

Excerpt from 'A Special Education'

by Dana Buchman and Charlotte Faber

My adult life has been shaped by many things. Being the mother of a child with LD [learning disabilities] has turned out to be one of the major, defining details. It's been a rigorous education — nineteen years and counting. And now it's hard to recall a time when LD-speak wasn't a part of my vocabulary.

Growing up in Memphis, Tennessee, in the 1950s and 1960s, I can assure you I never heard the term learning difference, or even the less politically correct learning disability. Back then, unfortunately, the kids who had difficulty reading and spelling and doing math were labeled “the dumb kids.” Knowing what I do now about LD — how it is the result of different brain wiring rather than a lack of intelligence — I tend to think many of those kids were probably pretty bright, and it breaks my heart to think of the kids I and others judged unfairly.

Me, I was always near the top of the class, an A student who loved sitting at the front of the classroom, raising my hand for the teacher to call on me. I was the youngest of three kids in a family that placed a high value on academic achievement.

Two years after graduating from Brown and with some very whimsical, fantastical student sketches in my portfolio, I embarked on a three-week job search.

I pounded the pavement of New York City's Garment Center day after day, ducking between the men pushing wardrobe racks along the sidewalks, from one company to another, before I finally landed a job as a junior designer at a small sportswear company. Once I found work, I was on my way. I found a huge, bohemian loft in Tribeca to live in — with no real bathroom and no buzzer from downstairs — so I felt like a cool, downtown New York chick. I was loving life, working hard, and playing hard, sometimes staying out all night at loft parties or at Tribeca's legendary dive, the Mudd Club.

One position led to the next, which led to six years working with Liz Claiborne as a knitwear designer. And that ultimately brought me to my own brand. Liz Claiborne and her husband, Art Ortenberg, had decided to add a higher-end label and asked if I would design the collection. They actually asked me if I would be willing to put my name on it. Willing? Willing!

This was a Cinderella dream — what every young designer longs for. I had worked hard since I got out of school. The fashion business is cutthroat and difficult to get ahead in, but I just kept at it. In my years working as a knitwear designer for Liz Claiborne, I put in long, long hours, traveled to factories in Asia, sometimes as often as nine times a year. In that time, I got to work closely with Liz. I admired her tremendously, and we became good friends. But I never dreamed that would lead to her and Art offering me my own label. I was over the moon.

I got pregnant shortly after I received the offer. Soon, I would be living out the feminist fantasy from my college days — I'd be a high-powered career woman, but that wouldn't interfere with my being a wife and a mother, too.

So there I was, 35 years old, with a new husband, a new company, and a new baby on the way. I was exhilarated. I felt proud, powerful, and optimistic. It would be a long time before I would realize

just how difficult some of the aspects of this “having-it-all” lifestyle were. For the moment, I was convinced that I was creating an example for other women to follow.

I loved being pregnant. It was a wonderful pregnancy — a little bit of morning sickness the first three months, then nothing. It was an exciting time for Tom and me. We were still in the blush of new romance, and we reveled in our adoration for and support of one another.

I worked until two weeks before Charlotte was born.

Long before I didn't know what it was like to have a child with LD, I didn't know what it was like to have a child at all. If you can believe it, all the time I was pregnant and enjoying those pregnancy hormones, I thought very little about what it would be like to have a baby. I was so wrapped up in work, the whirl of thinking about my own collection, of being a newlywed.

Babies were unfamiliar territory. I had only one woman friend in New York City, and she didn't have any children. None of my colleagues and acquaintances at work had babies. I hadn't held many infants in my life up to that point.

All this is to say, I had no idea how much in love with Charlotte I'd be from the minute she arrived. My baby was the most fascinating thing I had ever seen. It was almost comic to me how I'd instantly transformed from being totally indifferent to babies to being totally mesmerized. It must be nature's way of maintaining the species. It was a total, hormonal, undeniable, full-body change in my very being: I just wanted to be with Charlotte. All the time.

It came over me the moment I held her in the delivery room. I had never felt anything like this. It was just like in the movies. I cried at the miracle of birth (that was before the painkiller wore off from my Caesarean, and I began crying from pain). I marveled at the wonder of it all. All of a sudden, I got it; I knew what it was to feel like a mother.

But along with the joy, the pride, the love, I felt a sense of being in the dark. I didn't know how to take care of babies; I didn't know they cried so frequently; I had never experienced diaper rash; I didn't know what supplies I needed; I didn't know when to be worried or when something was not such a big deal, like cradle cap or a crispy umbilical cord drying up and falling off. There was a whole vocabulary and range of experiences I had no knowledge of and was terrified to encounter. Sweaters — ask me anything about sweaters and I can tell you. Babies — not a clue.

In fact, you'd think I hadn't been expecting a baby at all, from how ill prepared I was for Charlotte's actual arrival. When I went to the hospital to deliver her, I brought no clothes to take her home in. And it was a cold October day. So the designer's daughter had to wear a hospital-issue stocking cap, and, luckily, they let us take the blanket she had been using in her hospital crib.

I was truly out of my element. I wasn't prepared for the crying, the waking up several times in the night for feedings, the sleep deprivation. Charlotte was colicky. There were just these long, inexplicable crying jags, and I could do nothing to stop her. It sounds silly, but no one told me about these aspects of having a baby. I felt like I'd missed an important year at school where they covered the topic.

I felt so disappointed that my otherwise beautiful, relaxed, calm, smiling, heavenly infant — this child who filled me with an instant suffusion of love — would turn into a purple-red, tightly wound ball of rage and pain from hell. What was wrong with me, I wondered, that I couldn't comfort my child. What

was wrong with her that my overwhelming love couldn't comfort her?

I managed, as always, to keep a cool exterior. But, internally, I was losing my calm. What internal misery was making that little body convulse in distress? I'd get tired. Empathy would fade, replaced by despair, and, then, anger would begin to well up inside. Anger was the emotion I couldn't stand, the emotion I was never supposed to have, let alone exhibit. I'd just hold it in and struggle with my frustration over having no idea how to handle this.

Eventually, this unease, this not knowing, abated as far as the day-to-day care went. But it was to return when Charlotte's rate of development became a serious issue at age three. It's been part of my life ever since.

Charlotte was born in October. Two months later, in December, I went back to work to launch my new label. That was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do. Of course, I was excited about my new company, but my grief at leaving my baby each day was all encompassing.

My husband and I joined a parenting class held by our pediatrician in the West Village. Career moms and dads just like us would show up after work to listen to Dr. Tsao talk about what it would be like to be a parent, from a medical angle. I remember arriving there, still buzzing from goings-on at work — deadlines, plans for a show, hiring, designing — and having to switch my focus to less tangible issues.

It was interesting to be hearing tips from a doctor about what to look out for as far as illnesses and milestones. She told us when our daughter should crawl, when she should walk. I was grateful to have that.

But none of it really registered then. It was academic, just a bunch of facts at that point. Like taking notes in health class in junior high. Charlotte was so young, most of what we were learning wasn't relevant yet.

A few months later, though, when Charlotte didn't crawl on time, it would all come into sharp focus. Suddenly, we would be aware of all sorts of milestones. And everything would change dramatically.

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