

Lighten up, or child-rearing will make you crazy

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BRENDA SUDERMAN - CHILD'S PLAY

SOME of the funniest mothering moments in my life have involved four-letter words like milk, puke and poop, but they're probably not stories suitable for a family newspaper.

Or maybe they are, like the night one infant woke up with a sick tummy and then threw up all down his father's bare back.

Mind you, that was only hilarious for the parent who didn't have to shower baby vomit off her body at 2 a.m. But if we can't laugh about those times when life seems impossible or insane, raising kids would be a lot more serious than it already is.

And we would go bonkers in the meantime. At least, that's the premise behind Dorianne Sager's new book *Baby is a Four-Letter Word: Surviving the First Two Years of Parenthood*.

This 197-page book is all about the lighter side of the mommy track. The part-time journalist and full-time mother recounts her struggles with a fussy baby or active toddler while trying to enjoy a cappuccino at the local coffee shop, or attempting to keep her hormone-fueled fears for the safety of her child in reasonable check.

"There seemed to be so much advice about parenting, but there was no humour, no one in my generation that was smart and funny," says Sager, 34, who remembers her own mother reading Erma Bombeck. "It's all somewhat consuming when you have an infant." "I also knew if I didn't start writing about it, I would go crazy."

Sager reads and talks about her book, 11 a.m., May 6, at McNally Robinson Booksellers at Grant Park.

Instead of losing her sanity when faced with complications from childbirth, problems with breast-feeding, and a baby who wouldn't sleep, Sager wrote a weekly humour column about new parenthood for the Vancouver Sun.

Her Baby Steps column ran for seven months in 2004 while her son Zack was morphing from a mostly compliant infant to a terrorizing toddler, and gained a regular following among parents of all ages. While most readers sympathized and identified with her take on parenting, Sager says her most vocal critics were the dog owners who resented their puppies being compared to toddlers.

Now seven months pregnant with her second child, Sager says she's a fine example of a slightly too serious new mother who went overboard to keep her child safe.

For instance, she mashed all her child's food to prevent choking, which has resulted in a three-year-old who doesn't like the texture of apple slices or cheese cubes.

"I totally screwed up Zack's eating habits," she says.

Now in the midst of packing up her family into their small car for a cross-country move from Vancouver to Kingston, Sager will probably have more insane and funny stories to tell by the time she reaches Winnipeg next weekend. After all, two weeks in a confined space with a small child and a growing abdomen sounds exactly like a disaster (or story) waiting to happen.

"I think that's the problem -- a lot of times you don't talk about the struggles you have because there is so much guilt," says Sager, who wasn't looking to write a serious parenting book.

"I wanted it to be the ultimate antidote -- the anti-advice, anti-guilt book."

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Get a behind-the-scenes perspective on the inner workings of an art gallery at Winnipeg Art Gallery's open house and family Sunday, 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., tomorrow. Take a ride on the freight elevator to see how large works of art are packed, crated and hung, learn how sunlight could damage a painting, or figure out the best way to mat and frame a photo or painting.

Other family-friendly activities include a performance by the Asham Stompers at 1:15 p.m., a taste-testing of bannock and jam at 1:30 p.m., and storytelling by Joe McLellan at 2:30 p.m. and 3:15 p.m.

Artists Aline Fréchette, Lita Fontaine, and Karen Hutchinson will help you paint, draw, or create a paper mosaic in the Studio Building, 1:30 to 4 p.m.

Wander through the new exhibit of prints by aboriginal artist and former Winnipegger Daphne Odjig or view the work of hundreds of children in the exhibit Through the Eyes of a Child, which closes tomorrow. Admission is free.

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