

"MOMMY, Did They Have

TELEPHONES When You Were Alive?"

Starting child-rearing in middle age is almost commonplace these days. But the problems are unique.

BY DALE BURG

Years ago, my friend Glenda and I, both 20, went to the beach where I watched her do handstands to entertain her 2-year-old. My son, Alden, born the month before I reached 40, has never seen me do a handstand—and I feel guilty about it. Never mind that I couldn't do handstands when I was 20. At least then, it seemed within the realm of possibility. When my child was 2, I was already worrying about compression fractures.

This is not something I dwell on, but I was recently brought up short (and, thank heavens, I didn't throw my back out in the process) by discovering among Alden's first-grade art a flyer headlined "Moms! Dads! Jump for joy with your child!" inviting us to participate in an evening of aerobics. That I am not up to jumping for joy is no reflection on how happy I am. I am grateful for many things in my life, among them the fact that I am still able to walk up to my son's fourth-floor classroom without a nitroglycerin capsule.

Where I live in New York City, it's not uncommon to hear reports of women having children at 42, 46, even (says one reliable source) 50. The gynecologist who delivered my son induced labor when I was three weeks overdue, but told me he'd have chosen a different course if I'd been 18. "Eighteen?" scoffed his nurse. "He's never seen a pregnant woman under thirty-five."

I am blessed by belonging to a PTA of parents who, when they refer to "the War," don't mean the one in Vietnam. I like looking around the room and knowing that when these people bought their first Beatles album they paid with their wages, not their allowance. I recall only one nursery-school mother in her twenties. For months, the rest of us assumed she was the baby-sitter. In this insular world, you can forget that becoming a mother at a more advanced age is quite different than doing it at 20—and not just because of the handstands. It is with some cause they call us first-time moms over the age of 35 "elderly primigravida."

Now, it's true that even in my prime, I wasn't in my prime. I was the kind of teenager for whom the prospect of the Physical Education Department's six-week stunts-and-tumbling unit cast a pall on the entire school year. The brown leather "horse" was my *bête noire*. As for climbing the rope—well, I'd sooner hang myself with it. This was before the fitness revolution (it was even before color television!), and as things changed, so did I. When I became pregnant I was doing more exercise than I ever had as a teenager.

But grown-ups, even aerobically fit grown-ups, know that after 40 you just ain't what you used to be. Things break down. Hormones tell. My friend Barbara gave me an inkling when she suggested I make a beauty-parlor appointment the moment I told her I was expecting. "You'll have to start coloring," she said. "Gray hair frightens nursery-school children."

It's just such little things that get to you. Harold, who has recently undergone knee-

replacement surgery as a result of his arthritis, hated 7-year-old Joey's open-school nights because he had such a hard time getting up from the little chairs. The definition of an older parent, my friend Alan advises, is one who after he bends down to reach for his toddler feels dizzy when he straightens up. Or, adds my friend Sybil, one whose glasses—hanging from a cord—knock the kid in the head. She needs three different pairs, she says, just to take his temperature: one to see the kid, one to insert the thermometer—and one to read the numbers.

In my own case—though I resist buying bifocals—by the time I get my child's toenails into focus, they're too far away for me to use a nailclipper. I worry that I'm deficient as a mother because I cannot, with my naked eye, check him for Lyme disease or head lice.

Fortunately, he's past the point where I have to rescue him from tall playground structures (as I've gotten older, I've become afraid of heights), and he doesn't need me to play with him in the snow (I don't tolerate the cold the way I used to). As he gets older and finds companionship in playmates rather than me, the apotheosis of my desires in this department is that he learns to ski well enough so that he doesn't blame me for the fact that we aren't one of those families that schuss together. When I was young, people went to the mountains in the *summer*. Gore-tex hadn't been invented.

Other issues are harder to deal with. When you have a child in your fourth or fifth decade, the beginning of your decline coincides almost exactly with the child's beginning to "separate." He starts to take a good, clear-eyed look at you. He notices those spidery marks on your legs. He asks, "Mom, how come you have that long black hair on your chin?" You think Red Riding Hood is scary? If the prospect of the wolf impersonating Grandma is traumatic, consider what it's like to have Grandma impersonating Mother.

The worst day of my life was the one when I thought I looked pretty good and a lady on the bus asked about my "grandson." Of course, I told myself, I was overdue for a touch-up. Otherwise, I didn't look a day older than when I was a teenager. All my friends at our thirtieth high school reunion told me so. (Naturally, I told them the same, though—just

between us—they did.) One of them, the mother of two young professionals and grandmother of three, told me how wonderful it must be for me to have a little one at home. We ran into each other in the ladies' room, where I was trying to rearrange myself. I had figured it was OK to look "mature" if at least I looked "serene," but the baby-sitter had arrived late and I'd had about 11 minutes to undo the ravages of three decades. "Children keep you young," she said, running a beautifully tanned hand (she golfs) through her immaculately coiffed hair (she has a standing appointment at the beauty parlor), the better to show off a large diamond ring (her children support themselves now).

They keep you young, do they? True, I have done more knee bends in the past six years than in the rest of my life. Other than that, it's been all downhill. Being frequently awakened in the middle of the night (flu, night terrors, that sort of thing) does not give your skin a dewy glow. If such worries as coping simultaneously with adolescence and menopause kept you toned, quarters would bounce off my thighs. They don't.

What's really heartbreaking is when you see your own child helping keep your secret. "How old are you?" my son's friend Matthew asks. "Forty-six," I say, just as my son indignantly admonishes, "You don't ask a grown-up how old he is. Especially a lady! It's rude!"

"Why?" says Matthew innocently—and suddenly he knows.

"Oh, but you're in really good shape for forty-six," he hastily assures me. "I wouldn't think you were in your forties. I would think you were—maybe—in your thirties."

I am charmed but unconvinced, remembering the source. This is the same Matthew who thinks the Dark Ages was when there was no VCR. And despite my son's show of grace on my behalf, it was he who asked his father's age and gasped "Oh my gosh" at the response. The only thing that cheered him up was discovering that a friend's father was ten years older.

There are years—and even bigger issues—ahead. Alden's college graduation is just a few years shy of what might have been my retirement age. I probably should focus less on whether I'll be able to climb the dorm stairs and more on how to finance graduate school on my social security benefits. **WD**