

This is the Birth, Baby, and Life Podcast with Kristen Burgess, and we're imagining our way into Episode 065.

Welcome to the Birth, Baby, and Life Podcast — the tips, tools, and straight talk you want for pregnancy, childbirth, and bringing up baby. And now your host, Kristen Burgess.

Hi. This is Kristen from NaturalBirthAndBabyCare.com. Sadie and I are here with you today to talk about how to teach your toddler to have an alone time.

Before we jump into toddlers and alone times and the benefits and the how-tos, I wanted to talk to you a little bit about what I introduced to you last week. I started talking about my Smart Mama, Happy Baby program, which is my new program. It's made for mamas for the early years, so from babyhood and toddlerhood and even into the early preschool years. And I say "mamas," but really it's for mamas and daddies, it's for families, and it's made to help you feel confident in these early-year adventures and to help you find the joy in the early-year adventures. That's something that, when I think back on the early years for my biggest kids, there was a lot of stress there, mostly financial stress, and there were other stresses going on, but even in the midst of all that stress, there was a lot of joy, and much of that joy came because of the wisdom that I gleaned from older mamas on how to make those early years go more simply and more rhythmically. You've heard me talk about rhythm a lot on the podcast, and I really think that was a key, but just to enjoy the joyful simplicity of those days. And I know that in my memory I gloss over some of the tougher parts of it, but really it was a happy time, and now I kind of have my second set of little ones now because my bigger ones are moving into their teenage years now, but I still have toddlers, and it gives me an interesting perspective on what worked and what helped set good groundwork for the teenage years and those relationships and what I would like to change with my little ones now to help avoid some of the issues that we've had coming up. It's been an incredible learning experience for me, and it's been a time of incredible joy as well as frustration and feeling like a failure and feeling like I did things right and learning how to let guilt go, learning that it's OK to change my mind. There have just been so many lessons, and now as I have my little Sadie here, she's 7 weeks old — no, she's 8 weeks old today! She's 8 weeks old as we're recording this. It's such an interesting perspective, and I'm so excited about the adventures that I'm going to go on with her and with Corwin and Honor and even Galen. Galen will be in elementary school next year, which is hard to believe. He'll be a first grader. And then with my bigger kids, it's this incredible place to be, where I can give advice and wisdom — I always say to my students that I'm standing on the shoulders of giantesses — wisdom that I gleaned from other mamas that has become part of my life, wisdom that I've gleaned on my 14 years of parenting, wisdom that I've gleaned from my 14-plus years of intense

research into parenting, and then the wisdom that I'm still gaining as I'm in the middle of it with you.

That's what Smart Mama, Happy Baby is about. It's about that wisdom, those tips, those tricks — those life hacks if you're a geek like me — that help make you a smart mama and that help keep your little one happy. It's live now. You can go to SmartMamaHappyBaby.com and see how you can sign up. I like to call it a club because, I don't know, I guess I like that cozy, secret, kind of grade school summer girls club thought, but again, daddies, you're welcome, too. But it's to sign up for this membership club and find out more about what it's about. We're just in the really early stages now, so I have this huge vision for what it's going to become, but I also know that I don't want to do it in a vacuum. I don't want it to be all about me. I want it to be all about you and all about the mamas who are going to come after you tomorrow, next month, next year. I want to help mamas, and so I know for that I can be the one who's the driving force behind it, but I need other mamas and other families to help me. So if you want to jump on board and help me create something that really is dynamic, it's fun, it's an awesome resource, it's an awesome course or classes if that's what you need for various aspects of parenting, just a way to really share mamas' wisdom. Check it out. Again, it's live now at SmartMamaHappyBaby.com.

With that, we will jump into our topic for today, which is a little piece of wisdom that I gleaned from mamas who were more experienced than me, and I want to pass it on to you now. What I learned was that it's important to teach little ones how to happily have an alone time. I give it the name "alone time" because when I first learned it that's what the mama that I learned it from called it, but really it's the gift of independent play. It's not just an alone time, which, I guess, could turn some mamas off initially because, *Oh, I don't want my child to be alone*, but really when you think about it, you probably want some alone time, right? You might even right now be fantasizing about the day when you'll be able to go to the bathroom alone again. Everybody wants alone time now and then. Some of us want more. Some of us want less. Believe it or not, I'm definitely what you would probably call an introvert, and I like my alone time or I like to be with just Scott while the two of us are kind of coexisting together, doing our thing in the same room. I like his company, but we don't necessarily have to be interacting. So I'm more of an introvert, and I would be happy to be at home just doing my thing — I like having my Scott there with me — but you know, just puttering and doing my thing, and I don't need to be out and about socializing. The once-a-year Christmas party or whatever for his company, that was good for me. Or going to a mommy meeting or meeting up with other moms at the library once a week or once every other week has always been good for me. Some of you are going to want more time than that, but all of you probably have time that you want to be alone. There's nothing wrong with that for adults, and there's nothing wrong with that for kids.

I want to talk about the "why." This is just like I did last week on the naptime podcast. I talked about the "why" for a bit before I talked about the "how," and I think that's important because our culture has made a huge shift from what it was even when you and I were growing up to what it is now. I'm going to talk about creating a little bit of structure in this time, especially at first, but essentially it is an unstructured time, an undirected time, so to speak. You and I may remember growing up and having long periods of time to ourselves. Sure, we may have had piano lessons or ballet or we had karate or we did something like that maybe once a week. And then when we got in high school, we were probably a little bit busier. You may have played on a varsity team. You may have had academic clubs. You may have done volunteer work. You were probably a little bit busier at that point, but those childhood years, chances are you had a few things that you did, and that was that. You weren't really booked. It wasn't like today's young women or young men. I mean, Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts on Monday, and then soccer on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and then also after soccer you had a pottery class, and then you had a tutor on Thursday after soccer, and then on Friday was band, and then Saturday morning was band, and then you went to the soccer games, and then Sunday — I mean, it's just insane how booked up our children are nowadays, and that even starts in preschool and nursery school. I mean, there are little ones who are taking languages one day and then they're doing math preparation one day and literacy preparation one day, and it feels like our children have to be hyper-scheduled and hyper-managed, and maybe that's not good for our kids. We have to get away from that perception that children need, A, developmental stimulation all the time and that, B, they need adult oversight all the time. And when I say "adult oversight," I'm not saying that you're going to leave your child in a situation that's dangerous because I don't advocate that and never would advocate that, but you're not going to be right there staring at him or her.

This gives our child many resources. First of all, it's beneficial to learn to be alone. Like I said a few minutes ago, we have different scales. I'm more of an introvert. Somebody else may be more of an extrovert, so they may want to spend more time with friends, but there are times when you're going to be alone, and you have to be able to handle that. And there are also going to be times when you're not going to be entertained, where there's not going to be somebody dictating what you need to do right now with your time. If a human being requires entertainment or direction 24/7, they're not really an independent person, an independent individual. One of the big benefits of having an alone time is that it's in direct contrast to this kind of hyper-scheduling, hyper-supervision, and hyper-direction that children are given nowadays. Instead, it's a time when they're able to be free to explore something on their own, when they may be free to be a little bit bored and have to figure out how to entertain themselves. I'm not advocating that for hours on end, especially not for little ones, because little ones who are left alone for long periods of time without supervision get into trouble, though when you have an elementary-age kid in the summer, letting them go outside and play for a couple of hours, I think it's a good

thing, but we're talking about the little ones here. You know, you're giving your little one the opportunity to explore their world without you having to point everything out to them or without you feeling the need to micromanage your child's life, and you're also giving them that chance to develop their self-confidence and their ability to keep themselves entertained and happy, at least for a little bit of time, and that's a valuable skill. That's just as valuable as learning Mandarin or Spanish or French or anything like that. It's a good skill.

Having your little one able to have some time without you is also good for you. I wanted to talk about your little one first because nobody wants to think that he or she is selfish, but in reality, being able to have 30 minutes a day, maybe twice a day, once in the morning and once in the afternoon, when you don't feel like you have to be right there supervising your child, there's really nothing wrong with that, and it's very good for you. It's good for you because it gives you time for you. It gives you time to do stuff with you. Then for me, especially, and true for you if you have older children, is it gives you time to be able to focus on another child. The way that we do things in our house, we home school. I have seven children and we home school, which means that during the school year, that's a lot of time every day for me, but that's also a lot of time that I need to be able to teach my kids. So the way that works best for us with home schooling is we have a couple of subjects that we do all together as a big group and everybody's there, even the little ones, but most of the time I find that that doesn't work for us because we have such a big age spread. What does work for us is for me to have a 30-minute one-on-one time with each of my school-age kids. This year, that's four kids because it's Cassidy, Asher, Brennan, and Galen, who's in kindergarten this year and will be in first grade next year, so he'll probably need an hour of time next year broken up across the morning. But essentially I need 2 hours where I'm able to be one-on-one with one child or the other, and that's a pretty significant time block. Then I also have another time block where I'm with all the preschoolers and Galen. At that time, I do a little preschool activity with Corwin and Honor and Sadie, and then Galen is included, too. Those are all times when I need to be dedicated to the person to the person that I'm supposed to be dedicated with, or for the preschool group, for those people, those little people.

The way that I work that is that during those times, an older child is usually playing with a younger child. While I'm having a one-on-one time with Cassidy, Brennan is playing with one of the little ones, and Asher is playing with one of the little ones, and then there's another little one who needs to be having an alone time, and that actually usually coincides with Sadie. She's either napping or nursing. She's usually with me, or if she's not with me, she's napping; though when we start the school year next year, she will be big enough for the older kids to play with her. So I can have a child one-on-one with a younger sibling, which gives them fun time to bound, but then I have another little one who I need that little one to be able to play for half an

hour by themselves. That's a valuable skill because it gives me the peace of mind to know that they're safe and they're happy and I can interact with the older sibling, give that sibling my most-of-the-time undivided attention for a half an hour. I mean, things come up. That's family life. But most days, I'm able to give them that half an hour of undivided attention to go over their schoolwork, to ask how they're doing, to ask what they're thinking, to ask if they need my help with anything. And we always have that time, that one-on-one time, on the couch, so I'm able to be physically close to them, almost cuddled up to them, even if we're going over schoolwork. That's really important to me, to be able to give that to my older kids even while I have little kids, and part of the way that I can make that balance work is by having little ones who are OK playing by themselves for a little bit of time. So that could give you time for an older child. In the summertime, when our schedule is much looser, my big ones are usually off playing most of the day. This year everybody's in 4H, so we have animals coming out of all corners of the woodwork, and so they're going to be taking care of them. And that time is less intense for me, usually, with being one-on-one, and it's time for me to be able to work on more projects such as Smart Mama, Happy Baby, and revising things and giving a little bit more time to students and my website, and so having my little ones be able to play at an alone time at that time gives me more time for me. And there's nothing wrong with that.

That's something I really want to make a point about: Don't have any guilt. If you walk away from your child for 10 minutes, which is kind of what I'm going to talk about at first, or then half an hour and then another half an hour in the afternoon, that does not make you a bad mother, that does not make you a selfish person. It's really very much a cultural thing, very much in the United States and some other countries, too. I suspect the UK is very much like this, too. But in other countries, moms just don't have that guilt when they have to be away from their little ones. And I'm not saying 4 hours a day or 8 hours a day or whatever. I mean, we're talking about 30 minutes to an hour a day, and your little one is benefitting from it. Your little one is benefitting from it, so keep that in mind, and don't have any guilt about it. I think it's silly to feel guilty, but I've been in that place, where for me it was at first, *Oh, but I'm supposed to be attached, and we're supposed to be together*, but attachment parenting is really about being connected and meeting the needs of your little one so that those needs are filled when he or she is ready to fly, so to speak, and it comes in graduated stages and in fits and starts, but it does begin very quickly.

I introduced this podcast as getting your toddler to have an alone time, but I really feel that you can encourage even a baby to be content for small periods of time here and there on their own, so let's talk about the practicals, the hows about this, and as I hinted at, start small. I mean, Sadie right now, she's 8 weeks old today. I can't believe that. She's 8 weeks old today, and I could put her down on the sheepskin beside me when I'm working and she's happy for maybe 5 or 10 minutes. She's right there beside me, and that's as much time as she really wants to be put down

without somebody holding her, period, throughout the entire day, unless she's sleeping. With her, it's not really that I'm even trying to get her to have an alone time. It's just that I'm seeing as she developmentally gets to the place where she's ready to be on her own more, and she's getting close to the point where she's going to start reaching out and grabbing, and I suspect that she'll be happier to sit for a little bit longer period of time. And then once she's physically able to sit up, that's when a lot of babies get to where they're happier to be on their own. Really, like I said, Sadie's 8 weeks, so she's just sitting beside me for a minute or two, and I wouldn't focus on even having an alone time until your baby's older, like 3 or 4 months old. Four months old is really kind of the gold standard to start being able to help a baby learn a routine and learn new skills like this, though you can start gently urging them towards that earlier as I've talked about before. But at that point, something simple like a mobile in the crib or something like that and then 5 minutes where you leave them in the crib with the mobile. We like to do a mat on the floor, on the mat on the floor with the little toys dangling over them, and those can fit in whatever your belief system feels that they should. It could be handmade knitted or crocheted little toys that are all in natural colors or wooden dangly toys, or if you like the bright plastics, then the bright plastics. Or if yours is like ours, it's secondhand, so we kind of got what we got. And you go with that. Or if you even have a younger baby, you might choose to hang little black and white cards. This isn't really about stimulation. It's just about giving them something interesting to look at and maybe bat at and interact with for a few minutes of time. That would be for a young baby.

If you're starting with an older baby or a toddler, then obviously you're going to want something a little more entertaining, and I would also start with maybe 10 minutes rather than just 5 minutes. And you're going to have a safe space for them. Actually we don't have a crib, and we've never had a crib, but I have a Pack 'n Play, and actually we have two Pack 'n Plays at this point, one that's a bigger cube size and that's better suited for a toddler, and then one that's smaller, the normal rectangular size. This way, I can have a toddler and an older baby or two toddlers safe at the same time should I happen to need that. So you find somewhere safe, and for a preschool-age child, this might be a baby-proofed room, like their room, or you might have a baby gate up in an area that you guys are at frequently, like the living room or something, but I would choose to have it somewhere that you're not going to be, though I'll talk about some exceptions to that in a minute. Have an area that is safe and limited. When I say "limited," I mean they can't get into everything and they can't tear stuff out, because what you don't want is to leave your toddler alone for 30 minutes and then come back and everything is helter-skelter and the room is crazy. So if you're using their room, then your plan is to have just one or two toys in the room. And if it's in a Pack 'n Play, then you're going to have, like, one toy. What I usually do is one or two toys and maybe a couple of board books at the most. I really think that one toy is good and then a couple of board books.

So you put the child in there. You explain to them what's going on. I feel like it's good to even let your small babies know, and you don't have to be really wordy. I'm really wordy with you on the podcast, but you don't want to be wordy, and you want to talk appropriately for a little one. So, *OK, we're going to have some alone time now. You're going to play in the playpen and you're going to have these Duplos, and Mama is going to go and do some writing in the other room while you have this time, and it's going to be a lot of fun, and we're both going to feel refreshed afterwards.* And then you come back in and when you pick the child up, *Oh, wasn't that fun?! We had a great time! Mama got some writing done, and you've had fun playing with the Duplos.* I think it's good to encourage a child to look forward to it and to create a positive association with it.

And at first, it may be tough, especially if your child is used to having you follow him or her around, and we could do a whole new podcast episode on that. If your child is used to having you follow him around all day at the playground or even around the house, just interacting with him all day, he may have trouble or be surprised if you're going to let him play on his own for a little bit, which is another argument for doing it starting in babyhood because your baby kind of graduates up. But you know, you go for 10 minutes and then 20 minutes, and a half an hour is really the longest that I ever leave a little one in this kind of an alone time situation, though if I'm writing or something and I have little ones playing around me happily for an hour, I might not really be focusing on them. We're just all together. And again, I think that that is a natural state of being. It's not neglect. It's being engaged in your own activities and being able to entertain yourself and delve into your own interests perhaps concurrently but not having to be right next to each other, and that's actually natural for little ones. You've probably read about how parallel play is natural. Little ones don't require constant interaction all the time. That's OK. But if your child is used to having you kind of helicopter parent, to use a negative term, but it's what a lot of us mamas know. It's what we see other moms do. If you're in the United States, at least, it's what you see other moms do, and it may be your expectation. You might not be able to remember toddlerhood, but if you think back to your childhood, it's probably not what your mom did. And I know that some of us don't want to copy our moms if mom was a really big career woman and we didn't feel like she was there for us, but many of us have good memories of childhood, of a mom who was there and who had a snack for us after school and who had dinner on the table for us, but at the same time, you know, she wasn't right there standing over us when we were out in the backyard playing with our friends or as we got older in the neighborhood playing with our friends. So it's OK not to be right there. Again, a little bit at a time. Build up to that not being right there.

I think that it can be beneficial to start with this in your line of sight. I've only had to do this really with one child, but if your child is really having a lot of trouble with it, then, say, having

the Pack 'n Play set up in your line of sight can be really beneficial. I had to do this with Corwin. When we started getting him used to his alone time, I would put him in my room in a Pack 'n Play and he just cried. It didn't matter if it was 5 minutes or 10 minutes. He was just crying every day, and I think for him it was because he was born into a family as number six and he had never really been put down. He was not used to being alone. There were always people around him, always somebody to entertain him, and so having an alone time where there wasn't constant sibling or parent interaction was very different for him. So what I decided to do with him, because I didn't want him to sit in there and just cry, was I put the Pack 'n Play in the same room as me, but it was a little bit away from me. We have a large living room, and my home office is actually out in the living room area so that I can keep an eye on people while I'm working. So I would have him in the Pack 'n Play probably about 10 feet away from me, and I would write or go over the lesson with whomever it was that was having a lesson with me at that time and just be there and present where he could see me but not really focusing on him, not really focusing on soothing him or anything, because when he could see me, he was OK. He just wanted to be able to see us. And so he would have his toy and he would play, and if he started jabbering or talking, it would be, *Mama's working with Cassidy right now, and Corwin is having an alone time*, with a smile, or *Mama's writing right now, and Corwin's having some alone time*, again with a smile. And that worked for us, for him to have an alone time. Now, this year he's able to be in another room and play. He's gotten to the point where he's OK with it, but initially having him in my line of sight or really, I guess, me in his line of sight was beneficial. That's something to consider if your child is really feeling insecure and it just doesn't seem to be working. Keep them in their own space and just cheerfully remind them if they start babbling or calling to you that this time that Mama's going to brush her hair or Mama's going to write or Mama's going to read or check Facebook or whatever, and you're going to enjoy your alone time. That's a strategy to use.

I've already covered this a little bit, but make sure that it's in a safe place, so in a Pack 'n Play even if you would never use a Pack 'n Play at another time or for another reason, it is a safe place for your child to be for this half-an-hour time. And then again, if you have a preschool-age child that you're doing this with and you're still worried about child-proofing issues, then certainly they'll be in a child-proof room. And again, you don't want them to have free access to be able to pull lots of stuff down. I do believe that you can teach a child don't pull all my books down, don't pull all my stuff down, but when you're not there to directly supervise, you don't want to unfairly place temptation in your child's way, so make sure that it's an area where there's not much that they can pull out and what they can get to is stuff that you're OK with and that there's not going to be a safety issue there.

One of the things that works the most for me — and this is something that I got from the mama who taught me about having this alone time, and it has worked well for me since Cassidy, since my very first child — is to rotate activities. What works best for me is to have an assigned activity for each day of the week. We typically will have alone times Monday through Thursday and sometimes on Friday. Friday is usually our errand day, so some Fridays we're out and about. But I will have a different toy for each day of the week. Mondays might be Duplo blocks, and Tuesdays might be baby dolls or Matchbox cars, and Wednesdays might be puzzles, Thursdays might be play kitchen stuff. I'm just pulling things off the top of my head. But that way it's something new, and the toys are not played with at other times. We do have Duplos come out at other times, but the Duplos are never just left out at our house, so when they come out, they're always kind of new and exciting. And if you do this, the toys stay fresh, they stay newer, and they stay more enticing, so those Duplos are of greater interest. We have toys that are appropriate for different age groups. So stacking cups, those are something that will keep Corwin entertained still. He has just turned 2 a couple months ago, and they would keep a younger toddler than him entertained, but for instance, those would probably not entertain Honor at almost 4 for very long, and they don't entertain Galen at all, really, unless he just wants to play with them because he's jealous that a sibling's playing with them, which sadly and realistically sometimes happens. So you have baby toys or young toddler toys and then some that are of interest to older kids. We have this little magnetic doll toy where she can choose different outfits, and she loves that. That's appropriate for her at her age. And baby dolls are kind of universal. Whereas when a little toddler just kind of played with the baby or pretended to feel the baby, now she really understands that she can dress the baby and everything. Her play with the baby dolls is more complex and imaginative, so that toy is kind of scaled up with her. But in young toddlerhood, we would just give her the baby doll and a few accessories, and now she gets the entire kit and caboodle. And again, the baby dolls are a toy that come out at other times, especially because we have a few an Galen and Honor and Corwin all like to play with the baby dolls together, but they still aren't out all time except for Honor's one precious baby that's her baby, but all the accessories and everything aren't out all the time, so they maintain some novelty, and that's really good.

Actually Cassidy, Asher, and Brennan, they had alone time toys that, like I described, they only came out at those times. And when we prepared to move to Michigan, where we live now, we moved from down South, so it was a thousand-mile move, and we weren't going to bring everything with us. Brennan was 3 at the time, so I was able to sell some of the young toddler toys. I was able to sell a lot of those for almost the same price that I paid for them because they were in really good condition because they only got played with once a week, which was kind of funny. And so another child was able to enjoy the play value of those toys, so I really think that rotating toys is a good thing to do, and that's why I said, when I was talking about structure and creativity, that's there's some structure and that usually the child is given a toy to play with, but

you're not directly right there supervising them. So if they have baby dolls and decide that each one of their baby dolls is going to be a bear or a goat in a farmyard or something, you're not there to say, *Oh, no, those are supposed to be baby dolls.* They're able to have some freedom and creative expression in that. And like I was describing with Honor, they're able to mature in their play from what would be developmentally normal for a young toddler, which is just kind of feeding the doll, to a preschooler like she is now, where her play is much more complex, and she's free to explore and understand that as she grows into that without having an adult tell her this is the way that that should be done or that's the way that that should be done.

I really do think that this time sets a stage for creativity and independence. And as your child gets older into preschool age, you can introduce variations of this where they have an art time. You might have an art tub that you teach them to take out, and it's full of nontoxic stuff and child safety scissors and that sort of thing, but they're able to create and work on an art project for 30 minutes and then they're essentially independently able to clean up. It's going to take some time on your part initially as you teach them how to get it down and kind of show them what each thing is for and, most importantly, how to clean up after themselves. But a preschool or toddler-age child's day can be made up of going through different activities like this where they may not have your direct supervision. They don't have to have an adult instructor or teacher, so to speak, except for at first to initially help them become comfortable with being on their own and maybe to initially introduce materials such as with the art project. But it is reasonable to expect that your little one can learn to play. And then as you do things like go out when the weather becomes nice and you're getting out and about, you can encourage your child to go play for a half an hour in the backyard, in the sandbox, on the swing set. I mean, we can send Galen and Honor outside, and they'll play for an hour or an hour and a half in the backyard where we can see them on the swing set, in the sandbox, in that vicinity, but they kind of independently do what they're going to do without needing any adult to tell them what to do, and again, that's a valuable skill. That's creativity. That's independence. That's being able to develop awareness of themselves, proscriptive awareness, which is kind of sensory and balance awareness. Again, sensory awareness, all those things are vital to our children, and they gain that confidence and that experience and that knowledge of their world when exploring on their own, perhaps even better than if they had some adult standing over them. So I think that helping your child have an alone time is not only beneficial for you and for your sanity and to give you a little break, but it's also beneficial in setting a stage for your child to be comfortable with independence, to be comfortable having some alone time to think or to mull over life, and to be able to expand on their own creativity and use their own imagination without having some construct from another person or from an adult put in there. It's just them. That's really valuable, and it's a gift to your child.

OK, I will wrap up with that so that we don't get as long this week as we were last week. Again, I'm really excited about Smart Mama, Happy Baby, and if you would like to check that out and get on board right now, we have charter member pricing going on, so if you want to jump in, help me build that out, and get more practical wisdom and advice for you and your little one, check it out at SmartMamaHappyBaby.com, and I will see you in there. And I will see you on the podcast next week. Have a blessed week!

Thanks for listening to the Birth, Baby, and Life Podcast with Kristen Burgess. For great resources and tons more info, visit www.BirthBabyLife.com.