Entertaining Children from Bed Central
by Terri Gillespie Cook

The cobweb taunted me as it dangled from the ceiling, dancing in the gentle breeze from the air conditioning vent. I was deep in thought; pondering ways I could destroy it without budging from my doctor-ordered horizontal position on the living room couch.

"Give it to me . . . it's mine!" "No, I had it first!" My plan of attack was disrupted by the shrieks of my six- and eight-year-old boys, chasing each other through the house as they bickered over a toy that had probably gone untouched by either for several weeks. The web would have to wait as I took on a much bigger challenge--dealing with my two older children while on bed rest to keep my third one from arriving too soon.

"Boys, stop!" I said firmly. They didn't acknowledge me. "Boys, stop!" I demanded loudly. Did they even realize I was in the room? "BOYS, STOP!" I yelled, and I began my warning countdown. "One . . . two . . ." It was to no avail, though. They knew that even when I reached "three," I wouldn't get up, simply because I wasn't allowed to.

Desperate times call for desperate measures, so I picked up my empty plastic water bottle and tossed it in their direction. The noise startled them, and the screeching stopped as they turned to me with their full attention at last. Forgetting about the argument, they giggled as they left the room together, muttering about "Mom's bad aim."

Okay, so that move probably wouldn't make the top 10 list of effective discipline techniques, but the peace, while only a temporary condition, was wonderful.

Each year, hundreds of moms-to-be across the country face the difficult task of adhering to mandatory bed rest for a complicated pregnancy while caring for older children. I was among those who was "sent to the sidelines" after showing signs of premature labor. When my doctor spouted a long list of restrictions, I wondered how on earth I was going to care for my two school-age boys while following those guidelines.

The way he said, "Well, you still have to be a mom," made me realize that it wasn't going to be easy. And it wasn't. The good news was that it was summer, so I didn't have to get them ready and off to school each day. The bad news was that it was summer, so the days could have been incredibly long and dull without some creativity and a little
planning. My husband was just a blur during those 14 weeks as he tried to take care of both the kids and me, keep the house fairly clean and the refrigerator fairly stocked, and work a full-time job. So for the most part, it was just me with my two energetic little boys.

In the years since that time, I've talked with many other moms who faced the same type of dilemma. Some had toddlers, others had teenagers, but all dealt with the same kind of internal tug-of-war, the feelings of inadequacy, and the guilt that comes when it seems that we are placing one child's needs over the other's. As these women shared their strategies for surviving bed rest with other children at home, I often said, "I wish I'd thought of that!" The following list is a compilation of some of their best tips for dealing with this difficult situation:

- **Take time to snuggle.** Scoot over in bed to read a favorite book, watch a movie, or talk about the future. Discuss what it will be like when the baby comes, or what the baby's name might be, or better yet, what your child was like when he or she was a baby!
- **Invent your own games.** While "I Spy" is one that requires no cards or game pieces, you may come up with a family favorite using your own imagination. One of our favorites started out, "I'm thinking of someone who has brown hair (or blonde or red)" followed by more descriptive phrases until one of us guessed the friend or family member in question. The kids particularly loved it when they stumped me because they were describing the family dog! We also liked to hum TV theme songs, mostly from cartoons, and have the others guess what we were humming.
- **Count down the days.** Look for fun ways to mark the passing of time. Make a paper clip chain, adding another for each day that goes by, or draw a big X through the dates on the calendar. Inexpensive stickers can denote special times such as birthdays, doctor's appointments, and the baby's due date.
- **Stroll down memory lane.** Some of the best entertainment can be found in your family photo albums. Children love to see what they used to look like, reminisce about a favorite trip, or talk about their grandparents' visit last Christmas. Old yearbooks are great fun, too, as kids enjoy giggling over their parents' no-longer-cool hairstyles and "nerdy" clothes. Watching old family videos is another way to enjoyably while away the hours.
• **Enlist their help.** Even a small child can bring you a tissue or help fluff the pillows. Older children feel that they are doing their part for you and the baby by making a sandwich or folding the towels. Assign jobs that are appropriate for your child's age and ability levels, and praise their efforts to help. It’s not realistic to expect a perfect dusting job from a nine-year-old, and it's sure better than the house not being dusted at all!

• **Share the laptop.** If you have a computer, a quick search for children's web sites can provide stories, games, and puzzles to keep kids of all ages busy for hours. Children are quick learners and aren't intimidated by electronics like some of their older relatives. If you plan to do some shopping for the baby online, involve your child in choosing some of the outfits or decor for the baby's room.

• **Accept all offers of assistance.** When someone asks what they can do to help, tell them! My mother and sister sometimes took the children for an hour or two to give me a little quiet and them a change of scenery. One friend of mine invited my children on outings to the park, beach, or swimming pool with her niece. Another stopped by with a kid-friendly dinner. Think about older children in the neighborhood who might be happy to help out for a few hours, playing a board game with your child or pushing him or her on the backyard swing.

• **Take care of yourself, too.** Remember, too, that when Mom is happy, everyone is happy, and don't hesitate to accept offers that will make you feel better. A group from work not only came to my house to decorate the baby's room, but when they noticed my neglected hairstyle, they sent my hairdresser to the house. "You cannot look like that in the pictures with the new baby!" one friend said.

• **Remember that it's only for a while.** Keep in mind that "this, too, shall pass." Although it can sometimes feel like an eternity, pregnancy doesn't last forever, and it won't be long before you're buckling all of your children into their car seats for a visit to the mall. Today, my older two don't remember much about our summer on the sidelines, but they do remember what it was like to see their baby brother for the first time.

• **As for me, I look back on that time fondly.** Now that my older sons are on-the-go teenagers, their schedules leave little time for hanging out with Mom. During that one special summer, however, we had nothing but time--and a great reason for cherishing every minute of it.
Terri Gillespie Cook and her husband, Gary, are the parents of three sons—Ross, Rand, and Rhett. With 20 years of experience as an education public relations writer, Terri currently serves as publications coordinator for a school district on the Texas Gulf Coast. A Sidelines volunteer since 1999, she has written many features for the Sidelines web site.