

Grasshoppers, and Other Surprises

BY WANDA I. ALLEN

When our first child was born, I felt confident in my ability to be a good mother. I had studied child development in college, and I was firmly convinced that if I applied scientific principles of child rearing, everything would go smoothly.

As we welcomed four babies into our family during the following six years, I began making discoveries that weren't in the textbooks. There were some things no one had told me—some important things!

My knowledge of child development had prompted me to welcome the assistance of little helping hands when baking cookies, for instance, but it hadn't told me how to keep four pairs of hands and feet out of the batter, give everyone a stirring turn, remember to add all the right ingredients, save enough dough to make the cookies, and keep calm all at the same time. That problem was mine to solve.

When, in a day's time, I was confronted with a crayon-decorated purple bathtub, a pound of margarine smeared on the carpet, a quart bottle full of pears broken on the kitchen floor, and a tearful little boy whose pet grasshopper had escaped, I felt overwhelmed and frustrated.

In the middle of turmoil the answers began to come—not all at once, but little by little, just as the problems had come. When our four-year-old borrowed the wrench and dismantled his tricycle, I was upset and indignant. Questioning him, I received his answer, given in all sincerity: "Well, they shouldn't make tricycles so children can take them apart!" When I could see humor in the situation, the problem shrank before my eyes.

The morning I found a newly opened box of

cereal completely emptied on top of the kitchen counter, I resisted the impulse to scold two-year-old Melody long enough to hear her explanation: "I was just trying to get Heidi some breakfast, and it kept coming out!" A scolding for that episode would have deprived me of seeing a spark of love and kindness being developed in a toddler.

When Curtis broke into his new savings bank, at first I saw only the intent to damage and destroy. After a calm, understanding interview with our son, my husband, Dell, learned that Curtis was simply trying to disprove a statement he had heard—that this bank was one *nobody* could open. Having proved his point, Curtis hasn't disturbed the repaired lock since.

I've learned some of life's most valuable lessons from preschool children: to greet each day with enthusiasm and eagerness; to pursue adventure despite obstacles; to delight in new discoveries; to enjoy spontaneous fun; to regard the eating of toothpaste and the emptying of sand-filled shoes on the carpet as minor problems, not major catastrophes.

I had thought my college classes prepared me to control my environment so things would always go smoothly. But I've learned that when five children are hungry or tired or both, things *don't* go smoothly. When I accept this as an inevitable—even adventurous—part of daily living, I can be more flexible and less demanding.

When I can scoop my mud-covered two-year-old into my arms and deposit her into the bathtub for an unscheduled bath—and remain unruffled—I know I'm making progress. ■

ILLUSTRATION BY GREG NEWBOLD

Purple Bathtubs,

