

An Interview with Jennifer Bingham Hull, author of *Beyond One: Growing a Family and Getting a Life*

Q. *Beyond One* chronicles your leap from one child to two. In the book you claim that the second child is even more challenging than the first for parents. How can that be?

Everybody assumes that the second child is a piece of cake. After all, you've done it before. Yet studies show that the second is often much more difficult and life changing than the first. Fewer women return to work full time after the second child than after the first: it's much harder to have it all as the family grows. With one child you can play hot-potato-baby or fudge child-care issues in your marriage. With two, dad either steps up to the plate or mom becomes exhausted. Men usually do become more involved fathers after the second arrives, and some now even stay home. But as Arlie Hochschild shows in *The Second Shift*, when they don't share the load marriages suffer dramatically. And even the best partnerships get tested. Forget sex—it's hard to even talk with your spouse with two toddlers in the house!

A growing family also puts you firmly in a child's world. I took my first baby to cafes. With two little ones I was lucky to get to story time at our local bookstore: it was so hard to get them out the door. As Alice Walker put it, "With one you can move. With more than one you're a sitting duck." The old saw about the second being easier only applies when you're handling the younger one alone, which is rarely the case. Like us, most couples also space their kids closely—two or three years apart—making life difficult early on.

Q. So why not just stop with one like Alice Walker did?

I think that's a valid choice. Family size is a very personal decision. I'm close to my brothers and wanted my firstborn to have a sibling. Though much is written about sibling rivalry, studies show that most brothers and sisters value their relationship greatly as they grow up. Closely spaced kids are hell early on, but later they end up as playmates. For me, it also just feels right hearing two small pairs of feet padding down the hallway. I enjoy few things more than watching my kids play together.

But sibling relations aren't predictable. Jimmy Carter got Billy. Abel got Cain. The best reason to have a second child is because you want one, and all the work, chaos, joy and frustration that another little person brings.

Q. What prompted *Beyond One*?

With my first baby I read the child-care guides. Expecting my second, however, I wanted a book for me—something describing the mom in the middle of the maelstrom in all of her dimensions. Women, after all, don't stop having interests and personalities once they have kids, especially

these days when most start families after living independently. Yet I found very little on this subject and nothing that appealed to me.

Oddly enough, I was contacted by Ingrid Emerick of Seal Press to write *Beyond One*. Pregnant with her second, she'd too found nothing on the bookshelves to address her concerns. The subject grabbed me right away because second-time moms are a sophisticated audience. Already adept in baby care, they're thinking about larger issues concerning work, marriage and their personal lives. With your second you realize that motherhood is not a short-term crisis. It's a life to which you've eventually got to answer, just like before.

Most books on having a second child focus on the firstborn's feelings—so much so that it sometimes sounds like the older child is having the baby. I was excited about addressing *women's* concerns in this tumultuous phase.

Q. What surprised you about having a second?

My social life boomed with my first baby as I bonded with other new mothers. It was a lot like when I was living in a third world country, where other expatriates became instant allies. I expected something similar with my second child. Instead I felt isolated. The first-time moms at the baby classes suddenly seemed naïve and boring: I'd outgrown the burping and baby-gas discussions. Other mothers of two were too busy to meet and my own schedule had become complicated. Though I finally solved this problem, initially the isolation threw me.

I also found myself eating humble pie. You can't match your first-time standards as a second-time mom and it's easy to feel guilty about that. My husband Bill and I shared parenting with our first but I was really the leader. The demands of two forced me to rely much more on Bill and his instincts. That made us much more equal, but it meant that I had to accept being the follower as well as the boss.

Q. You challenge some parenting assumptions in *Beyond One*. For instance, you don't think much of sibling rivalry, though you experienced it growing up. Isn't there a contradiction here?

I think sibling rivalry is overrated. You hear all the horror stories when you're pregnant with the second. I fully expected my firstborn to kill her sister. However my kids get along well and so do most siblings I know.

As Americans we're so concerned about individual rights that we expect the second child to displace the first. From some of the guides you'd think that mom was committing a crime against her firstborn by even having another baby. In fact, I think it's usually the opposite. Kids fight. They're supposed to. Yet overall, having a brother or a sister is a blessing. And as a mother, it's a lot better to feel like a gift-giver than a traitor.

Then again, maybe my own experience with rivalry sensitized me to the issue, smoothing my daughters' relationship. I would no more compare my kids than lock them in the closet, though other parents do it all the time. Managing sibling relations may be the best thing I do as a mom.

Q. And the worst thing?

I yell. I lack patience. And I've let the princess thing get way out of control.

Q. What other parenting assumptions do you think are off base?

I don't believe there's a war between stay-at-home and working mothers. Many women's lives are not that neatly defined in the first place. And especially after the second, a large number work part-time. We're not a generation of slacker parents. If anything we try too hard - though any second-time mom is a slacker compared to her first-time self. Work-family balance is not a woman's issue. Men want and need this too. Finally, I'm living proof that nursing does not suck the fat off.

Q. One of your chapters is titled "Dreaming of Divorce," and throughout the book you provide an intimate view of married life with two children, warts and all. How does your husband feel about *Beyond One*?

Luckily, Bill has a skin as thick as a rhino's hide. The same thing that makes it so difficult to get him to the barber—his lack of concern for appearances—is *Beyond One's* saving grace. Husbands are conspicuously missing from many mommy memoirs, probably for good reason: marriage with little ones isn't always pretty. Even feminist firebrand Naomi Wolf is pretty circumspect about her own relationship in *Misconceptions*. It's probably no coincidence that single mothers have written some of the best parenting memoirs.

Bill encouraged me to write freely and I was able to do so because we have a very strong marriage. Oddly enough, he didn't care that *Beyond One* describes us as practically celibate after our second baby's birth. He didn't mind being described as messy or as the object of my divorce fantasy. What bothered Bill was a comment that made him look stupid: upon learning that our second child would be a girl, he initially accused me of rigging her gender—That's an academic for you! I kept the quote. I needed it to show his initial disappointment over having another girl, as many parents get the gender blues when the second is the same sex as the first. When I explained that, he understood.

Q. You've been a journalist for twenty years, reporting on business and political issues and working as a foreign correspondent. Isn't writing about parenting a strange switch?

If you'd told me earlier that my first book would be on motherhood, I would have laughed. I wasn't sure I even wanted to have children much less write about the experience. I was much more interested in troubled regions like Central America, where I reported for several years.

After my first daughter arrived, though, I realized that motherhood is another country, with its own political issues, peculiar culture, and insurgents. I started writing on the subject and found it fascinating. Kids elicit a person's best and worst sides—all in the same hour. They raise all your own childhood issues, bring marriage to a boiling point even as they unite you as a couple, and challenge your values. With more women working and men doing childcare, families are also in flux. There's a revolution underway on the home front with important social ramifications.

Parenting is also a universal subject that allows you to connect with all sorts of people. As a reporter, I've particularly enjoyed interviewing fathers: kids bring out male emotions that usually remain hidden. And after interviewing a mother whose son was having five tantrums a day, my own terrible two looked like an angel.

Q. Do you miss your previous reporting adventures?

No. There really is a time for all seasons. Had I not reported abroad, I might harbor that desire. But I've done it. I've slept in a rebel camp. I've been shot at. I've listened to machine guns fire outside my door. As a mother, I no longer want to take those risks or live that life. I have plenty of conflict, adventure and high emotion in my own house. These days, I dream of room service, not of sleeping in some scratchy hammock.

Q. How did you write *Beyond One*?

Like many parents who work at home, I have a lot of distractions—many quite adorable. Though I have excellent help, I could easily pass the whole morning matching small socks. My work hours are also limited as I spend the middle of the day with my kids. Therefore, to finish *Beyond One* I became obsessive. I didn't aim for a certain number of pages a day: I don't work in a linear fashion. Instead I clocked time, writing using a stopwatch. It took two years to complete *Beyond One* and during the second I did very little magazine work and rarely saw friends. But I continued to do the preschool pickup: I didn't want to take time from my kids to write about them. Anyway, when they aren't driving me crazy, they keep me sane, balancing the sedentary, isolated life of a writer.

To make sure my themes were relevant, I read the second child guides, and many nonfiction parenting books, including classics by writers like Erma Bombeck, Shirley Jackson, and Jean Kerr, who in some ways wrote more openly than mothers do today. I also laughed my way through the novel *I Don't Know How She Does It*, whose protagonist has two kids.

Q. What challenges did you face writing the book?

It sounds silly, but one of the hardest things was revealing that I weighed 216 pounds after my second baby's birth. I used to make my husband leave the room when my obstetrician weighed me. Publishing that number feels, for me, like walking out into the street naked.

But weight is a big issue for mothers: a woman's risk of obesity increases by seven percent with each child she has. For many women, a growing family brings a moment of truth. You either become obese or you do something about it. I describe losing 50 pounds in a chapter called "The Amazing Toddler Diet." May my embarrassment serve others.

Q. What's next for you?

I want to write another book similar to *Beyond One*, perhaps focusing again on my experience as a mom in midlife and how parenting has changed. *Beyond One* covers the early years with small children, a phase in which the challenges come from within your own home. But as my girls grow the big world will intrude. Parents with kids older than mine are facing pressures concerning homework and kids' activities, neither of which were issues when I grew up. Midlife used to be a time for women to find themselves. Now we're having kids after we've found ourselves and driving them to soccer. What's going on?

Midlife also presents it's own challenges. Dreams, for instance, don't die. They only become stronger as the finish line comes into sight. Yet parenting has become more demanding. How does a mom handle that? How will I deal with my girls' emerging beauty as my looks fade? A marriage that is no longer new? My own and my parents' aging as my kids come of age? I'm interested in this phase of life in which a woman touches both extremes and which has changed so much.

But right now, I feel like the new mom who can't think about another baby yet. Unlike two years ago, I now know how demanding it is to write a book. After catching up with friends, though, I'll be ready for another big project. The first was such a joy. Why stop with just one?