

Back in the early days of diaper changes and 2 a.m. feedings, we'd ask every parent we knew if it got easier as the kids get older. Despite our pleading looks, they never said yes. Instead the best we got was "It changes." Well, it has certainly been a year of changes, both subtle and profound.

For example, we used to tell time in hours and minutes. Now we tell time in 'Cliffords' - as in the half-hour PBS program *Clifford the Big Red Dog*. "Mom, how long til Grandma gets here?" "One and a half Cliffords, sweetie." Or, "When are we going to be there?" "Two Cliffords, big guy." I can only imagine their teachers' confusion when our kids ask how many Cliffords they get for lunch.

As the kids get bigger, their toys get smaller. I thought I'd be thrilled when our house started to look more like something out of Better Homes and Gardens instead of the Fisher-Price catalog, but that was until my bare foot had it's first encounter with Barbie's spiked heel. What I want to know is do these things always land heel-side up, or are the kids deliberately laying their own minefield just to see me do the Daddy Hop? (expletives deleted)

Speaking of Barbie, dolls used to be for feeding and loving. Now they are for grooming. It doesn't matter which Barbie it is - Malibu Barbie, Princess Barbie, you name it - they all become Hairdresser Guinea Pig Barbie. Hannah's got the greatest collection of scalped fashion dolls going. You know, we don't have a dog because we don't want it shedding everywhere, yet we've got about 22 lbs. of Barbie hair sprinkled around the house.



Jefferson models the latest in protective headgear for the stylish fisherman.

At least we no longer have to baby-proof the house. Now we just equip them with a crash helmet and full body armor and send them on their way. It took Jefferson about two weeks to go from training wheels to becoming Evel Kjeffer-son, riding his two-wheeler down the hill on our street side-saddle and one-handed. I don't know if he's tough or just numb. I can't tell you how many times he jumped up from one of his many headlong tumbles shouting, "I'm O-tay! I'm O-tay!" Well I'm glad, son, because I'm having a heart attack. Sheesh.

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And Hannah nearly gave us another heart attack by learning to love kindergarten. Just this summer we weren't so sure she'd even go. When Jefferson stated that he wanted to be grown-up just like me so he could go to college and study *everything*, Hannah commented, "Well, pre-school was enough for me!" Oddly enough, I thought she might have been on to something (guess I can use that college fund money for a new boat after all).

To be honest, instead of school, sometimes I think they need to go to Poverty Camp. Not soccer camp, not Spanish camp - poverty camp. These kids are so lucky with everything they have that I begin to worry that we're spoiling them. But then something always happens to ease my mind.

One of those moments came this summer when one of their friends was poked in the eye while racing to get in on the pināta action at a birthday party. While about a dozen kids piled up trying to get as much candy as possible, Jefferson noticed his friend crying and came over with just two pieces of candy—and quietly gave one to Andy to make him feel better. And I realized that maybe it's not the kids, but we grownups who need a little change in perspective. As caught up as we get trying to make sure we and our kids have the best of everything, leave it to a 4 year-old to remind me that it's not what you get, but what you give that matters most. Thank you, my big guy, for reminding me of the real measure of success.

I've been struggling to finish this letter because of the year's biggest change, one that is still playing itself out as I write. It began with a call Chris received from my Mom and Dad on the morning of April 15 so they could sing Happy Birthday - all three verses - to her. At first glance that might not seem to be such a big deal (besides the three verses), but for my family it says everything you need to know about both my Mom and Dad and the special people they are. For they called on their way out the door to go to Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit where my Mom was scheduled to have brain surgery several hours later on the four tumors that had just been found the week before. I've always been bad at remembering birthdays, but now there is no excuse that I could ever possibly come up with to explain not calling. My advice? Call home often.

Oh, and the three verses? 'Happy Birthday to you', 'May the dear Lord bless you' and 'May your wishes come true'.

May everyone have a Merry Christmas. That's my wish.



Hannah gets on the bus for the first time after conceding she might still have a thing or two left to learn.