siblings, but I'm willing to bet it's a lot. If much of that friction is not innate "sibling rivalry" but instead a healthy competitiveness for a scarce resource, attention, and support, then options open up for doing something about it. But the obvious things to do bump squarely up against the isolation of nuclear families and the structure of working lives.

So here's what I'm NOT going to do in this book. I'm not going to tell you that this or that or the other is the right way to parent and you are inadequate for not doing it. I'm very aware of the privilege I had beginning to raise my son in an extended family surrounded by an elaborate community. Although that particular family didn't last long into my career as a parent, the experience challenged all the models of family and of motherhood I'd encountered before. Later, I sought out another version in the U.S., an elaborate chosen family surrounded by community.

Drawing on my experience of alternatives, I am going to suggest another way to think about parenting, another vision of relationships

and responsibilities and powers within the family, with a full understanding that doing things that way is idealistic because it flies in the face of some very fundamental facts of social life. I'm then going to explore ways of challenging those conditions, which are different for people of different communities, classes, cultures. In other words, my approach is about learning new ways to parent and strategizing new ways to organize life, creating new social conditions, in order to make those ways of parenting possible. Whatever doubts I might have had about how realistic that latter proposition might be, they have been allayed over the years by my clients, the many families who have asked for my help in supporting experiments and adventures in community-based child-rearing.

In the "learning new ways" category, power-sharing parenting involves resistance to many of the moral injunctions that influence parents, taking a critical look at the "shoulds" and "supposed-tos" that inhabit the moral ether around families. It also involves growing skills in negotiation, emotional literacy, expressiveness, and reason.

The "creating new social conditions" category involves building community, rethinking the definition of family, renegotiating divisions of labor, and critically evaluating the function of particular kinds of labor.

To parent in a power-sharing way, in other words, is to sign on for a role as social activist as well. Another burden, you think? Yes and no. There is work involved in doing the things I'm talking about, but there are also ready rewards in the form of easier and richer lives for both kids and parents.

plan of the book

The book is divided into two parts. Part One lays out a developmental order of things. Stages are defined by the challenges greeting parents at various ages of their kids. To some extent the conceit that this is a book about parents' developmental stages is a fiction; questions

about parents can't be separated from questions about kids. Clearly, the questions for parents are posed by their children. But parents are also distinct individuals living lives in multiple and complex worlds. At each stage of the process, I seek to keep a focus both on the tasks of parenting and on the lives of parents.

Part Two looks at a number of issues. Some of these will have appeared in the age-appropriate chapters. But many of them, such as discipline or dealing with death, may appear at any point along the way. In a series of short chapters, I've tried to focus on some questions that frequently arise in my therapy practice.

Throughout, I've drawn on stories of particular families. Most of the people who appear in these pages (with the exception of my own family and friends who have agreed to be here) are fictionalized. A story may be sparked by reality, but I've disguised details and created variations, both to protect confidentiality and also to include a greater breadth of experience. I've also tried to reflect at least a bit of the diversity of our society. Of necessity, my knowledge of the lives of people from heritages that are distinctly different from my own is drawn from work with clients and from the generous input of friends and colleagues. I don't pretend to have included all possible cultural identities, veering toward those peoples with whom I'm most familiar (there are more people of European and African heritage, for instance, than of others). I fully realize that for many readers greater rather than lesser acts of extrapolation may be necessary. I both apologize for leaving you with that additional work and I welcome your feedback. The richer the sharing of experience available to us all, the better parents we can be and the better world we can make.

1

cooperation and communication:
infancy

Developmental challenges:

- 1) Learning teamwork
- 2) Understanding baby talk

It begins with the notion that we should be ecstatic about new life, and the *shoulds* and *shouldn'ts* of parenting grow steadily more daunting from there. In reality, few events change one's lifestyle so immediately and so dramatically as does the arrival of a child. The meaning of that event, and the emotions a parent may feel about it, vary enormously depending on a family's condition (isolated or extended, older parents or teenagers, adopted child or birthed triplets), culture (valuing large families or small, education or athleticism, emotionally restrained or expressive), and circumstance (rich or poor, renter or owner, settled in one place for generations or peripatetic).

Many of today's parents are full-bore involved in working lives that can be seriously altered by the abrupt introduction of children. Not only may an individual's identity be vested in a career, but also increasingly her (or his) experience of community may be lived far more extensively at work than at home. Infancy therefore often means a new isolation for a parent, or possibly finding yourself suddenly plunged into a new circle of acquaintances. Moreover, people who have mastered job-related skills, who feel competent and appreciated at work, may find themselves juggling a mysterious new creature screaming pas-

sionately for no discernable reason, wiggling and turning alarmingly red in the face. It may have been a long, long time since you felt quite so helpless, quite so adrift. If you're lucky, you may have an elder around to help, or a sibling who arrived at these shores a bit ahead of you. Yet even the business of accepting other's expertise may be complicated, triggering uncomfortably competitive dynamics within your family of origin.

On the other hand, you may take to infant care like a pro. Perhaps you handled a string of younger siblings, or you worked your way through college as a nanny. You may be surrounded, as at a point in time I was, by scads of competent moms, all lending a helpful hand with no strings attached – but counseling you to do things in a way dramatically at odds with your pre-parenthood ideas.

Given all that variation, what happens when you believe you are supposed to feel uncomplicated joy? How do you feel when deep down you've bought the idea that parenthood comes naturally, that motherhood especially should be instinctive?

adrift in a sea of infancy

I gave birth in a hospital (or what people in India call a nursing home) in Calcutta. Despite my neighbor's generous offer of midwifery, I was insecure about delivering without a functional hospital nearby. My acculturation to reliance on professionally-defined medical resources was too strong. So, at seven months pregnant, I decamped to the big city 300 miles and full-day's travel away by car and train and boat and train again.

In the end, we almost couldn't get to the hospital; it was monsoon season, the city was underwater, the car's brakes were shot. But we made it, and after several days we brought the baby to the home of the relatives with whom we were staying. I'd looked forward to this moment, as much for the rich support I assumed the environment would offer as for anything else. Lilidi was in her sixties, a warm, intelligent woman

who'd reared four children and was now actively grandmothering four more. Her husband, Jaimababu, was a physician. He hadn't practiced for years, serving instead as an administrative medical officer for the government. Their eldest daughter and her three kids were staying with them at the time. Another daughter lived nearby with her husband and year-old baby.

But when I got home, I found that Lilidi was ill with a heart problem and confined to bed. Jaimababu focused nervously on his wife, to whom he was devoted. Besides, he knew little about the practical side of infancy and was, in fact, a super-nervous surrogate granddad. The resident daughter, who knew lots about babies, was away; her father-in-law had just had emergency surgery for lung cancer. The maid-servant, a woman who cooked and cleaned for the family, had just quit, unwilling to assume so great a work-load. And there I was, my worst vision come true: a newborn in my arms and no one who knew anything close by to help. True, my husband and newly college-graduated brother were with me, and they were certainly supportive. But combining all our knowledge of infants, we added up to something substantially below zero.

The next day, I woke up to strange sounds. Tuhin's little body was regularly, rhythmically jerking. I swept him up, patted him, offered him my breast. He didn't seem to be in distress, but he refused to nurse and jerked and jerked and jerked.

I was going for Dr. Spock when the younger daughter arrived to meet the new baby. She laughed. "First case of hiccups?," she asked merrily. She put a little sugar on her finger and rubbed it in his mouth. The spasms promptly stopped.

If parenting is supposed to be an inborn ability residing somewhere deep inside each of us, especially if we're female, then I was in a lot of trouble.

Let's start by deleting that idea. Parenting, as I've said, is a learned activity, and much of what we know about it in the beginning we've

learned without consciousness, without critical reflection. Ideas seep into our minds from many directions. You probably go to movies, watch TV, listen to popular music, read a magazine from time to time, even if only in the dentist's waiting room. All those products that we define as culture combine with a ton of influences that are cultural in a wider sense to shape your attitudes and feelings and beliefs about parenting. Inevitably, you are dealing with those influences, knowingly or subliminally. A clever person once said, "We don't know who discovered water, but it probably wasn't a fish." Culture is our water, the medium in which we form assumptions and understand what our experiences mean. Your own experience of being parented, of course, is a basic social influence. You may find yourself justifying your practices by saying, "I was treated that way and it didn't do me any harm." Or you may take the opposite position: "I was treated that way and the last the thing I want is to do that to my kid." In all likelihood, you sometimes take one of those positions and sometimes the other depending on the question at hand, your sense of control, your powers of inventiveness, the resources available, and the prevailing ideas in your present community.

A very basic idea for many people in the modern industrialized world is that parenting is a project for two people. Single parents are seen as "unfortunate"—or worse, irresponsible—people, usually moms, who have failed for some reason to provide the ideal of a two-parent family. Yet 28% of America's households with children contain one parent. Based on US census data, researchers estimate that more than half of all children born during the 1990s will spend some amount of time with a single parent, usually their mother. Prevalent though it is, single motherhood in today's America is drenched in moral judgment. Women raising children alone are held responsible by that ethereal thing known as the mainstream for poverty, crime, homosexuality, and a host of other so-called "social ills".

But if parenting by one is "a bad thing", the concept of parenting by fours or sixes or twelves lies wholly outside the realm of consideration.

Indeed, however many adults are involved in raising a family—and I will argue that the number is virtually never one, that more adults than a single primary parent are always involved—the socially prevailing picture of parenting is limited at most to two.

I swore as a child and young woman that I wanted no children. I watched how bound my mother's life was by her role as mom. Her lifestyle suited her well, but my ambitions far exceeded any model I had of female parenting; I vowed I'd escape that trap come what may. But then one day I realized my own feelings had changed. My husband and I were living in a rural part of India, in his extended family, peopled by relatives I adored. Surrounding us were gazillions of children, parents, cousins, relatives and neighbors of all stripes. Suddenly, almost literally from one moment to the next, I was hungry for a child. I was about twenty-five and my vision of life turned 180 degrees. But without my realizing it, my feelings about childrearing had been formed in the context of a suburban nuclear family that couldn't have been more different from the social context in which I now found myself.

I believe the most central developmental task facing new parents is learning to work as part of a team, and the two most essential skills required are listening to others' stories and trusting ones own perceptions. Those two processes may seem to conflict with each other, but in reality they are intimately bound together.

reading the baby

Some babies are easy from the start. Peaceable and predictable, they sleep a lot, feed with no problem, and smile on cue at about eight weeks. They're happy being held by everyone, happy being left in a crib with a colorful mobile floating above them.

Then there was Tuhin. He was a visual baby. From a very early age his eyes focused on lights and fans and anything else that was bright and moved. So he wanted to be held upright where he could see the world, and he wanted to be moved frequently from one place to another. That

translated into a lot of pacing for his adults.

He also cried a lot. Once we got our newborn back to the village, my mother-in-law quickly diagnosed the trouble as colic. We experimented with my diet, since I was nursing him, to see if it was something I ate. But his squirmy restlessness didn't abate. My mother-in-law applied Bengali remedies, mostly involving human touch, massage, and heat. That all helped, but it took three months before his digestive capacity kicked in and we weren't dealing with a near-constant belly ache.

Amazingly, Tuhin grew restless and cried whenever I ate. My mother- and sisters-in-law insisted on carrying him to the other end of the house, far away as possible, while I had my meals. "He's used to your digestive cycle," his grandmother opined. "It's natural that he reacts when you eat." Our umbilical cord might be severed, but clearly significant strands were still in place. For the next decades I was to learn how many and varied they were.

From the beginning, the routines and approaches we developed were tailored to this particular baby, as well as to the resources afforded by our particular environment. Tuhin was a wide-awake child. He napped for very short periods of time and sought amusement when awake. Fortunately, there were at least fifteen older children around at most any moment, so amusement was plentiful and I could happily arrange to meet his need. How different life would have been had we been all alone in a city apartment! I could well imagine resenting his alertness, struggling with him to give it up and go to sleep, maybe even coming to believe he was intentionally doing it to me.

Under my more munificent conditions, though, I very early became convinced of a different and fundamental principle: babies don't lie. They don't manipulate or power play in any other form, either. What they do abundantly, though, is express. Whether giving voice to discomfort or curiosity or a desire for human touch or a passion for visual stimulation, Tuhin always told the truth.

My job was to learn his language. Communication involves a sender and a receiver. He sent; could I receive? There is little in life more heartbreaking than tending to a wailing baby when you can't figure out what's the matter. Sometimes you're left with no option but to comfort rather than satisfy. But that's because of a misfire between the infant's language and the grown-up's comprehension or resources.

In my extended family in India, that premise lay beyond question. In the United States, however, I commonly hear people say things like, "Don't give in every time s/he cries, or s/he'll learn s/he can manipulate you. S/he's got to learn s/he doesn't get what s/he wants simply because s/he wants it."

I imagine these sentiments may translate into, "I'm too worn out to respond when s/he cries, and there's no one else here to do it for me." As a problem statement, I understand it, the problem being too much work, too little labor around. But voiced as a moral statement, a declaration of the *right* way to do it, I disagree. On the other hand, if the objective is to raise citizens who don't express their needs, who don't protest, who are willing to suffer silently and alone, then the methodology makes sense.

Bedtime is a case study in how all those themes play out. Establishing sleep patterns is a major concern of parents in America. In rural India, bedtime is a non-concept. Family life continues late into the night. As the women prepare and serve the last meal of the day and the men visit and talk about the day's events, children play until they tire, eventually curling into the available lap of a woman sitting on the floor to cook, or cuddling up beside a man as he smokes and chats in the dim light of a lantern. The grown-ups' last task of the day is to collect the sleeping children and sort them into the appropriate family beds.

Imagine translating that method into an urban industrial setting. In India, the whole family naps in the afternoon. Two or three hours of down time, followed by more work in fields or kitchen or shop in the cooler hours of the evening, make for a relaxed but awake transition to

bedtime. An extended household supports many children, who occupy themselves as a group with little need for adult attention. And when they do gravitate toward the very natural human impulse to fall asleep against the warmth of another human body, there are plenty of bodies available.

In your family, however, chances are good that only one or two adults are around for bedtime, and they are likely to be exhausted from a long day on the go without rest. Parents' need for time off clashes sharply with children's need to play out their day. Battles circling around children's bedtime, so frequent right through adolescence, begin now with a decision about whether to let your infant cry her/himself to sleep. The temptation is strong. Not only are you probably sleep deprived, but you may be suffering from the shock of your dramatically altered relationship with time. Before baby, however busy you may have been with work, relationship, domesticity, and friends, you nonetheless had at least small periods of time alone. You rested, or jogged, or thought, or bathed. Now, however, even when the baby naps, you face an endless set of tasks threatening to bury you unless you hurry, hurry, hurry, racing against the alarm of your infant's wake-up cry.

Combined with the practicality of establishing, by any means necessary, an early end to the baby's day, are a set of moral imperatives that justify your taking action. Here's how that story goes: Learning to fall asleep to the clock, doing it alone, without extra comfort or overly-extensive ritual, we are told, is good for the child. It establishes self-reliance. It teaches a healthy realism about expectations of too much nurturing. It ensures that the child gets enough sleep, "enough" being a quantity scientifically established by physicians. It may seem harsh to let your baby cry to the point of exhaustion, but it really is not. It is for the child's benefit, and sometimes parents must put away their own sentiments when a hard thing to do is also the right thing to do. Mother and father know best, especially when they adhere to the norms of what's best as they are widely established in the community.

I can only imagine how horrified my in-laws would have been had I given voice to such an opinion.

Assumptions about the value of inculcating independence in infants often play into decisions about where to put the baby to sleep. In recent years, the notion of the family bed has gained some currency. In village India, of course, any other kind of bed would be seen as totally weird. But in the U.S., it is an innovation. Babies are natural cuddlers. Fresh from the womb, touched during feedings and play, newborns can have little familiarity with the sensation of sleeping alone. I've mentioned that mosquitoes resolved this question for me; I was lucky to be able to experience first hand the ease and comfort for all of us of sharing a bed. How often I hear parents complain that they fall asleep in their children's beds while putting the youngsters to sleep, waking in the night with stiff neck and sore back and having to re-bed themselves.

Now let's rewrite the bedtime story applying a different set of moral principles and skills for listening and power sharing. Start with the premise that you *don't* know best, that your baby is the expert. Next, observe your particular infant's patterns clearly (as clearly as you can given your own sleep deprivation; maybe you need to recruit someone to cover childcare for a couple of hours in the afternoon so you can nap and be clear enough at night to observe?). What are the rhythms of napping? What signs of tiring do you see at night? How does the baby respond to noise and activity in the environment when those signs appear? How about light and dark? Does the child want to nurse or to have a bottle? Does s/he seem more content lying down with someone beside her/him, or does s/he want to be walked and jiggled and serenaded?

Well informed about your individual infant's sensibilities, you need next to register your own. What do *you* need at nighttime? Here's the point at which the social and the biological meet. Your need is probably more dictated by non-natural factors, like how much help you've had during the day, whether you've worked outside the home that day, how

many other primary care adults are around at bedtime, what time you have to get up in the morning, whether you have a dishwasher and a washing machine, and a thousand other details about the construction of your life. Given all those conditions, what you need is reasonable and probably pretty compelling. But is it possible?

Possibly not, at least not in a perfect way. The more people involved in childcare, the closer you may be able to come to finding a balance point that best embodies care for everyone, you included. But if you truly believe that your wants and your baby's wants are equally legitimate and that you share equal rights to satisfaction (a concept I'll elaborate later in this chapter), then you are facing a practical dilemma, not a moral one or an issue of parental responsibility to shape and discipline a malleable and willful child. Even at the very beginning of life, implicit judgments are communicated to children. Your job (in my way of thinking about parenting) is to recognize ideas you've learned, indeed that you've so thoroughly internalized as to regard as natural truths rather than debatable ideas, that serve to justify choices involving an imposition of your will on your baby. You may not be able to satisfy the child's desires and needs entirely, but you can protect your offspring from internalizing the idea that s/he is somehow bad for wanting it.

There is, in my view, a distinct reason for reframing necessity as morality. If you think you're a good person for forcing your baby to sleep according to the clock, you are more likely to accept the assignment, as well as to feel relieved from responsibility. But if you think it is the nature of your social world that positions you to do something less ideal than you would like, you're more likely to challenge that world, to join a campaign for increased maternity leave or family time, for instance. Similarly, you may have to exert less physical force to get children to obey if you insist you are acting in their best interest, and on the other side you may have to practice more skills of persuasion, more imaginative compromise, more self-reflection about where you really can compromise, all of which take time and energy.

Translating the principle of negotiation into practice may take different forms depending on your family structure and circumstance. If you are alone at night with a baby, and if you need to get up in the morning to, let's say, drive a school bus (meaning that the lives of other children depend on your being reasonably rested) and if you can't join forces with other adults who share the routines of bedtime that most resemble your baby's style, then you might opt for an evening that is as quiet as possible, that begins bedtime early and allows rituals of cuddling, feeding, singing, story-telling, that are restful both to you and to the baby. That choice might mean that you do less laundry, cook less elaborate meals, tolerate a messier house. In other words, try to make space for bedtime uncrowded by the thousand other tasks of housekeeping that claw at your consciousness.

This last idea is truly complex. There is a fine-grained mixture of necessity, aesthetics, and ingrained social rules embodied in the standards of housekeeping. Over the years of mediating couples, both heterosexual and same sex, I've had demonstrated to me with great vividness how much gender enters into questions of maintaining domestic space. Women typically (although certainly not always) feel compelled to keep the kitchen surfaces well wiped, the laundry up-to-date and neatly folded, the toys put away, and the floor vacuumed, before they can fall exhausted into bed. How often I hear women complain that their male partners fail to share the load, only to have the men complain that when they do try to "help," the women criticize their low standards of cleanliness:

"I don't mind washing the dishes, but I get really mad when she takes them right out of the dish drain and washes them again!"

"You call that dish washing?! I call it a rinse, and just barely that!"

Environmental aesthetics matter deeply. Many women tell me they need their physical space to be orderly before they can claim consciousness as their own. Men, in contrast, more commonly say, "I want to read the paper, check my email, make love, paint the garage....and then I'll

clean up the room.” Market researchers maintain that women’s brains are made for multi-tasking, while men need to focus on things serially, first one task, then another. And while they are doing each one, they have the power to exclude from their peripheral vision anything extraneous.

I’m not convinced this difference is altogether biological. Biology, I consider, presents us with continua, ranges of capacities and possibilities. From girlhood, the kinds of things women are stereotypically trained to do—talking with friends, dressing elaborately, playing at family life—require holistic thinking, broadly encompassing perceptions of things spoken, seen, sensed, remembered, known, and surmised. Even in today’s less-gendered world, girls’ toys elicit a variety of imaginative interactions. Boys, though, are trained to focus on a ball or a computer, on one thing at a time. Action figures come with more distinct story lines, and even video games compel awareness to a screen and a repetitive action.

For women, then, a chaotic environment may be disquieting, while for men it may be simply a task postponed. That working women often crowd their evenings with housekeeping reflects both wide-ranging capabilities and internalized oppression. When I wrote my first book, I realized some segment of my crowded life would have to go. I wouldn’t give up full-time parenting; I had to continue earning money. I looked around the house, gulped, and made a vow to pick things up only after each draft was done. It seemed clear that those were my choices: a neat house or a completed book. It was a hard thing, not a relief, to let go of the housework, but it was that or suppress my writer’s voice.

Ideally, if you are co-parenting with a partner, your bedtime choices are broader than I’ve suggested. You might negotiate with that person to share bedtime in a variety of ways, seeking the ones that best serve everyone’s purposes. You could alternate nights, or trade bedtime for a morning shift, if you have an earlier start time than your partner has. Finding that the baby responds well to having you both present, you

might do the rituals together, hoping the time also serves your need for connection with each other. Use your imagination and all your negotiating skills to experiment with variations on the theme, noting and selecting the most effective ones. And just as you get the routine down, be prepared to notice that your infant's patterns are changing. They change constantly as the baby grows and discovers new capabilities, including a growing appetite for wakefulness.

Throughout all of that, practice saying to yourself and to your baby that the problem is not that s/he wants too much or is too dependant or demanding or needy. The problem is that you're simply not in a position to respond perfectly, and (practicing for the emotional complexity of your baby's next stage, the "terrible twos") that you feel sad, or angry, or whatever it is you do feel about the situation. You might also try practicing optimism: The longer you learn parenting together, the better you'll work the problems out.

how to work cooperatively

The approach I'm suggesting for handling bedtime is also good training for learning to negotiate, both with your child and with your co-care-takers. For the lucky few of you who live with more than two adults, the negotiation of needs becomes easier, and also more complex, a small price to pay for the extra help. If the baby speaks the truth, then the problem becomes building enough help into the baby-care system so that parents can afford to listen.

Let's start with an inventory of your "team." Who are the adults involved in childcare? Do you have a spouse? A partner? A grandparent or several? A neighbor? A friend? A paid caretaker? Hopefully, you have some number of people laying hands on the baby in a regular and helpful way. Some friends, a straight couple, gave birth to their firstborn, Jesse, while living in a household with two very close single women friends. All four adults were thrilled with the infant, and all four vowed to share parental duties. We learned that the averages were just

about right: four adults to one infant. That's the break-even point—the amount of labor needed so that no one individual feels exhaustedly overloaded. True, everyone in Jesse's household worked hard. But the labor-to-baby equation worked well enough.

To construct cooperative working relationships among the adults involved is easy to say, not so easy to do. In fact, most of the ways that many of us are taught in this society to relate to others are the opposite of cooperative. We're taught to fight for what we want, to view others as adversaries, to compete to win. Exceptions to that pattern often exist in families newly immigrated from more communal societies. But as the generations go on, individualism, and with it competitiveness, tend to crowd out those cultures of origin.

What lies on the other side of individualism is, paradoxically, self-sacrifice. If we're not competing, then we're likely to be caretaking. Messages abound about putting others before yourself. To be selfless is to be noble. Especially in family relations, we are taught that "compromise" is inevitable, that you can't get your way all the time, that accepting loss and restriction equals maturity, concepts that begin at birth and continue throughout.

Both sides of the coin—coercion and self-sacrifice—can only operate under conditions of dishonesty. That's a harsh word to use for the many little lies we tell ourselves and others, born of contradictions between integrity and what we don't know how to do. Mom may, for instance, feel ashamed of her inability to be endlessly patient with a cranky baby and her inability to be endlessly forgiving of a less-than-helpful mate. So she may say she's doing fine and doesn't need help, right up until the moment when she explodes in anger. Or she may nag and needle rather than admit she's incapable of further activity and deeply in need of relief. Self-sacrifice and coercion take turns with each other, an endless swing from sweetness to tyranny.

Meanwhile, her partner may look away from signs of her impending collapse, justifying inattention by his conviction that he brings

home more money and (in his most private thoughts) doesn't a greater income make him a more worthy person? Or at least more worthy of peace and quiet at the end of the day? The notion may jostle uncomfortably with sympathy for the woman he loves as she goes down for the third time and resentment over her fastidiousness and volatility. But none of this does he say out loud, hiding instead in front of the eleven o'clock news.

Both partners are, on an emotional level, living with secrets and lies of a sort that come home to roost, usually in the form of battles at the breakfast table, if not earlier in bed.

All these behaviors are strategies for handling problems, and, especially in combination, they produce disunity and contention. Cooperation begins with ruling the behaviors out:

- **No power plays** (any act intended to get another person to do what she or he wouldn't otherwise do)
- **No self-sacrifice** (any act intended unilaterally to assume a disproportionate or untenable amount of the work)
- **No secrets or lies** (any act intended to manage relevant information, of an emotional or a factual nature, by withholding it)

Simple rules, but don't try them while driving! Taken together, they describe an open, collaborative, mindful, and, above all, reciprocal relationship. If you are abiding by these three injunctions, what you are left with is honest discussion, creative resourcefulness, shared problem-solving, and good-willed negotiation. Clearly, those practices are better accomplished with some people than others. Specifically, cooperative relationships call for a measure of equality, if not perfect equality of power, then at least a very firmly entrenched equality of rights.

There are plenty of times when power plays and secrets are exactly in order. You may not want to tell your boss just what you think of him or you may want to construct a careful strategy to add political muscle to your attempt to take control of the school board. When you find yourself in a truly adversarial position with people who are not about

to let their guard down, don't try to act cooperatively; one hand can't clap and if you try, you may be surprised to find your hand smashing painfully against the wall. Times when you have less real power than the person or people in contention with you—a boss, or a business competitor, or someone of a more privileged social identity, there may be justification for power playing by withholding information, or even sometimes lying. Of course, there is an ethical dilemma each of us faces in these circumstances. There is an injury incurred to the integrity of the person who chooses to act less than honestly, less than cooperatively, under whatever circumstances. I would wish for a world in which negotiation in good faith were the prevailing norm. But in the real world, often it is not. Unequal and uncooperative relationships are unfortunately common, and the consequences if one person acts openly and honestly while another does not, especially if that person is more powerful, can be severe.

So the guidelines for cooperation I'm suggesting are only useful when everyone involved is equally committed to them, and when the capacity for each person to negotiate for her or himself at least approximates equality. "Equality" is a complex matter; between children and adults, for instance, where does equality lie? I make a distinction between mechanical equality and a commitment to equal rights. The starting place for cooperative relationships is the assumption that no one is more entitled to getting her or his needs met or interests satisfied than anyone else. How exactly you manage that is not always obvious, but the principle needs to be profoundly adopted for the question to become meaningful.

In this context, then, what's the problem with self-sacrifice? As I've commented, many cultures honor it. Its opposite is construed to be selfishness, an accusation most acutely leveled at girls and women who are, according to traditional rules of gender, enjoined to nurture relationships by putting others' needs before their own. Indeed, particular individuals are enjoined to endure different sorts of sacrifices: men,

perhaps, to be good providers at any cost to self; women to “do it all” with successful careers, perfect housekeeping, and all-patient partnering and parenting. In the process, we burn out, get grumpy, or lose heart—all sorts of nasty consequences that are the mirror opposite of those intended.

At the same time, in a competitive economy there is a counter-injunction—to compete hard and win, to put oneself before others at all cost. We’re taught those rules through sports and academic rankings. These contradictory messages all assume a dualism: that self-sacrifice and selfishness are two opposite and self-canceling qualities. When it comes to parenting, I’m suggesting they take on very different meanings. It is neither selfish nor selfless to speak up for your own needs while simultaneously respecting everyone else’s, because both sides of that equation hold information crucial to finding solutions that truly work for everyone and therefore stand the test of time.

negotiating solutions

Let’s go back to baby’s bedtime and play out scenarios in which no one either power plays or sacrifices. Right away, you might protest, there is a critical contradiction: self-sacrifice is not an infant’s problem; small children are hardly known to be willing negotiators. They insist on what they want with little regard for the well-being of their caretakers.

True, and also not true in some important ways that I’ll talk about as they come up. For the moment, however, I’m focusing more on transactions among those whose equality is more obvious, the caretakers. Because I believe it is isolation, so common among parents in nuclear families, that gives rise to so many of the problems we take to be inherent to child-rearing, I prioritize the mindset, and with it the skills, that best increase chances for as much labor sharing as possible.

In two-parent families, negotiating bedtime duties is often thorny. At the end of long, grueling days, most of us are not at our most cooperative best. Whatever store of extra energy for talking through a

problem there might have been in the morning is now long gone. So one good strategy is to have the conversation about bedtime at some time other than bedtime.

Start with each person speaking fully about her or his experience of the occasion.

Parent One: "Working part-time, I'm home earlier than you. So I pick Sally up from childcare, do the grocery shopping, come home and start dinner. All that while the baby is cranky because she's been away all day. I'm trying to entertain her and comfort her, which means I'm juggling her on one arm while I'm lifting grocery bags with the other. By the time we're ready to put Sally to bed, I'm done. I'm not up for the process."

Parent Two: "I know you do all that, and I so appreciate it! Here's my dilemma: Working a full-time job while trying to be a responsible co-parent has me exhausted. I'm sure I'm not more tired than you, but I am tired. I've been dealing with dissatisfied customers all day, glued to a computer screen. All I can think of is a shower and bed."

It's so much about scarcity. Where are the grandparents and aunts and uncles? Where are the neighbors who are themselves raising children and who, needing the same things, might band together with you? A place to start is with the possibility of bringing more people into the picture. Can you afford to hire a mother's helper in the evening hours? What a relief it would be to hire a teenager who's willing to entertain Sally while dinner prep is underway, especially if that person could put on a load of laundry, run to the store for forgotten items, and do other small tasks around the house. How about some sharing with neighbors?

Soon after I returned to the U.S. from India, I joined with friends to live collectively. One step along the way to that rather dramatic act was to form community in a neighborly way. We commonly traded off watching the kids and cooking. In fact, it was partly the tedium of carrying pots and pans and sleeping babies from one house to another

that encouraged us to live under one roof. I know of four families who have formed a childcare co-op, sharing much of the work in imaginative ways. They talk about the relief, and also about the enrichment of their family lives.

If finances or the absence of teenagers or other parents of young children in the community make these approaches impractical, how can you manage to make the most of what you do have? If you can't bring more working hands into the equation, are there ways to reduce the workload? Re-examine all the chores you do before the baby's bedtime: can you pare them down to the minimum? Are there any of those activities you might "outsource"—buying healthy prepared food to minimize cooking, using paper plates to minimize dishwashing, packing away knick-knacks for the time being to minimize dusting, and so on?

Now we're down to sharing the work out between you both. Start with the recognition that everyone's life is hard right now, that arguing about who has it worse and most deserves relief at bedtime will only get you into another energy-sapping cul-de-sac. A handy technique is to list all the things that need to happen between the end of the working day and the grown ups' bedtime. Next comes the "no self-sacrifice" part, or at least as little as you can manage. First say exactly what you'd want:

Parent Two: "I'd like to disappear into the shower and a rest when I get home. But then I'd really *like* to put Sally to bed. I love lying down with her, cuddling and singing her lullabies."

Parent One: "Well, I really need some down time myself before starting to get the house in order. I'd love dinner to magically appear. If I didn't have to cook, I'd be happy to entertain Sally before she's ready to go to sleep."

Some solutions start to appear. Parent Two might offer to bring dinner home several nights a week, freeing Parent One to play while Parent Two transitions out of the working day. Parent Two might offer

to take on bedtime rituals on working days, in return for Parent One compensating with other tasks.

At this point, you're likely to remember all the other items on the must-do list that this draft of a plan doesn't address. Scan the list and speak for the chores you least mind doing. Maybe you can stand taking out garbage but absolutely loath dish-washing. Maybe folding laundry has a certain meditational value, while washing lettuce drives you bonkers. Having both picked your "can-do" items, you'll be left with some things, hopefully only a few, that nobody wants to do. If you can't find someone else to do them, and you can't figure out a way to ditch them, then at least you can divvy them up with a sense of equality. You can also agree to reshuffle the deck when either of you reaches a point of total burnout.

Laced through this model negotiation is the principle of honesty. In fact, I often believe that an agreement to withhold no information—nothing relevant to what's going on between you, that is—and to tell no lies covers the entire subject of cooperative negotiation. If you are speaking up for what you want and feel, you've laid down the crucial basis for working through solutions that are most cooperative and most likely to work.

The steps are:

- *Say exactly what you want.* If you start out compromising, by the time you negotiate more compromises you'll end up with an agreement you can't stand to implement. By asking for 100% of what you want (but no more; don't "position" yourself for a negotiating edge against a loved one), you stand a much better chance of coming up with an agreeable agreement.
- *Listen to your negotiation partner's "100%" and believe it.*
- *Work together to seek ideal solutions, ones that give you exactly what you want, or even maybe something more than either of you imagined. (I found collective living to be in the latter category.)*
- *Having exhausted those possibilities, look for compromises that do least*

injustice to your sensibilities. Again, if you compromise too much, you won't be able to stay true to your solution. It will fall apart, and you'll have to do it all over again.

- *Promise to continue to be honest about how your plan is working for you and to renegotiate whenever either of you feels overburdened.* That is a state, by the way, that is often signaled by a sense of grievance against the other partner. Avoid feeling that he or she is taking advantage of you or getting off easy: those ideas hark back to adversarial relationships, not to what you've both (hopefully!) signed on for. Give your partner the benefit of the doubt, but pay attention to those feelings of resentment, reading them as signs that your system needs revision. Speak up rather than unilaterally rewriting the agreement.

making even harder decisions cooperatively

Resolving workload issues cooperatively is one thing. Making those many difficult, culturally charged decisions that accompany infant care may be another. There are choices that carry intense religious significance, for instance. Circumcision is one of those. Heavily grounded in cultural traditions, the circumcision of boy infants challenges new parents to sort out their own values and beliefs, and to reconcile them with each other's and with their extended families. Circumcision may identify a boy as a member of a particular identity group, as Muslim or Jewish, for instance. Or it may simply signify compliance with current medical opinion. Recent research questioned the notion that circumcision is a requirement for good hygiene later in life, demonstrating that "science", too, can be thought of as a cultural group.

The family bed is another of those decisions often laced with assumptions and values. As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, I opted to keep the baby with me. It was not a choice I made in a theoretical way, in advance of the reality. In fact, we hired a craftsman to build a lovely teak crib for the baby, cannily constructed to convert into a sofa. And a sofa it remained as Tuhin never slept in it. Here again, the wishes of the

whole family need to be taken into account. A restless, breast-fed baby may allow parents more sleep time if s/he's in the bed, while a sound sleeper who never stirs all night might not care after falling asleep. One parent might relish the sensuality of that small body in the night, especially if you've had to be away at work all day. If the other parent wants an adult-only sleep space, then it's time to pull out negotiation procedure and seek those acceptable compromises (family bed some nights, the crib others?).

negotiating with baby

I'll deal with the topic of cross-generational negotiation in greater detail as the chapters go on. I am aware of common objections, starting with the idea that adults really do know some things that children don't. Kids and adults are, by definition, not equal and don't have equal experience nor equal access to resources. Many people's objections go on from there to claims about authority and entitlement. Cooperating with kids, some parents fear, will undermine the authority needed to get through day-to-day life tasks, not to mention keeping teens alive later on. All these questions will come up for discussion as we move along the road of parental development.

For now, I want to make one essential point: all children, from infancy on up, are more responsive to others than we adults imagine. At the very beginning, a newborn can be invited to play or to rest, depending on the body language of the adult holding her. An undiapered baby's bowel habits become predictable within a couple of months, and rituals can be constructed so that the baby goes where you want if you agree to follow his or her lead as to when s/he goes. I tended to nurse Tuhin while reading a book; very soon he connected the two, reaching for the breast when I picked up the book. Later, when he could crawl, he'd tell me he wanted to nurse by bringing me the book I'd been reading last time he fed. He had no words yet, but he surely could communicate. If I had finished the book when he wasn't looking, I had

to mime reading the last page and picking up the new one in order to move on. We negotiated the rituals.

The capacity of small children to note their world, to adjust to what goes on around them, to experiment with different ways of doing recurring things like nursing and relating and sleeping, is wonderful. Even though a newborn doesn't understand language, I urge new parents to speak about what they're doing and what they want, for two reasons. First, it's never too soon to cultivate the habit of talking matters through with a child. Second, you may not be aware of how much your tone of voice and other non-verbal signals communicate to an infant. Better, I believe, to err on the side of offering information than it is to assume you can tell what registers for a newborn and what doesn't. Here, too, information is power and power sharing is a good way to go.