

Alice Garner

Thirteen Things

Our first child was born thirteen years ago, in a rush, as I knelt with hands on hard tiles in a bathroom at the old Royal Women's Hospital. The midwife had hoped I might stagger back to the birthing suite to deliver after a long, groaning bath, but the short journey over the lip of the tub was as far as I got. By the time a towel had been laid on the floor, our daughter's screwed-up face was emerging to greet her stunned father.

The Birth Centre is no more. And the building it inhabited—that grimy behemoth on the corner of Swanston and Grattan Streets in Carlton—lies silent and unloved, its occupants having moved two blocks west to the new hospital. The old hospital may be empty now, but in my mind, heavy-bellied women in dressing gowns still pace slowly along its corridors, passing orderlies and midwives who glide efficiently between rooms from which primal screams issue forth, just as they did in 2000, and again in 2004 and 2007 when I returned to have more babies.

Here are thirteen things I have learnt in thirteen years of mothering, in no particular order.

1. That standing under the flap and smack of freshly laundered cloth nappies in the yard was when my best ideas came. Of all domestic tasks, hanging out squares of hemmed white cotton was the one from which I gained the most pleasure—aesthetic, intellectual and physical.

2. Old prams look good, but babies can slide out of them and into the gutter.

3. During a week spent in an isolation ward with my two-week-old daughter whooping her little lungs out, heuh-heuh-heuh-heuh-heuh-heuh-heuh-*rasp*, I discovered that the Children's Hospital budget did not extend to feeding nursing mothers caring for sick babies. I had to leave ours alone in all her tininess and take the lift down several floors to the canteen, to buy myself disheartening meals in plastic containers. So my husband began to bring in hot dishes from home, twice a day. We only had one child then. It was possible for me to focus fully on the little sick one, to sit quietly for a whole day watching and holding her, oblivious to the tug of the outside world.

4. Before we had our first baby, I couldn't understand why any woman would agree to be sequestered at home for forty days after childbirth. The books told me that some cultures impose this upon new mothers. While pregnant, I had an image of myself striding the streets, baby in sling, engaging fully with the world. But when we drove home with our fresh newborn painstakingly strapped into the back seat of our old Renault, we felt terribly vulnerable. I can remember the first right-hand turn through an intersection I had driven through hundreds, perhaps thousands of times before without a second thought, and the shock at how huge and scary, bright and cold the world seemed. We had changed overnight, and everything looked completely different. Home took on new meaning. Confinement suddenly made sense.

5. I had always thought I was a calm, collected, even-tempered person. When I found myself in the hallway pulling hard on a bedroom door knob, while my three-year-old daughter hung off the handle on the other side, both of us screaming, I figured that some part of me that had never seen the light of day was climbing out through a child-shaped chink.

6. Perched beside my baby's cot, I realised I knew the lyrics of no more than three or four songs. For some reason, when listening to music, my brain simply does not register the words; it works away at unpicking

melodies and rhythms, leaving no room for anything else. My husband is a walking lyric encyclopaedia, but somehow I ended up being the bedtime singer, which makes no sense. Humming became tedious, so I decided to sit down and learn some lullabies and old nursery rhymes, line by line, so that I would have something to sing. Now I know the words to about eight songs. The children don't seem to mind my singing the same ones over and over. I mind.

7. Our children don't want long, convoluted answers to their questions. They want explanations that are to the point, that introduce no unnecessary detail. There is a real art to answering questions concisely.

8. I thought all children liked to draw. My own childhood was full of drawing: a ream of typing paper, a box of serious pencils (Derwents), and a good sharpener were always on the table. With friends, with adults, and alone, I drew pages and pages of shoes and hairdos, dream house plans, cartoons and Mr Squiggles. Two of my children love to wield the pencil, but the third sees it as a chore. Perhaps to satisfy my desire that he make marks on a page, at four he developed a unique technique he called 'a stitchèd A', which involved intense biro pressure over one small area, creating a dense cross hatch of indeterminate shape.

9. Children sometimes choose to believe in God even when their parents don't. I knew it worked the *other* way, but didn't expect to be asking my kids: 'How do you *know* there is a God?' We haven't read the Bible with them, but we have read many Greek myths. Maybe they believe in gods rather than a God. One of our children decided that 'God is the world'. I wonder if he will manage to convert me, and undo my father's hard work?

10. Trying on accents is important growing-up work. At two, our pantheist announced at breakfast in a posh English accent whose source we never identified: 'Ái dewn't *teik* toast' (*trans*: I don't take toast). A while later he began experimenting with 'oi' for 'i', as in 'Good noight'. Our thirteen-year-old has spent the last week speaking with her school friends in a thick Scots brogue. I have a vague memory of

having invented a unique accent with a close friend around that same age, an accent that never entirely left us. There is still a thread of it in our talk, thirty years later.

11. It turns out that being alone at lunchtime is not necessarily a sign of misery or social failure. Sometimes, at school, children want to play by themselves. *Who did you play with today?* No one. *Oh . . . Why didn't you play with X, Y or Z?* Because I didn't want to play the games they were playing. *So you preferred to sit by yourself?* Yes.

12. Playing word games at the dinner table every night has kept us all sane, and everyone in their seats. One particular favourite: inventing names of heavy metal bands, in alphabetical order, with extra points for alliteration. 'Gates of Gotham City' was one memorable offering. Another beauty: 'I, Imbecile'.

13. Children's made-up names for body parts are hard to give up. 'Bim bombs' for breasts; 'call-it' for vagina. But there comes a time when the official words must be taught, to prevent public confusion.

13a. Nits are hell. My husband has hatched a business plan: to drive around visiting infested and despairing families in a van with a troupe of tiny monkeys who will happily sit on children's heads and locate, pick and devour all the eggs and lice. A brilliant scheme, we agree. Although what if the monkeys decide to leave a few nits in their clients' hair to ensure future harvests? To be honest, I would miss the intimate work of slow and thorough sectioning and combing of hair, the merciless homing in and squashing of nits and hatchlings with my fingernails. There is a real, basic animal satisfaction to be got from this process. An old friend of ours has developed a theory that mutual nit picking is an essential social oil, and that without it, people fall sick from lack of physical touch.

13b. I'm cheating now. But I want to squeeze in a few more: The desperation of sleeplessness that drags on for years, followed by a slow re-awakening; the discovery of a reserve army of parents, aunts, uncles, siblings, cousins and friends, of whom one can ask almost

anything, and who seem pleased to be asked; the simple pleasure of a Quaker-like silence of two minutes holding hands with eyes closed before eating, no praying required; the perverse pleasure to be got from revisiting conversion of fractions, order of operations and long division; the awesome power of Lego to colonise the entire house, piece by piece . . .

I really must stop now. It is important not to explain too much, as my thirteen-year-old keeps reminding me.