



Blessing or Curse?

Life with a Highly Gifted Child

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Cover design: Erik Kinting and Kurt Meier, studioart.ch

Cover photo: Kurt Meier

Cover collage: Bastian Eichenberger

From German into English: Spiral Cat Translations

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg

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Foreword

Lately, people have been increasingly asking me what is happening in my son's life and how he is doing. So I have decided to write Bastian's story.

I'd like to dedicate this book to the two most important people in my life, my husband and my son. We've been through an awful lot together! My husband, Manuel, and I have spent thousands of hours talking about our son and his gifts. Manuel has been a good listener, and patient. He has held his nerve when I started to flag, and he has always supported me in my decisions.

My son Bastian is highly gifted and has to find his way in this world. He is the reason I have written this book. He has always shown me how glad he is to have me supporting him on his difficult path.

The following story has seen me running the gamut of emotions. It has shaped me, tormented me, but also brought me moments of great happiness. My great thanks go to Manuel and Bastian. I could only write this book because of them.

This book is the story of my son's life. It is told from my perspective, as I experienced it as his mother. All names except mine, my son's and my husband's, have been changed.

I welcome all your comments and feedback, at: renate@eichenbergers.ch.

I hope you enjoy the book.

Renate Eichenberger

Foreword by Susanna Pap, Bastian's Private Tutor

I was recently talking to a student:

Frau Pap, are there any heroes left any more?

Yes, but they are very rare, and they probably always have been. Most of them aren't as mighty as Hercules. They can even be quite small.

You mean like Yoda from Star Wars?

Yes, exactly. A great spirit can be hidden within a small body.

A highly gifted child, who doesn't seem to have a place in our society, who is sometimes about to be shattered by the intransigence and lack of vision of our system, parents who are driven to the edge of desperation, but also the incredible strength shown by families dealing with this special challenge... for these children, school is a kind of torture – being bored to death becomes a real danger. All of this casts a shadow over a parent's duty to send their child to school, which is very rarely discussed in Switzerland. But there are other alternatives, especially when it comes to highly gifted children. What do Thomas Edison, Leonhard Euler, Blaise Pascal and Pierre Curie, just to name a few, have in common?

They didn't go to school!

The spirit of learning and creative thought are lost in strict rote learning.

Albert Einstein

There is no duty to ensure the attendance of children at school in England, the USA or Australia. Instead there is a duty to provide appropriate full-time education. Parents must show that children are receiving suitable education, but the details are left to them. In Switzerland, however, everything is subject to bureaucratic oversight. Anyone who doesn't fit is hammered into shape.

This is the story of someone who wouldn't allow themselves to be hammered into shape. It's a story that is far from over.

Good luck, little hero!

Prologue

What do you do, dear reader, when your tummy rumbles? You eat. What about when your eyelids get heavy? You sleep. If you are in pain? You go to the doctor for medicine. But what if you ignore these needs? Then, you start to feel unwell. You feel uncomfortable. What about people with the gift of being easily able to study and learn almost any subject? How do you think they feel when they aren't allowed to discover new things? That's right, they don't feel good. They feel uncomfortable.

These are highly gifted people, but there is no place for them in our society. They exist at the edges, excluded. Many of us find it difficult to accept that someone else can be so much cleverer than us. Highly gifted people suffer greatly from the prejudicial stereotypes that society perpetuates about them. They are seen as nerds, or show-offs. They are seen as people who should be pushed to achieve their best. People think they never relax, and that study is all they care about.

But is all this true? Or could it be that gifted people are just searching for sustenance, which for them means that they want to feed their brains?

And what about their unbelievable knowledge and potential? What about their sheer unlimited ability? Do we really want to see that potential go untapped? Shouldn't we forget our reservations as parents, relatives, managers and teachers, and make use of it? Shouldn't we accept that younger, less skilled, less experienced people might actually know more than we do? We shouldn't feel bad about our relative lack of knowledge. Instead, we should realise that the ability to see the strengths of others, and to make use of them, is actually a great thing.

Many of the concepts to do with highly gifted people may seem difficult, even incomprehensible or unrealistic. As the mother of a highly gifted son, I've been through a lot over the last few years, and I've learned a lot too. I'd like to share these experiences with you, and perhaps you'll gain more of an insight into this fascinating subject.

Read on, and dive into the early years of an extraordinary, but at the same time very ordinary, child!

Thirteen Years and Ten Months

Bastian is thirteen years and ten months old, and he loves judo, golf, boxing, curling, tennis and piano. He is an altar boy, member of the youth fire brigade, has incredible general knowledge, speaks eight languages – German, English, Chinese, French, Italian, Spanish, Romansh and Latin – has almost completed his British A Levels and is studying for his last exam in Biology for the Swiss equivalent. But how did he get to this point?

Birth

Monday 24 July, at 8:17 pm, a baby boy took his first breath – our son Bastian.

It all began about ten months earlier, in Paris. But I'll spare you the details. The pregnancy was uncomplicated, beautiful and exciting. I had the very great fortune and privilege of being able to devote myself, in the time before the birth, to my unborn son and to myself, without any outside stress from my job. I had left my office job in the third month of the pregnancy, and was now only doing a little swimming teaching. This left plenty of time for a strong connection to form between me and my tummy.

For a long time I didn't even know that I was pregnant. I felt I might be, but I wasn't sure. I became pregnant as soon as I stopped taking the pill, but pregnancy tests didn't say I was pregnant and, when I went to see my gynaecologist about four weeks after my missed period, he told me I was paranoid. He told me—without bothering to examine me—that it wasn't unusual to miss a period after coming off the pill. He told me not to worry. But who knows better than a woman about what's happening in her own body?

After three months passed and my period had still not returned and none of the pregnancy tests I had tried had come out positive, I went to see Dr. Meierhans again. He decided to do an ultrasound, because three months without a period did seem like a long time after all. And what did he find? Right there on his screen, in my tummy, was a human life. I was three months pregnant!

My due date was mid July 2000. Dr. Meierhans would be on holiday then, so another doctor would be taking his patients. At this point we didn't even know if it would be a boy or a girl, but he was convinced that our baby would be delivered on the expected date, but, just in case he was wrong, we made an appointment for just after he got back from holiday. I ended up going to that appointment, because our son took his time—a long time.

It was 24 July, 2000. It looked like it was going to be a beautiful, warm summer day, and we had an appointment with the doctor for nine. I woke up early, so I decided to walk from where we lived, in Oberwil, to the doctor's. Oberwil is in Switzerland, in the Canton of Basel-Landschaft, and is part of the metropolitan area of Basel. I took the scenic route, so the walk took a good two hours. When I arrived at the doctor's, I caused consternation. Nobody had expected to see me still with a huge belly. And nobody believed that I felt fine, or that I had come on foot.

Dr. Meierhans examined me and said that it was time to help things along a little bit. He gave me a suppository to speed the birth, and I asked him how long he thought it would take before labour started, "About 24 hours." I let my husband know, who was working 80 kilometres away. At that time, he was working as a business economist at a large bank. I decided to take it easy that afternoon, and on the way home I was thinking about how to enjoy my last few hours with no responsibilities. As I was thinking, I realised that I was getting hungry, so, on an impulse, I popped into a shop to pick something up. For some reason, I had a craving for *Sulzpastete*, which are like pork pies, a very heavy snack with a lot of pastry and filling. While I was still in the shop, and afterwards as I was walking home, I started to feel a tugging sensation in my lower body. When I got home,

these sensations eventually started to become painful. Was this labour? I remembered reading in one of my favourite pregnancy books that a bath would make things better. I climbed into a tub of warm water and made short work of another of the Sulzpastete, even though my appetite wasn't even half what it had been. But the bath didn't seem to be bringing the promised relief. I tried to distract myself by folding up the washing from that morning, but it was no good. I decided to phone the doctor, to ask if what I was feeling could be labour. He didn't miss a beat, "From what you're telling me... yes." I got straight on the phone to my husband to tell him to get the next train, because the baby was coming. And I told him to order a taxi for me, too, because I didn't think I would be able to say our whole address. I was in pain, but I felt a pleasant mix of anticipation, trepidation and relief. My feelings were alternating between fear and disbelief from moment to moment. The few minutes I had to wait for the taxi seemed to last an eternity. The pulling sensations in my belly were getting stronger and more painful by the minute. My ride finally arrived, and took me to Basel to give birth. The driver must have noticed that I wasn't feeling well. He blathered on incessantly about his daughters and their births. I tried my best to be polite with him, but I just didn't have it in me to engage in small talk.

They were already waiting for me at the hospital. But before I was allowed into the delivery room there were a few forms to fill in. I almost lost my temper. I was doubled up in pain and now they wanted me to do paperwork? It just didn't seem necessary, considering I'd already contacted them months before the due date. I was probably a little short with them when I told them to get me to a bed and that my husband or myself would sort out the paperwork later, "It's not like I'm going to run away!" I screamed, which seemed to help. I was taken, through a warren of stairways and corridors, to the delivery room. Afterwards, I couldn't remember which way I had come, or how I had managed it on foot.

Eventually, I was lying on white sheets, panting like I'd just run a marathon. The pain was incredible and, for the first time in my life, I just wanted to fall unconscious and not wake up till it was all over. Three midwives were there to take care of me, and they were a little surprised to

see that I was having constant contractions, one contraction after the other, without a pause. This is painful for the mother, and it doesn't give the baby a chance to rest either. The problems with the delivery were causing it great stress and actually endangering its life. The delivery room nurses said that they had to contact my doctor to ask him how best to proceed, while I was screaming at them that they had to give me something for the pain. I have quite a high pain threshold, but this was overwhelming. They told me that Dr. Meierhans would have to give permission first. "Then just give me the form and I'll sign it!" I screamed, "But do something!"

"We're very sorry, but it has to be done according to the rules."

I don't know how long it took—except that it was much too long—until I was suddenly told I could have an epidural (an injection into the back that numbs the lower half of the body and stops the pain).

"Yes, at last! Let's go!"

The next thing was that only an anaesthesiologist could administer it, and they were helping with an operation at the moment. I couldn't believe my ears. There was nothing for it but to keep breathing and pray. That's when my husband suddenly came through the door. I almost wished he hadn't bothered to turn up, I just had no time for him right then. On top of everything, he had a tie on with a pretty pattern—a very stylish one, in fact—but I couldn't stand it. Instead of saying hello, I screamed at him to *get the stupid thing off from around his neck*. It was a little rude, but I apologised later, and we can laugh about it now.

A little later the anaesthesiologist arrived, a nice lady who told me all about the risks and possible side effects. And, at last, after umpteen hours, I got the drugs I needed and I could start to breath normally again. I had time to take a breath, and to calm down.

Then my gynaecologist arrived. He took a long, calm look at what was happening and waited. More than an hour went by before one of the nurses mentioned that he should probably change because the baby could come any minute. He got to his feet, an irritated expression on his face, and disappeared. He came back a little later in the usual hospital scrubs. My husband and I were a little worried. We wondered if it was the good doctor's first time helping in a delivery room.

The fun and games carried on, with the nurses asking Dr. Meierhans how he thought they should get the baby out. *Get it out?* The demigod in the white coat must have been thinking, *but time will bring the baby all on its own*. A few more minutes went by, which he was probably using to work out that he needed tools. Tools, perhaps? What was this, a garage? Forceps! Yes, forceps. He was handed the desired implement by a nurse, took the two parts from their sterile packaging and started trying to put them together. He couldn't quite get them to fit, and at that moment I really started to wonder who I was dealing with here. What kind of doctor is this? Has he even studied medicine? I was relieved to find out that there had been a mistake in packing the instrument, and two of the same parts had been packed together. It was impossible to put them together. He tried again with another package, and this time he got his instrument together. Now he could get down to work.

Six hours later, at 8:17 pm, the baby finally came. Bastian arrived, started screaming and opened his eyes.

This new, small life was laid on my belly, and I could finally breathe a sigh of relief. He was all in one piece, with all his fingers and toes! What small hands and feet he had ... but what an enormous head. I was lost for words, but inside I was a storm of emotions. What kind of miracle had just happened?

I'd have liked to have helped with the next stages, but it was left to my husband and one of the nurses to give the first bath and do the weighing and measuring: 8.3 pounds, 20 inches long, with a head circumference of 16 inches. Then he was dressed, and it was time for a photo.

Dozens of photos were taken of his hands and feet, and he had his portrait taken too. We needed the photos for the birth announcement we were planning. My husband had had the glorious idea of making an ID card for our son. It would be A5 and we would give a copy to all our friends, relatives and anyone else who was interested. Obviously, the plan was to get as many presents out of it as possible ...

Anyway, the birth was over, the first glow of happiness was gone, and everything could now start getting back to normal. So we were moved from

the delivery room to a normal ward, where we had decided that I would stay for four days so I could be fit and recovered when I came back home. But before we even had the chance to move off to our new quarters, the nurses started to take my son in their arms and, one after the other, made remarks like, “What an unusual little boy!” - “What a pretty baby!” - “What a special little fellow!” My husband and I listened with pride, as we had exactly the same opinion. But we didn’t really take what they were saying seriously. We thought they said the same things to every newborn. Little babies attract a lot of attention, which makes their proud parents very happy.

We moved to the new ward, and our son took our whole attention. It was our first opportunity to spend some time alone with the new baby, and we really enjoyed it. Then it wasn’t long before Bastian started to get hungry. I held him to my breast, to feed for the first time, and I felt the close bond between a mother and her son, even if he didn’t manage to get much milk during this first attempt. It was a little tricky, and would take some getting used to.

Late that night, my husband left to grab a few minutes sleep. He borrowed my keys because he’d left his at the office in all the excitement. We decided that Manuel would come back to see me the next evening because he wanted to work during the four days I was in hospital. This would mean he could take a fortnight’s holiday later.

Bastian was in a little cot on casters, so I could pull him right up to my bed. He slept peacefully, and only woke once that night, when he got hungry.

It was soon morning, though I hadn’t slept much. I was too stirred up and happy. The birth had given me such a shot of adrenaline that I didn’t notice the lack of sleep. I stared into the little cot beside me, fascinated. Bastian was lying asleep, happy and contented, as though nothing in the world could bother him. Looking at him, I began to think that the back of his head was incredibly large. But, apart from that, all I could think was how cute he was, yummy. I was head over heels for the little boy.

While I was sunk in thought, the door opened. My husband was back, his eyes gleaming. He hadn't been able to wait till evening to see us again. He was the image of the proud father.

One nurse after the other came into the room that morning. I started to think about the savings the health system could make, because only a few of the people had anything to do with me, my son or the room. But then I realised that they were coming to see the baby. I couldn't understand what was attracting them all, but I put up with it without complaint. After all, I was feeling a certain motherly pride. Bastian was also visited by a pediatrician that morning. He didn't find anything unusual, and wrote, *no problems found*, on his notes. I was very happy and relieved to see this because I'd had problems with anorexia ten years before and I was worried that this might have harmed the baby. There were a lot more visitors that afternoon, even though it was a Tuesday. There were a lot of relatives, coming to see the baby.

It was only when night came that I noticed how tired I was. Bastian, on the other hand, was as active as if it was midday. He was awake all through the night. Around midnight, my eyes fluttered closed as I sat, and I wondered if I should give him to the nurse. That was the whole point of being in hospital, wasn't it? They could watch the baby for a while, and I could sleep a little. Thoughts tumbled over each other in my mind: *Does this make me an unfit mother? - I'm not that tired! - Get it together, you won't have nurses to help when you get home! - Yes, but now I've got the chance. - No. Don't do it!*

For the first time, my maternal instincts were tearing me in two. Exhausted and teary, I needed somebody to talk to, even if it was the middle of the night. I quickly dialled our number and woke my husband up. He sounded quite groggy himself, and I suddenly felt guilty about this too. He said it would absolutely be okay to give Bastian to the nurse. He said that otherwise I wouldn't be rested when I came out of hospital.

I rang the bell with a heavy heart, and handed Bastian over to the care of a stranger. Afterwards, it felt like I'd made the right decision.

The time in the hospital passed in a flash. Bastian was awake pretty much the whole time, peaceful and contented. The only thing was that there were still a few problems with feeding. It seemed that my milk wasn't nourishing enough, and so the baby's appetite came back very quickly. To stop him getting hungry, I tried feeding him a few spoonfuls of carbohydrate-rich fennel tea, but he didn't take to it. While this was happening, Bastian and I got to know each other better, and I tried to be less frightened that something might break when I picked my delicate little baby up.

At last it was Friday. There was just one last refreshing bath and a last examination by the pediatrician before it was time to leave. Everything was fine, so I was free to go home. I wanted to get away from the hospital as quickly as possible, but getting to the exit was like running the gauntlet. There was a huge crowd—mostly of women—who wanted to say goodbye to my little bundle of joy. My husband and I began to seriously ask ourselves what was going on. We asked them if this kind of send-off was usual, and the answer was quite a surprise. They said no, but Bastian was such a special child. Unfortunately, we couldn't get them to tell us what they meant by *special*.

Bastian was awake the whole way through his send-off, and it didn't seem to bother him at all, in fact, he seemed to be enjoying it. I'd already noticed how much of the time Bastian spent awake. In contrast to what the reference books were telling us, Bastian only slept ten hours per night, at most. He spent the rest of the time looking around with his eyes wide open, as though he wanted to take everything in, as though he might miss something when he fell asleep.

The First Days at Home

A short car ride later, we were back home. I was very happy to be back in the bosom of the family where there was peace and where I would, at last, also have the chance to move about a bit. It was still a little early to go jogging, but it was nice to take a brisk walk that was more than up and down in the hospital corridors. Bastian was relaxed about the change of scenery. My husband held him in his arms—as if he were a fragile doll, or a recently won trophy—full of pride, humbled by the new life. I could see how Bastian was enjoying being close to his father. He seemed to be pleased with his new home too. Even though very little of this experience was likely to stay with him, Bastian opened his eyes wide and looked at all the different jumping jack dolls on the wall of his room.

Just then I felt the need to run one last chore. We needed to go to the supermarket to stock our empty fridge. We wrapped up our baby and headed off to the shopping centre.

Right from the very beginning, we took Bastian out, and we are quite active people. We went for city walks, country walks, and walks in the park. I was breastfeeding, so Bastian's food was always at hand, and this gave me a feeling of freedom and independence. The breastfeeding had been going well too. Only the rhythm was still not set. Every time I felt like I had found the rhythm, Bastian seemed to feel that the rhythm needed to be altered.

We'd already bought a baby carrier, and it would go on to do sterling service, but it was really only for jogging, and in case anyone else was taking the baby out. We didn't have to get used to carrying Bastian around, we actually found it something very natural—something monkeys do instinctively—and we also found it was the easiest way to get a baby from place to place. Bastian could always feel the closeness of our bodies, and the security this offered. He also saw everything from the vertical, right from the very start, and, last but not least, it also meant that I had my hands free.

During these first days, everything went perfectly smoothly with Bastian. He was an unusually peaceful child, which was a pleasant surprise after I had prepared myself for exactly the opposite during the pregnancy. He only

cried, and you could hardly call it crying, more of a snivelling sound, when he was hungry. Apart from that, he cried as little as he slept.

Two Weeks

We waited two weeks after the birth before breaking out the bicycles for the first time. We had bought a bike trailer shortly after Bastian was born, which would go on to do thousands of miles over the coming years. But we had to adjust the straps before we could start, because bike trailers weren't designed for such small babies back then. Bastian didn't enjoy his first excursion behind the bike. He was sick—unfortunately without sticking his head out the window. We didn't know if it was because of the shaking, the heat, or maybe something else entirely. But there was only ever one little accident, so we decided that riding around in the bike trailer was probably not doing any harm. Bastian later put our minds at rest by burbling and singing in pleasure during the rides.

For me, the bike was an absolute pleasure. It was fast, independent, out in the fresh air, getting plenty of exercise, what more could I ask for? From then on, any journey was by bike, and, when we reached our destination, out came the baby carrier. Now and then I also took a ride on public transport.

Three Weeks

Three weeks after the delivery, Bastian was lying on his belly, and he lifted his head unaided for the first time. From then on we no longer needed to support his head when we were holding him. We decided that it would be possible to hold Bastian the other way around when he was in the baby carrier. This allowed him to look at his environment with his eye level at our chest height. It can get quite cold in Switzerland too, so we often put on a big coat and zipped it up over the baby carrier. This meant that our baby wouldn't have to freeze out in the open air, and that we wouldn't have to

keep on adding and taking off layers of baby clothes. The whole thing looked a lot like a kangaroo, because often all that can be seen of their young is the head poking out of their pouch. Bastian would lean his head way out, so he could get a good look at what was going on around him. The impression we made was met with much hilarity by the other people on the street, and it would elicit comments from quite a lot of them.

Four Weeks

At four weeks, I made my first and only visit to the children's centre in our village. I thought I might be able to pick up some useful hints and tips there. One of the staff weighed my son and looked him over. She said everything seemed normal, whatever that meant, but she also said that she had never seen such a small baby with such a big head. I was pleased and deflated at the same time.

Bastian wasn't sleeping much, so I was very grateful when Bastian's grandmother, on his father's side, occasionally offered to look after the baby. 'Grossmutti' would always ring unexpectedly to ask if I had just fed the baby, and then came round for the next few hours to spend time with her grandson.

I was especially pleased because I wanted my mother-in-law to spend time with her grandson. I hoped that a close connection would be forged between the two, and, from time to time, it also allowed me the chance to catch up with the housework.

On the day I gave up my office job, I automatically became a *housewife*. I'm absolutely against this term, because what I actually am is a mother. My housewife persona is quite incidental. My greatest task, the one that has taken the most of my time, has been providing my son with a good mother, to give him the best possible start in life, and to be there for him, whenever he needs me.

I spent my time without Bastian enjoying sport, but also enjoying doing nothing. He still wasn't sleeping much, so I tried to get my head down for a

sleep whenever I got the chance. Unlike my son, I needed a few hours sleep to be able to get the most out of life. Bastian would often wake up during the night, and then it was a very difficult job trying to persuade him to go back to sleep again. He didn't want to miss any chance to experience new things. It wasn't unusual to find me at night, with my baby in my arms, humming and walking from room to room of our house. So I could get some sleep, I came to an agreement with my husband. We worked out a schedule where until one in the morning was *father time*. This meant that if Bastian hadn't gone to sleep by then, Manuel would carry him around trying to stretch out the time until he would need his next feed. Helpful tricks for dragging out the time were, unsweetened tea, water or just *sucking on daddy's finger*. Then, at one o'clock in the morning, my husband would go to bed and sleep so deeply that even ten screaming babies wouldn't have woken him up, and it was my turn to take the baby.

Five Weeks

It took five weeks, but eventually Bastian started to sleep for five hours in a row. This made my nights a little more peaceful. These five hours were enough for Bastian, and they actually lasted him all the way until lunch time. After having some milk, he would then go to sleep again for about an hour and a half. And that was it! Altogether, Bastian was only sleeping around six or seven hours a day.

At around this time, we realised that whenever we sat Bastian on the sofa or on the floor he kept trying to stand up. He always wanted to have his feet in contact with the floor. We mentioned this to the pediatrician during a routine check up, but he passed it off as a reflex that *he would grow out of*. We were satisfied with this explanation, and enjoyed watching how much energy our son invested in his efforts to stand, and how strong he was.

Six Weeks

It had now been more than a month since Bastian's birth. One sunny Sunday morning in early September we took him to the Catholic church in Oberwil to be christened *Bastian*, with his grandparents, and his godparents in attendance. The meal afterwards was at my husband's parents' house. Bastian was fascinated by the beautiful presents he received, most of them made by hand with great love and care, even if some of them he only appreciated later.

We were already taking Bastian on lots of trips out. We visited my parents near Lake Thun, went to Zurich, Lugano and Geneva. We preferred to get from one place to another by train, because going by car was a nightmare. As long as Bastian was asleep everything was fine, but there was trouble if he woke up before we arrived. I'm sure the rest of the carriage were always thinking of phoning the police to complain about the noise. Our baby could scream the house down. Oh yes, he could certainly scream.

Seven Weeks

Bastian was just a few weeks old when we had to take him to the pediatrician, Dr. Fäller, with his first illness. Bastian had had a bad cold for a few days and there was some discharge from his eyes. The doctor diagnosed inflammation of the middle ear, which he said wasn't unusual for babies. He asked if Bastian had screamed and cried the night before, because the condition is very painful. He hadn't screamed or cried at all. In fact there hadn't been any unusual sounds from him. He'd slept a little fitfully perhaps, but that was all. I was able to get plenty of sleep. The doctor prescribed antibiotics, and Bastian was soon well again, but then the symptoms came back. It just kept on coming back, over and over. Bastian fell ill – a visit to the doctor – antibiotics – he recovered – two week gap – Bastian fell ill – a visit to the doctor, and on and on.

By the fourth or fifth visit, I asked the pediatrician if this was normal. He told me it was, and that he'd eventually grow out of it. We believed him and

carried on with the same procedure. Luckily, all these medical shenanigans didn't hold up Bastian's development at all.

At eight weeks, my son was an absolute joy. He would suddenly smile, at anything going on around him. He seemed to know when to turn on the charm and used his little smile to make lots of friends. When he couldn't sleep, or when he was eating, or out and about, Bastian was always playing with his extremities. His hands and feet were fascinating to him. He was also fascinated by anything colourful, and anything that could be hurled through the air. He experimented with gravity during every meal. He was already in a baby chair because he could hold his own head up from such an early age. I had lined the chair with lambskin, and he sat there watching as I cooked, explaining everything I was doing as I went. I would often put a wooden spoon in his hand, which he would joyfully drop on the floor with a delighted shriek.

Two Months

The days went by, with me trying to enjoy every minute. I knew these times would never come around again. I carried on with breastfeeding, but my milk didn't seem to be enough to nourish our small child any more. He wanted more. He never cried, but he sucked on my breast with such an intensity that I could feel that he wasn't getting enough nourishment. After two months—and against all the advice and wisdom I'd been given—I tried to feed Bastian his first mashed banana, fortified with some of my milk. It felt a little like it was feeding time at the zoo, because Bastian was hooting like a monkey for his food. He gobbled the mush down like a hungry animal and immediately wanted more. From that moment on, he never had any problem with this new *food*, and banana became a fixture on his menu. After that we began to add something new every week. At first we limited ourselves to tried and trusted foods, to make sure there would be no trouble digesting them. After banana came apple, then carrot, then potato, and after

six months, Bastian was eating everything except onions. It was great, though of course everything was mashed up for him because he didn't have any teeth yet. And so, exactly seven months after Bastian's birth, I was able to say goodbye to my role as a *dairy cow*.

I had enjoyed breastfeeding very much. The closeness, as well as the practical advantages were very nice, and I didn't want to say goodbye to them, but everything changes eventually and twohundred and fifty days of breastfeeding had been enough for me. But a lot of other things were to happen before I stopped breastfeeding.

Three Months

Exactly three months after his birth, Bastian managed to turn over from his belly to his back, and a couple of days later he managed to turn back over. From that moment, everything changed. Bastian was suddenly able to move around by turning over. We now had to childproof all the power outlets, and we both knew what else this meant. We would have to keep an eye on Bastian and know where he was at all times.

I was enjoying spending time with Bastian. I had also started to teach swimming again. I'd been a swimming teacher for years, first alongside work and now alongside looking after my baby. I either took Bastian to the lessons and handed him over to one of the mothers of the girls I was teaching to look after, which led to me making a lovely new friend, or Bastian was left with his Grossmutti. I also taught *Aqua-Fit* in the evening, and my husband took on the child-minding duties.

Apart from this, I was able to dedicate all my time to my son. There was a lot of time, and we made the best use of it that we possibly could. We went to the zoo, we went on all kinds of trips, we painted, played games, did handicrafts (even at such a young age) and I enjoyed it all immensely. I also talked to him a lot. I explained everything to him and made a big effort to avoid using baby talk (no choo-choo trains or moo cows). Everything was called by the name adults used, so a dog was a dog, not a bowwow. And no

weather was ever 'bad'. Every day, whether the sun was shining, the rain was pouring, or snow and ice had turned the landscape into a winter wonderland, we spent hours in the fresh air, usually twice a day. On the other hand, I hated having to walk with other mothers or to have to sit with them at the playground. I was happy to take other children on our trips, but I didn't enjoy making small talk with the other mums. I wasn't interested in comparing my son's progress to the other children, or to feel I had to boast about him to try and keep up. Bastian would go his own way, whatever way that would be. When I ran into someone, or when I had to be polite and go on a trip with another mother, some of them seemingly a little troubled and uncertain, I had to listen as they told me what a lovely, alert little boy I had, and they would always say, "He has to be a lot older than you're pretending."

We sometimes took the tram when we were going on our trips. I particularly remember one of the encounters we had. It was when I took Bastian out of the baby carrier and put him on my lap so he could practice his instinct to stand up. He was still trying to stand the whole time. He sat, then stood, then sat, then stood, as an elderly lady, who was sitting beside us, was watching. She said, "That one is going to grow up to be very, very clever." I looked at her, a little irritated. "Look at the back of his head. Only the clever ones have such a big head!"

I was very glad that Bastian didn't have to grow up with a father that was a virtual stranger, without seeing him, or perhaps only at the weekend. But because my husband didn't get home till after seven in the evening, I got my son used to a rhythm where he didn't go to bed until ten. He didn't sleep very much as it was, so it allowed us to have a meal together in the evening. Then my husband had time to bathe Bastian and put him to bed. This allowed my husband and our baby to develop a close bond, and it gave him some responsibility because I didn't want to be tied to the baby. I enjoyed the feeling of being free every now and then.

We encouraged the grandparents to form a close relationship with their grandchild, to make it possible to have some quality time with my husband. We could leave Bastian with them sometimes and do things together. We

enjoyed this freedom a lot and it gave us the strength to be there for our child.

Four Months

Bastian's godfather, Manuel's brother, lived in Vienna. Why don't we all pack up our suitcases and take a trip, we thought, and why not go by plane. No sooner said than done. Because Bastian was still having problems with his ears, I decided to go see the doctor the day before the flight. I wanted to make sure there was no inflammation, because it could be painful on the flight. He told me *everything was okay*, and we were looking forward to the change of scenery.

It was Bastian's first flight, and it went without a hitch. We had a lovely time in the Austrian capital, looked at a lot of impressive buildings, and paid a visit to the famous Christmas Markets. We had some orange punch there, which was lovely and warming. I decided to have a second, even though it is very rare that I drink anything alcoholic. The alcohol had its effect on me, and I spent the whole evening with a big smile on my face, laughing and enjoying myself. Bastian seemed to be enjoying my escapades too, and that night, after feeding, he slept almost eight hours through.

The return journey, however, turned out to be a nightmare. As soon as the aircraft took off, Bastian began to cry. Our son screamed for one and a half hours without a break. Nothing helped, not drinks, not games, not distractions, nothing. It was torture for me, but my husband was a great support. He quietly helped with Bastian, without any objections. We hadn't been on the ground for a moment, and everything was over. No more screaming, not a peep. But he hadn't gone to sleep.

The following day, I went back to the doctor, even though I was already pretty sure what he was going to say. The diagnosis was, *inflammation of the middle ear*.

In the meantime, Bastian was learning lots of new things. He was getting so good at rolling around that he could go anywhere in the house. Yes, he was

already on the move at just four months, and he scrutinised everything he could get his hands on. His favourite was newspaper, which could be wonderfully ripped up and sucked.

Five Months

It would soon be time for Bastian's first Christmas. It would be his first opportunity to help make some presents. His small hands made great shapes for a pretty pattern. I decided to put them all over some tea towels, although the towels ended up with little fists on them instead of hands. Nobody gets it right the first time! Christmas, on the other hand, was a lot of fun. Nobody is too young to enjoy Christmas. But it was the packaging that was the most interesting for Bastian, rather than what was inside it. One of the presents went on to become a firm favourite of Bastian's. It was a blanket that his godmother had stitched herself, and Bastian used it as a play mat. It was wonderful and also practical.

It snows in Switzerland during the winter from time to time. During this wonderful period, Bastian provided us with our next surprise. Bastian lay *helpless* in our arms, or turned over and over on the ground, for five months and two weeks. Then came the next big development. He could sit without help. His sitting was the start of a new chapter. Bastian lost no time in exploring his new freedom. Sitting at the dinner table in the baby chair was now a real pleasure. He added kitchen utensils, salad forks and Tupperware to his games, and the little table on his baby chair became a drum. It was so much fun that Bastian was beaming over his entire face.

That's when his first teeth came. They came one after the other without Bastian showing any pain. Bastian could now deal with his first carrots – a little overcooked for my taste – without them being mashed up. He reached for a spoon or a fork more and more often, although lots of his food ended up around his mouth rather than in it at the beginning. But Bastian kept practising, and soon got the hang of it.

I met lots of other mothers and parents, even if I didn't seek these encounters out. At this age, even weeks can make an enormous difference to a baby's development. I wasn't looking for it, but increasingly, as the days went by, I noticed with fascination the difference between the other children and Bastian. I realised that Bastian was developing much more quickly in comparison to the other babies. I was secretly proud, but tried my best not to show it, and certainly not to brag about what Bastian could do. I didn't want to be special, or to attract attention, but I couldn't resist telling my husband all about it in the evening.

The more often I noticed the difference, the more I tried to seek out parents with older children. I did this because my son was also being compared—often angrily—by the other mothers.

Six Months

It wasn't long after Bastian had started sitting that he worked out how to pull himself up. Shortly after he was pulling himself up everywhere. He then made a great effort and was soon managing to stand on his own two feet. He was also trying to crawl and I had the feeling that it wouldn't be long before he got the hang of it. To help him along a bit, I put little towers of wooden blocks around the floor. What little baby doesn't enjoy knocking over towers of wooden blocks? I decided to make use of this compulsion, and it worked. Bastian started crawling from tower to tower, at first with a lot of effort, but then quicker and quicker, and after a few minutes he was an expert. From then on, he was going everywhere in our home on all fours. I was so pleased that I forgot one very important thing. His new mobility would mean a lot more work for me. I could no longer just sit in one place. Suddenly Bastian could be anywhere in a flash, and nothing was safe any more. We also had to be more vigilant outside the home, but, at the same time, we also noticed that Bastian was very, very careful. He would stop at the stairs, without us having to make him. It seemed to me that he realised that there was danger ahead.