

Bringing Up Baby Is Not Always What You Expect

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

Charlotte is eight months pregnant. This will be her first baby, and she is full of expectations about motherhood.

She doesn't like surprises, so she learned the gender of her baby ahead of time. She will have a boy. Her mother says Charlotte was a calm, restful infant, so Charlotte expects her son will be the same. Charlotte was an earlier walker, so she expects that her son will be running about the house at 10 months.

Friends and relatives have gently warned Charlotte about holding fast to very specific expectations regarding delivery and her new baby. The experienced mothers among them know that "every baby is different," and they worry that she is setting herself up for disappointment.

Charlotte is not alone. Many parents develop specific expectations about birth and their baby, especially first-time parents. Common expectations center on childbirth experiences, a baby's temperament and behavior, and when the baby will reach certain developmental milestones.

But to avoid unnecessary frustrations, new parents should understand that all babies, like adults, are different from one another. Having a baby should be a joyful event, not one marked by needless disappointment, unhappiness, or guilt simply because the delivery or the child does not match up to arbitrary expectations. The expectations were wrong, not the child.

When it comes to a child's development, it is also important to know that published ages associated with milestones are often averages. This means roughly half of the babies will reach those milestones later than the average age. And almost all of them will grow up just fine. Most children will reach the milestone within a published typical range, for example, walking between nine and 15 months.

It is more important that children maintain steady progress from milestone to milestone, even if they are always a month or two later than average.

If you are concerned about your infant, talk to a range of people – doctors, nurses, other parents, relatives – about childbirth and parenting and you'll get a better idea of how diverse those experiences and children can be.

Keep an open mind about yourself and your infant. If you set specific expectations, you risk being unnecessarily disappointed at a time when you should be excited and glowing. Love and enjoy your child and parenting. Go with the flow – whatever will be, will be is the right attitude.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.