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Carpool Tunnel Syndrome: Motherhood As Shuttle Diplomacy

Judy Gruen
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The author is describing a conversation between her-self and another mother on the first day of school vacation. Her friend, Marilyn: "'It's only been four hours. What am I going to do for the next eight weeks?' 'Have you tried Ritalin?' I suggested. 'I already asked my doctor. He said the kids don't need it.' 'I didn't mean for them.'" Welcome to the world of Gruen. It's not her domain alone-it's one every other boomer parent can identify with-but Gruen navigates it so well, that it's a pleasure to go along for the ride. In twenty-nine chapters she explains how she is able to be a full-time, hands-on parent of four-juggling their activities, a freelance writing career of her own, and oh yes, a successful marriage.

She confronts in "Stretch Marks: Every Mother's God-Given Right"; she advises in "Running from the PTA: A Refugee's Guide"; she challenges in "What the %$#@\ *& Happened to Good Manners?", all in the conversational manner of a good, close, chatty friend. She muses over the differences between her three sons and one daughter while relating the time her then three-year-old girl began arguing with a friend over who would play the mommy and who would play the baby. "With the argument at an impasse, my daughter took one of her brother's squirt guns, aimed it at her friend, and said, 'You be the baby or I'll shoot!'"*

Gruen touches on nearly every aspect of life with kids in the millennium: pets, food, computers, holidays, sibling rivalry, the movie-rating system, extra-curricular activities. She nonchalantly makes a general comment, and then sends in a zinger. For instance, she notes: "My oldest son takes sports the most seriously in our family. He lives for the sports section of the newspaper, and knows the names and parole dates of thousands of ballplayers."

The book's title comes from her realization that the result of combining car and children is that "a mom's life becomes a seven-day-a-week game of beat-the-clock." Gruen relates in horror the summer her kids switched schools and the ensuing panic while trying to locate a timely, yet appropriate, carpool solution. An extra bonus is Gruen's humorous insights into modern family life in general-for example, the necessity of slide locks on a parent's bedroom door.

Robin Farrell Edmunds