How to Handle Parenting With Rheumatoid Arthritis

by MARIAH LEACH

Managing Motherhood with RA

Being a mom can bring such joy to your life! However, motherhood can also be extremely challenging — especially if you are living with rheumatoid arthritis (RA).

I was diagnosed with RA at the age of 25. Since then I've managed my RA through two pregnancies, and today my rowdy little dudes are four and two. While I am still learning each and every day how to be a better mom, I wanted to share some of my own experiences and ideas for parenting with rheumatoid arthritis.

Plan Ahead for Baby's Arrival

From pregnancy to surrogacy to adoption, there are many equally beautiful ways to start a family. Whichever path your family chooses, it can be a difficult transition to bring home a new baby.

For those of us living with RA, it is especially important to plan ahead for baby's arrival because an increase in stress combined with a decrease in rest makes the probability of an RA flare-up quite high. Also, if you carried the baby yourself, there will be an additional physical toll on your body from pregnancy and birth.

And even if you were lucky enough to be among the 48 percent of women with RA who experience remission during pregnancy, almost all women with RA are likely to experience a post-birth flare. For me, this flare happened around six or seven weeks after each of my boys were born.

To help you through a difficult transition and likely flare, it's important to do whatever you can to prepare in advance. For example, you'll likely be too exhausted to do much cooking, but you'll still need to eat nutritious meals — especially if you are trying to breastfeed.

I spent the last few weeks of my most recent pregnancy filling my deep freezer with healthy meals that would be easy to heat up, like lasagna, meatloaf, soups, and things I could easily stick in the crockpot. This helped immensely with our transition from a family of three to a family of four!

Ask for and Accept Help

Perhaps the most important lesson I've learned as a mom with RA is the importance of asking for and accepting help. While it can be a very difficult thing to do, I think there is genuine strength to be found in recognizing that we can't do everything by ourselves.

When you have a new baby, one easy way to request help is to create an online meal registry so friends and family can deliver meals for the first few weeks. It's also useful if you can schedule some time for a friend or family member to help out regularly so you will have adequate time to rest.

As your children grow, it’s important to continue asking for help whenever you are struggling. As a very independent person, this has been a rather difficult learning process for me.

I found that an easy place to start is by accepting whatever help is offered. So if a friend offers to unload the dishwasher or watch the kids so I can take a quick shower, I always make myself say, "Yes, thank you" instead of "No, I’m fine".

RA-Friendly Gear

Caring for little kids can be a huge strain on your body, so you’ll want to make sure you invest in gear that makes life easier for you. For example, when my boys were newborns I really loved having a co-sleeper, which is a bassinet that attached securely to my bed.

The co-sleeper kept my boys safely in arms reach for feeding and care while still allowing me to spend more time in bed to rest. If you plan to try breastfeeding for any length of time, a nursing pillow can really reduce the strain of properly positioning your baby.

I’d also recommend considering a lightweight stroller, a car seat with buckles you can operate yourself, pajamas and other baby clothes with zippers instead of tiny snaps, and a comfortable way to wear your baby so you can still hold them while giving your hands and arms a break.

The Importance of Self-Care

As a mother, it is essential to keep in mind the importance of self-care. I realize this can be a very challenging goal when small humans depend on you for their every need, but if you don’t take care of your own health and well-being it will be extremely difficult for you to take care of anyone else.

My favorite reminder of the importance of self-care is this: I can’t pour from an empty cup. If I want to fill my children’s cups, I have to make sure my own cup is full first.

Focus on the Positive

Whenever I am really struggling with motherhood, I find it useful to focus on the positive things that my boys can learn from growing up with a mom who has RA. Just as we try to teach kids not to judge a book by its cover, I hope my boys learn that you should never judge someone by how they look on the outside.

I also hope to teach my boys that sometimes strength is nothing more than the decision to try again tomorrow. While my RA does place some limitations on my body, my love isn’t in any way limited — and with unlimited love I know I can find a way to be an amazing mom despite living with RA.