

Seeing Ourselves in Our Children

By Tara Hardesty

Months before my first son's birth, I was struck with an overwhelming sense of his personality. Accompanying the nausea and exhaustion was the distinct feeling of being occupied; this tiny force of nature growing inside of me was already asserting himself. Having never been pregnant, I was surprised. While the other aspects of growing a human were expected, I wasn't prepared for this overwhelming awareness of who he was. I wrote everything down, to remember in detail, and to compare perception with reality after his arrival.

My son arrived 10 days late. We tried everything to get labor moving naturally, but with no progress, we went ahead with an induction. I was convinced that he was stubborn, like his mom and dad. As it turns out, my sweet son was not staying put due to stubbornness: he was stuck. After 36 hours of labor, we were ushered into an emergency c-section. My obstetrician's first words after delivering him were, "It's a toddler!" Weighing in at 10 pounds, 14 ounces and 22 inches long, Luke arrived into the world the physical equivalent of an emphatic exclamation point.

Born with a scowl on his face, Luke had eyebrows knitted together in what would appear to be consternation at his new circumstances. His stern expression didn't disappear in the weeks after birth; it was his Resting Baby Face for what would be the better part of 6 months. When people cooed over him, he



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frowned. We took him for walks—another frown. I remember this RBF clearly because it was identical to the look my husband wears daily. Stern, focused, unsure if he wants to be talking to you.

We joke that my husband doesn't really like people, which isn't that far from the truth. As a former New Yorker, he doesn't do small talk, is comfortable with conflict, and can be a bit surly out of the gate. And now at almost 4 years old, it seems as though my son inherited more than just the scowl from his dad.

There's no question that nature plays a large role in handing down characteristics to our children. When Luke was first born I heard, "He looks just like your husband. You know, nature does

that, so the men will bond with the baby." I thought this was an interesting statement—though scientific studies on this have produced mixed results, the premise certainly makes sense to me. In my son's case, it certainly seems to be true. It's hard to tell that the portrait of my husband from the early '70s isn't my son.

But the nurture part is what interests me the most. Genetics have handed down the foundation to my children, but what will happen next? I am the youngest of five children, and we could not be more different from each other, both genetically and in personality. I am a tall, pale person, the kind of pale with a bluish tint. Yet two of my sisters have olive skin and are six inches shorter than me. We all have outgoing personalities, but we present them in very different ways. One is stoic and reserved, the other is a hugger out of the gate and will make you feel like family in minutes. It has always been a head scratcher that two parents created five people who look and act so differently.

My husband and I are each loud and assertive in our own ways. We both struggle a little with anxiety, which my husband displays by always moving and hustling about while I nurture a severe case of overthinking. As we watch our sons grow, I wonder if via day-to-day contact with their sponge-like brains they will pick up our anxiety-fueled tendencies.

It amazes me to observe personality traits of both his parents as I watch my eldest son grow. Some, like the scowl, were visible from the beginning, while others emerge over time, like the sparkle in his eye and his ability to laugh at his own jokes. That's me. And the uncanny skill he has with tools and building. We could track that one through both of our families of builders. He wields a shovel and digs like a 60-year-old farmer, which would make my grandfather proud. Each day, we learn something new about him. While the framework seems very familiar, the little character he is becoming is completely original.

I recently revisited what I wrote during my pregnancy. My son proved to have the larger-than-life personality I predicted, the kind that is noticed when entering a room, as a force of nature from the very beginning. ❖

Tara is a mom of two boys, a marketing professional who specializes in commercial real estate ventures, and a freelance writer. She blogs at TheDailyWrites.com about the things she is passionate about: the hairy underbelly of life, motherhood, and entrepreneurship.