

No More Computer Solitaire

By Peter Eisen

New parents—if they're anything like my wife, Jean, and me—really do not know what they are getting into when they have children: They read books, do research, take classes, and prepare their homes. Everybody is scared, nervous, and—to some extent—ignorant. All you need to take your new child home is a car seat, and not even that if you can walk to your house. Most parents find individual ways to cope with the change of having a new family member who cannot speak their language or care for himself. Yet, even with all this fear, most parents do not make a complete mess of their children.

The transition from adult to parent encompasses many changes and challenges. One of the hardest things for me when Jean and I had Patrick was how to deal with "bad" days. Everybody has them, and often there is no reason why you are in a foul mood. When you're at work, you can take a break from your day by surfing the Internet, playing computer solitaire, e-mailing/phoning friends, eating two-hour lunches, and—if all else fails—napping behind a closed office door. Early in Patrick's life, I realized that none of these alternatives would work for a stay-at-home dad.

One day, when Patrick was just an infant, we were both having one of those days that every parent knows and dreads. I felt that Patrick cried all day, and I can only assume that he was frustrated with the fact that I couldn't understand what was bothering him. But this day was different because Patrick and I solved all our woes. Yes, when Jean came home from work she found Patrick and me rolling around on the floor and having a great time. How did we accomplish this great transition? While lying in bed with Patrick, fighting to find ways to amuse an upset baby, I realized that we *both* needed to laugh, and so I suggested to Patrick that we practice laughing. From that day on, when Patrick or I are having a bad day, one of us will say "We need to practice laughing." After all, it's hard to be sad when you're laughing!

As Patrick has gotten older and his ability to communicate has gotten better, we have found a second way to deal with bad days. In particular, the bad days associated with long trips. One of Patrick's favorite games is imaginary hide-and-seek. Patrick and I were driving down to his grandmother, Big Momma, in South Carolina. Patrick was starting to get bored, asking me to stop the car every fifteen minutes. He was transitioning to toilet training and knew if he said, "I have to potty," I would stop. After the third or fourth false alarm, I realized that Patrick just wanted to get out of the car. Realizing that this eight-hour drive could easily become a 10-hour nightmare, I had to quickly ad-lib some way to entertain Patrick.

I suggested that we play hide-and-go-seek. His first response was to cover his face with his stuffed bear and giggle. I told him that it was too easy to find him behind bear and suggested that he should hide in Argentina. He took the bait, saying that he was not hiding behind bear, and that I had to keep guessing where he was. He ended up hiding in a big red truck we had just passed, but most often he hides behind a tree... and if I don't guess the exact tree, I lose.

Thus, I learned early in my career as stay-at-home dad that distraction is the better part of valor. Computer games can be fun, but your own imagination is the best way to distract yourself and your child. Solitaire is solitary; play is best with two or more... although there are days when I still wish I could close my office door for that mid-afternoon nap.