



Photos by Fuller Royal

Not even a little pregnant, a reporter finds that caring for three electronic RealBabies helps him get in touch with his inner-Mom.

## Four's Company...



By MARK GILCHRIST  
Chief Photographer

I have done crazy things in my life, but this is triple-crazy. Most reporters might cover the topic of RealBabies by keeping one for a day. I adopt three.

I get my first hint that I'm not cut out for this assignment during training in the Guardian ad Litem office before I take home three RealBabies, electronic devices made to look, sound and behave like infants. After holding and rocking one of the six-pound darlings for about 10 minutes, my arm hurts – it nearly cramps up.

I've rebuilt a house with that arm, lifted bricks and lumber and other manly stuff, but right now I feel less qualified for this assignment than an 80-pound teenage mother, and the next 23 hours would make that notion as obvious as a skillet to the forehead.

These "babies" come in all varieties, and I am adopting a boy and two girls whom I have named Ben, Andrea and Chica. I have one Caucasian, one African-American and one Latino baby, attracting more than one joker to ask; "Mark, who's the mother?"

GAL Director Christy Robbins assures me that, although my "children" will not actually wet their pants, they will often act as if they had. The daunting challenge of caring for these guys for an entire day, after 46 years of caring for little else but myself, has me nearly wetting my own pants.

Christy straps three bracelets around my arm and tells me to put them near a baby when it cries, which will ensure that only I will care for the babies, she says, and I refer to the bands as my "electronic house arrest." Christy frowns at the remark as she tells me that one baby is programmed to behave "easy," one "medium," and one "hard." I ask her which is the "hard" one. "Oh, you'll figure it out," she says.

In the office, my new babies are all nice and quiet and my confidence builds. I congratulate myself on my accomplishment – Papa!

Driving away with the kids on my passenger seat, stacked like cordwood, they waste no time letting me know who's boss as they all rip into me at once. They cry and cry, and they cry out loud, like they're the three little babies of the apocalypse. I pull over.

Grab a kid in one arm, pretend to feed another and "burp" another. This is madness. How will I last for 23 more hours? How will I cope? I'm only a man! A half-hour into this experiment and...

I'm calling Christy. "Mark," she says, "this was your idea." Great, no help here. Fine, I'll just... boy, that Chica can scream.

What made me think I was cut out for this? I don't have children – I don't even have a pet. A pet? Heck, I'm not responsible enough to have a bird feeder. I can't even keep screensaver goldfish alive.

What a mess – I get nothing done all afternoon or evening. I had planned to stop for gas or at the library to get that single-parent-runs-errands feeling, but those plans fly out the window with my own screams.

I attract a bit of attention, (do you think?) as I take my children for a walk along Madison Street. Women stop and smile and are unusually friendly to me – they even hold doors open for us and stare lovingly (at the babies, not at me.)

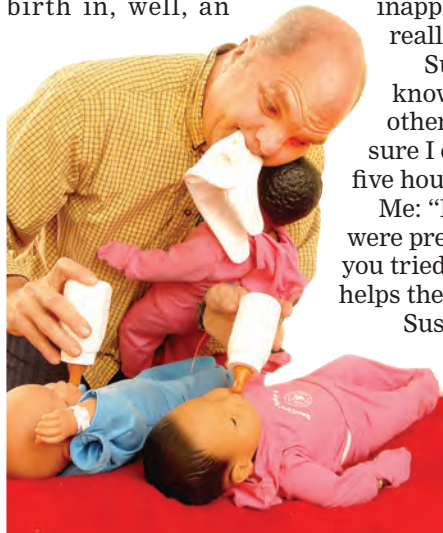
This parenthood thing goes right to my head, and I engage in conversations about birth in, well, an inappropriate manner, really.

Susan: "I don't know if I'll have another child – I'm not sure I can take another five hours of labor."

Me: "Really? Mine were pretty easy – have you tried yoga? It really helps the breathing..."

Susan no longer talks with me about her children.

The entire evening is a blur, as I'm busy coddling,



For everyone's safety, when Mark takes his "children" for a stroll, everybody, clear the streets.

### April is Child Abuse Prevention Month

Special reports on children's health can be found in today's main section:

- Wallyce Todd reports on a new education and resources program for expectant mothers at A Women's Choices.
- Nicole Cartrette reviews an under used program of free or low-cost health insurance for children.
- Bob High reveals historical Columbus County birthrate statistics.

### What are they good for?

Realbabies are used in three areas: First, high school girls and boys use them for a realistic experience caring for children.

Second, girls and boys about to become parents use them for training.

Third, Guardian ad Litem uses them to help evaluate parents' competency as courts make child-custody decisions.

**April 3 is G.A.L. Day.** Guardians ad Litem are trained volunteers who investigate needs of abused and neglected children whose parents work through legal problems. They recommend to the court services in the best interest of the children. 641-4034



"Dear Mom, I'd like to apologize to you for the years 1960 through 1963..."

changing and, well, pleading. I'm begging for peace and quiet, and taking what I can get. At one point, all three of my beloved children team up on me in full-throat, and above the cacophony of screams I can faintly hear the soothing sound of a gentle jazz melody on the radio. Drowning in the surreal, I laugh. I laugh like a madman.

Feeding, feeding, feeding. Just how much can these kids drink? But every time I think how excessive this is, I realize just how realistic it is. By the end of the night I am exhausted. C'mon, I am only a man.

And I have it easy. As realistic as these are, they cannot compare to caring for a real-life human infant. Just ask my co-worker, Hanne.

"I tell you, what's really scary," she says, "is when they wake you up in the middle of the night screaming and you don't know what's wrong, and you're wondering if you should take them to the doctor."

Yes, my experience was mild compared to having a real baby. There were no fluids involved, no smells and no college fund to worry about.

I cared for three e-babies for (almost) 24 hours, but a real mother or father will have to spend 24 hours each day being that child's parent, worrying about its health with the constant knowledge that everything they do shapes its future.

Also, these will never simulate the real beauty of biological parenting. I mean, can anything really compare to holding a bundle of your own DNA in your arms?

Those times when things had settled down nicely, and the babies rested quietly – like when I had one on the bed beside me as I was daydreaming, and I could hear her quietly breathing – something was alive there.

Not really, but in that quiet moment I sensed what it might be like to have another human, a young and fragile human, in your care, and I guess I felt, even slightly, the wonderful gift of being needed.

### The Report

Well, how did I do? My three little children were spies the whole time, recording how many times I missed their feedings or diaper changes, or I didn't burp them or hold them right, or dropped them on their heads (I didn't), or how much they cried.

"Will they tell you how much I cried?" I ask Christy as she downloads the report. She pats me on the head and tells me, with obvious amazement, that I did very well, and I think about someday holding a real-live six-pound darling of my own in my arms, and I wonder if maybe I might be qualified for such an assignment.



"Thank you, Officer Cribb. I appreciate you caring so much - I really should have my children safely secured in my vehicle. Whoa, a \$135 ticket? I should have bought car seats!"

"But I just changed your diaper!" • "I mean it this time!" • "C'mon guys, one at a time!" • "What!" • "I just fed you!" • "What now!" • "Will you please go to sleep?" • "Please?" • "C'mon, eat. I'll give you a dollar." • "Hey kids, I got needs too, you know!" • "Speak English!" • "Can I please have some peace and quiet?"

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