

# Oh, Baby!

New moms talk about the joys and challenges of motherhood

By Christina Elston



Sara Hulan-Crestani cuddles daughter Lily, also pictured above, who was born Dec. 20.

PHOTOS COURTESY SARA HULAN-CRESTANI

Around 12:30 a.m. on Dec. 20, Sara Hulan-Crestani was in bed and about to fall asleep, having just come in from an evening visiting with friends. Her husband, John Crestani, had also gotten home not long before. Sara was pregnant and due in two weeks, so she and John were enjoying their last days before the responsibilities of parenthood set in.

Sara was ready for a good night's rest, but before she could drift off, her water broke. The couple set out for Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center

in Westwood, where both sets of soon-to-be grandparents joined them.

Things progressed, but slowly. There was some concern a C-section might be necessary. The doctor cleared the delivery room of everyone but Sara and John to do one final check - and found that Sara was ready to go. Lily Hulan-Crestani was born at 3:42 p.m. "Oh my god, I can't believe this is happening," John exclaimed as Sara cuddled Lily.

The BirthPlace Santa Monica offers a "golden hour," where new families are

given privacy immediately following delivery. "I thought that was the most magical thing about the delivery, just being with the baby and my husband and getting to share that space," Sara told me from her mom's home in Altadena. "It was just the three of us. And it went by so fast."

If you're a parent, you know that feeling of joy and amazement that takes hold after the birth of a child. And what fun to recapture it by meeting new moms! I spent the past several weeks talking with new mothers about pregnancy, birth and the joys and challenges of motherhood.

Teresa Chavez brings daughter Gia to a new-moms support group at Del Mar Birth Center in South Pasadena.

## Nausea and Excitement

There are more than 130,000 babies born in L.A. County every year according to the California Department of Public Health. The conventional wisdom is that pregnant women are sick for the first few months, then enjoy a glorious middle trimester before becoming quite uncomfortable toward the end.

"Each of my pregnancies has been as exciting as the first," says mom of three Jessica Reed, whose latest delivery was daughter Olivia Marie, born Jan. 3 at Huntington Memorial Hospital in Pasadena - which makes the county's top 20 in number of babies delivered. Reed and I chatted by phone. "Knowing you are growing a tiny human is a really cool feeling," she told me. "The best part about pregnancy was feeling the kicks and movement. The most challenging part was getting through the last couple months. It's hard getting so big and still having to chase two young boys."

"I was really nauseous at the beginning and really uncomfortable at the end, but the middle was great," says Sam Schwarze, whose son Graham was born Jan. 9. I met Schwarze, Alyson Flack, Emily O'Connor, Rory Dorsey and several other moms at a class at A Mother's Haven in Encino.

Flack, whose son Winter was born Feb. 1, found a silver lining throughout her nine months. "My pregnancy was awesome," she says. "I'm an anxious person, and I was the most laid back I've ever been, I think because of the hormones."

O'Connor, seated nearby, loved her pregnancy as well - but eventually was ready for it to be over. "He



PHOTO BY CHRISTINA ELSTON

was five days late," she says of son Callum, born Feb. 18, "so it was a little frustrating." When labor did start and she arrived at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center - which records more births than any hospital in the county and welcomed more than 6,400 babies in 2014 - she wasn't fully dilated. "I got to walk the halls for an hour and a bit," she says.

## A Big Adjustment

After the birth come other challenges. "The first month was just like a blur," says Dorsey, whose son James was born Feb. 13. Her biggest adjustments so far have been to "not

being able to do things" such as get her car washed and her nails done, and keeping up with James' feeding schedule. But she says it is getting better every day.

Flack has experienced some feelings of isolation and a few bumps in the road as she transitions to being a parent. But things are improving for her as well. "I'm kind of adjusted to not sleeping," she says. "I'm starting to feel like myself now."

Jordyn Siegel, whose son Mason was born in early February, says she is learning every day, and that her professional life as a radio host and



Alyson Flack and son Winter attend a support group at A Mother's Haven in Encino.

PHOTO BY CHRISTINA ELSTON

I met another group of moms at Del Mar Birth Center in South Pasadena, which offers a drop-in support group for moms with babies ages 2 weeks to 6 months. The center also offers classes in breastfeeding, infant CPR and birth preparation, plus complete maternity care through delivery. An average of 15 babies are born there each month with the support of certified nurse midwives. You don't have to deliver there, however, to take advantage of the support.

Dalyn Carbajal, whose daughter Lozen was born Nov. 2 at California Hospital Medical Center downtown, says she has faced many challenges – the biggest of which was trying to recover from her C-section while caring for and breastfeeding her newborn. She's staying home with Lozen, and calls that a blessing and a challenge. "It can be exhausting at times, but I wouldn't trade it for anything," Carbajal says.

Teresa Chavez, whose daughter Gia Lorraine was born Feb. 16, says her biggest challenge is "second-guessing if I'm doing things correctly. Breastfeeding has probably been the most difficult." She says she blamed herself when Gia was slow to gain weight at first. She delayed taking breastfeeding classes until after Gia was born, and now advises all moms to take them during pregnancy so they are prepared.

Aarti Mankad, whose son Shantanu was born Jan. 4, knew some of what to expect. She has a 12-year-old daughter. This second time around, she says she has slowed down to savor every moment. "Every stage has been really, really special," Mankad says. "I'm really enjoying learning his language, how he communicates. When I stick my tongue out, he finds that hilarious."

## Giggles and Grins

Wherever I met them, moms seemed to revel in those early exchanges with their babies. "Seeing her smile when she sees me or her dad [is my favorite]," says Carbajal about Lozen. "Her face lights up and she smiles really big."

"He now is recognizing me and my husband and my parents," Schwarze says about 3-month-old Graham.

O'Connor says one of her favorite things is seeing traces of her husband in her son. "He's the spitting image of my husband," she says with a laugh.

Cuteness also serves a purpose. "She can be challenging sometimes," Hulan-Crestani says about Lily, "but it doesn't bother me. You wake up at 3 a.m. and you think *ohmygod I'm so tired*. And then you see her face and you're not so tired any more."

Hulan-Crestani has found, like many of these moms, that tapping into the parenting community helps. She and Lily go to mommy-and-me classes at The Pump Station & Nurtury in Santa Monica, where discussions have touched on sleep, eating, teething and relationships, and they even go on field trips. "We all went with our strollers to the Santa Monica Farmers Market, and we did Mommy Movie Mondays at The Grove. We saw 'Beauty and the Beast,'" she says.

A longtime yoga practitioner, she has also discovered Zooga Yoga in Culver City and FIT4MOM classes. "I've just been introducing myself to all the mommy things that are around L.A.," Hulan-Crestani says. "You just find different things that fit in with your life."

writer don't hold a candle to being a mom. "Nothing's more challenging than this," she says. The biggest challenge: "Learning that every hour of every day is for him and not for you."

Parenting classes can help in a variety of ways. A Mother's Haven runs an average of 10 Mothers' Gathering classes at a time, and first-time moms can start coming when their babies are 4-6 weeks old. The classes are facilitated by expert instructors but also serve as a place where moms can bond and share. The Haven also offers other prenatal and support classes, sells baby gear and rents breast pumps.



PHOTO COURTESY HUNTINGTON MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

Jessica Reed's third child, daughter Olivia, was born Jan. 3 at Huntington Memorial Hospital.

### A Little Advice

To women approaching motherhood, Carbajal says, "Consider all possibilities and be flexible." During her pregnancy, her focus was so squarely on the natural childbirth she had planned that she didn't take in enough information about the C-section she eventually had. "I didn't read about the emotions and healing and recovery," she says.

Many moms mentioned support from family as essential. "I don't know how people do it without their family," says Hulan-Crestani, whose parents and in-laws pitched in to help her and her husband - even coming over as a group to watch Lily and send the couple on a date night. "They're very supportive not only of Lily but of our relationship," she says.

Even with all the help, Hulan-Crestani advises new moms

to trust their instincts. "If I just listen to my gut, that's what always worked," she says. "Even if it's scary and you feel like you don't know, you really do know a lot more than you realize."

Mankad echoes that sentiment. "I've learned raising my daughter that your child's just an individual and you have to learn to embrace them for who they are," she says. "That's a daily meditation."

Of all the moms I met, I've decided to give Erica Friedman, part of the group at A Mother's Haven, the last word here. Her daughter Ilsa was born Jan. 29, and she perfectly sums up what most new moms seem to feel. "You don't realize how much you can love someone until you have your own baby," she says. "It's worth it all, even the last month." ♦

*Christina Elston is Editor of L.A. Parent.*

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