**17 Weeks of Baby Bliss: Sleep, Growth, and Parenting Wins S5|138**

Welcome to a captivating new episode of Sense by Meg Fora. This week we're catching up with Julia again. She's our regular guest and the mom of two and we're going to be diving into the wonderful world of 17 week old babies through her little daughter Aurelia's journey.

Well let me tell you, you are in for a treat because in this episode we're going to explore why this age is just so super cute and how you can make the most of these precious moments. We're going to chat about the magic of serve and return, and we're not talking about a tennis match here, but just as important because it's all about your baby's social and emotional growth. And if you've ever wondered if you are responding too quickly to your little one, well we're going to discuss why it sometimes does pay to wait and listen.

So for those who are battling with night feeds, we've also got you covered on that front because Julia covers her experience of dropping a night feed and just how that affected Aurelia's sleep. So trust me, you really do want to hear this section. We also go on to tackle the infamous 17 week sleep regression and I share some strategies to help you prevent this before it hits.

And then we also delve into the fascinating topic of gender differences in babies and is it nature or nurture or is it actually just our perceptions as parents. So whether you're a first-time parent or a seasoned pro, this episode is absolutely packed with insights and it'll leave you feeling more confident and connected in your parenting journey. So grab a cup of coffee or whatever floats your boat and join us for some heartwarming moments and some practical tips.

You don't want to miss this one. Welcome to Sense by Meg Fora, the podcast that's brought to you by ParentSense, the app that takes guesswork out of parenting. If you're a new parent, then you are in good company.

Your host Meg Fora is a well-known OT, infant specialist and the author of eight parenting books. Each week we're going to spend time with new mums and dads just like you to chat about the week's wins, the challenges and the questions of the moment. Subscribe to the podcast, download the ParentSense app and catch Meg here every week to make the most of that first year of your little one's life.

And now meet your host. Welcome back mums and dads. Really awesome to have you here with me.

I am Meg Fora and this is a podcast where we chat with other mums or experts about all topics revolving around early parenting. So everything from pregnancy through to preschool. And one of my favourite parts of the podcast is to actually track a mum over a very long period of time.

And if you listen to season one, you'll know that the mum we tracked during season one and part of season two was Cassidy and her little boy Max. And for season five, we have been journeying along with Julia and her little girl Aurelia. And it has been a wonderful journey.

We literally recorded our very first podcast a couple of days after she was born. And so it has been really, really exciting to track her along her journey. So I am going to welcome you back today, Julia.

Welcome back. Thanks Meg. Lovely to be here as always.

Excellent. So how old is little Aurelia now? Today is 17 weeks. Oh my word.

Can you believe it? I can't believe it. Over four months old. You're not saying it out loud.

Yeah, it's very odd. It feels very strange. I know I've said it over and over again, but it really is whizzing by.

Yeah. And it's an interesting age, the 17 weeks, because just so much shifts between about 12 and 17 weeks. They move out of that newborn phase, less crying and fussing, a little bit more settled.

We feel like we're getting on top of things. And just as we feel like we're really getting on top of things, things start to shift again. Things like weaning and sleep regression and behavioral changes often happen at around about this time.

So how has your week been with Aurelia since we last chatted? Yeah. So yeah, I'm hyper aware of that shift being on its way, I must say. But so far we've been lucky.

I'm not counting my chickens just yet, but she's really thriving and I'm starting to see her personality, which is lovely. She's just an absolute delight to spend time with. I think in reality, I struggled with Santi the first, I mean, in reality, the first two years of his life were incredibly tough for me.

I spent a lot of time with him, but it was really, really hard and not sleeping. And he had reflux and it was just kind of one thing after another. And I didn't have a chance to really enjoy it, if I'm perfectly frank.

So with this second baby, I'm just a much more present, I'm much more relaxed. She's sleeping quite nicely at the moment. She doesn't have reflux, just these things all kind of combined to make the whole process a bit more pleasant.

So it's really interesting when you talk about that, because my experience from one to two was identical to yours. My first was a boy, super busy, complete sensory seeker, loud, noisy, busy, had to work on his sleep. He also was more fussy in the beginning.

And then along came my little girl and she was just unbelievable. I mean, slept through early and just super, super easy. And I really, really enjoyed motherhood a lot more, although I did enjoy being a mom first time round.

And I experienced that classic primary maternal preoccupation. I think it was more enjoyable with Alex, with my second child. What's interesting is that because my research at that time comprised two children, I factored in gender very strongly.

So I thought this must be what girls are like. So boys are hectic, girls are easy. And that was the way it was.

It was very much kind of the way that I looked at it. And then when I fell pregnant with my third, I had calculated my dates and I had worked out that I was going to have a boy. And I can remember sitting on the toilet, sobbing and thinking, I don't know if I can do this again, because as much as I'm completely obsessed with my son and still am, I just didn't see how I could possibly do that busyness and that level of anxiety, fatigue, the whole lot.

And then along came Ems and she was completely different to my other daughter and actually much more like my son. And then I realized, hold on, this is not a gender thing and it doesn't have something to do with me because, or potentially it does a little bit and we can talk about that, but it has a lot to do with their sensory personality. And so I then started to work out actually sensory personality and self-regulation, which are two innate capacities of babies actually drive a lot of this more so than place in the family and gender.

Although I do think that moms first time round have heightened anxiety, which might contribute to a little bit more angst in the whole story. But really, really interesting. The more children you have, the more actually you start to realize that there are a lot more facets to a human personality than what simply meets the eye.

Yeah. And certainly much more complex than simply whether they are a boy or a girl. Anecdotally, all of my friends love to talk about how girls are so easy and they don't move around as much and they're much less challenging and boys are these kind of hectic, on the go all the time creatures.

And certainly so far in my journey, and it's obviously only been four months with Aurelia, but that has turned out to be true, but that doesn't make it universal fact. I think it absolutely has to do with their personalities and that kind of classic nature nurture debate. There's no question that who I was when I had Santi had an impact on my mothering journey and who he was and who he was, especially as a little baby.

And in the same way, the same thing's happening with Aurelia, but I am a different person now. So that's definitely something that's at play. So there are kind of three things that, you know, three factors, and of course there are a million more factors, but the three factors we're talking about here, the one is gender, the other one is sensory personality, and then the third one is our mothering capacity.

On the gender thing, I mean, although I say that Emily was more similar to James, there is definitely a boy energy that girls do not have and a need for proprioception and kinesthetic input and a busyness that is on another level. And that I think I've seen in almost every boy and most girls, not all girls, most girls, even Ems, who was more similar in sensory personality to James, but even she has never ever done what he's done in terms of sensory seeking and risk-taking. So I do think that there are gender differences and, you know, it's quite interesting because, of course, the, you know, the whole gender debate will say that gender has more to do with how you nurtured, and if you nurtured both children the same, they would turn out exactly the same, but I don't believe that's true.

I do think that male and female children are actually different, just that men and women are different, and I'm personally of the thought that we embrace that rather than, you know, try and make us all exactly the same and, you know, pretend that we can all be identical. So I do think that there is something in that debate. I do think that.

Yeah, it plays the role for sure. I mean, it can't be something that so many people have in common that it's not a factor. So, yeah, the energy levels are intense with boys.

Yeah, absolutely. And then there's, of course, the first-time mum versus, you know, and there definitely is a factor there where, you know, first time round you're a little bit lost, which is fine, but very often in our modern systems we don't have support, which we would have had 150 years ago, and so we're very isolated, and that does increase our levels of anxiety because we're carrying this load, what we call the weight of responsibility on our own, and when our anxiety levels are up, our heart rate variability goes down, and I think I've mentioned to you previously that there was some very interesting research. It's on my LinkedIn if anybody wants to have a look at it.

On the 13th of August, research came out looking at the impact of heart rate variability on infants and their sleep and their mood and what they did find was that mums who are anxious, which means your heart rate variability is low, have little ones who are more fussy, more irritable, and, of course, it works in the opposite direction as well, but the reality is that first-time round we are, we're lost, and so that will definitely impact our firstborns compared to the next. Yeah, and I think, you know, when people talk about, again, it's something that anecdotally I hear a lot about, second babies being easier, quote-unquote. You know, I think that it's obviously, it's a huge amount to do with your confidence as a parent and your experience, so I think that, you know, that's also very much part of the picture.

It certainly is, absolutely, and then the other thing that I found that happened between one and two, which you might have found as well, is that with one, my husband, Philip, who's been a very involved dad, to a great extent the buck did stop with me because there was, you know, we outnumbered the baby, so, you know, if somebody, if there was always, you know, we had to decide who was going to do what, you know, and so inevitably often it would fall to me because he was the breadwinner at the time. When it comes to two, you're outnumbered almost, so they have to step in, and in some respects for mom, that means actually your load is slightly less because looking after a newborn can actually, we don't tell everybody this, but it actually sometimes be easier than looking after a toddler. Yeah, so actually I do, I do think it's easier because you've got, you've definitely, your husband has to or your partner has to muck in properly with two.

Yeah, and I think, you know, for me the main difference between one and two, and there are lots of differences, but the biggest thing for me was that with one, your life has been turned upside down and shaken out already, you know, the changes are dramatic from zero to one. I mean, I'm even thinking back on it now, it's so extreme, that change to your lifestyle, and I think a lot more for the mom than for the dad, it must be said, or certainly in the traditional kind of parenting setup. And the second time around, there's just much less change to be had, so it's just more of the same, so it's just not such a shock.

Yeah, absolutely, and your expectations are slightly different. Have you found that your expectations are different this time around? Yeah, absolutely, I think I'm, I have far fewer ideas in my head of what to expect. My expectations as a person, I tend to have them be low because I don't like disappointment, but I also think that I am more familiar with what to expect, so the nature of the expectation has changed as well, and also that I don't need her to be any one thing, whereas I think with Santi, I'd done all the research, and the reading, and the courses, and I had this very black and white idea in my head of how things were going to go, and if I did X, then the result would be Y, and I learned very quickly that that is not the truth, as much as I wish it was.

So I think with Aurelia, it's a bit more relaxed, and a bit more, okay, well, she's screaming, and I've checked all the obvious things, and I can't figure it out, so we're just going to wait until it ends, and I'm going to problem solve until I'm blue in the face. Yeah, absolutely, and you know that goes through the whole of life, and I wish that I could say that you learn that don't sweat the grade one drama, and whether or not they've chosen for a sports team drama. With hindsight, you should be able to say, well, you know that you mustn't sweat all this more stuff, but you still do it with your firstborn, and your second born is just, yeah, you just don't.

So that is why I think position in family does make a difference. Our firstborns are very often highly driven, focused, very serious, very responsible, because they have grown up in a bit more of an amped environment, and so what have been some of the joys of the week, because this is a very cute age. This episode is brought to us by Parent Sense, the all-in-one baby and parenting app that helps you make the most of your baby's first year.

Don't you wish someone would just tell you everything you need to know about caring for your baby? When to feed them, how to wean them, and why they won't sleep? Parent Sense app is like having a baby expert on your phone, guiding you to parent with confidence. Get a flexible routine, daily tips, and advice personalized for you and your little one. Download Parent Sense app null from your app store, and take the guesswork out of parenting.

And so what have been some of the joys of the week, because this is a very cute age. Yeah, I mean, she is ridiculously cute. I mean, I know you've seen a lot of babies in your time, but I'm sure you will agree that she's the most beautiful baby you've ever seen.

She is just extremely delicious, and she's cooing a lot, that's a lot of chatting going on, which is really lovely, because that two-way communication is so satisfying, and it makes being with her such fun. And so she's really engaging, which is just adorable, and like watching her when she sees Santa, her whole face lights up, and she looks at him, and she gurgles, and it's, oh, it just absolutely kills me. It's so sweet.

So that part of things is just wonderful, and really kind of warms my heart at the moment. And that is such an important part, because when we look at social-emotional development, your first responsibility as a baby, as a human, is to be able to stay calm generally in the context of stimulation, and that's why they're a little bit unsettled in the evenings, and they have those little patches when they're less than 12 weeks old. But your second emotional stage, which is the one that she's in now, is the falling-in-love stage.

And you have to fall in love with human faces, human minds, human engagement. And so that's why this is so important, to watch for these coos, and these laughs, and these turning towards somebody when they walk into the room. And then, of course, that lays the foundation for what then comes up, which is serve and return, which is you coo, she coos back, or she coos, and you coo back, and then you pause, you wait, you listen, and then she coos.

And it's interesting, because that serve and return, I don't know if you play paddle or tennis, but if you play paddle, you will know, and everybody seems to be getting into it now, but you will know that facing off those balls is a thing of timing. You have to slow down sometimes to let it land or come off the wall, and then you have to go faster at it sometimes. And so that timing is so important.

And it's exactly the same with serve and return with human interactions, is that we've really got to get that timing right. And sometimes when we see little ones who are battling socially and emotionally, and particularly little ones who are going to be on the autistic spectrum, there's a mismatch in the timing between the parents and the baby. And parents need to learn to slow down, to wait for the signal, not to rush over their child, not to always make noises and kind of bombard them, but actually to give them the opportunity for them to engage as well.

So that all happens now. We've done the falling in love, and now we're into the serve and return, which is amazing. Yeah, that's so interesting that you say that, because it's something that I was kind of noticing when I'm having these kind of conversations with her, you know, I have to kind of consciously leave the gap for her to respond and not just kind of constantly kind of babble in her face.

You have to coo a little bit and then wait, and then, you know, two seconds later, she'll join the conversation, and it's really sweet. But yeah, I know you have to create the space for that. That's true of lots of things.

You do, absolutely. And that, you know, and I think it's one of those things where a very engaged and loving parent can just get that one little piece wrong, because it really, in order to take the time and to be very reciprocal and to take turns, you have to be very conscious. You have to be noting that it takes them time to piece it together, to make that little sound.

And I don't know if you've had that thing where you can see she makes her mouth into a position and she's like almost concentrating so hard to get the sound out, the coo out, and then it comes out all wrong for her. And, you know, it's, and then they get surprised by their own sound of their voice. I mean, it's such a cute edge because they really are starting to piece together how to communicate with somebody.

Yeah, you can just see the cogs turning when you have those little chats, because also it's so intimate. You're looking straight into their eyes. You're generally very close together.

It's a real moment. It's awesome. And you know, what's amazing is they've actually put electrodes onto mothers and children's or caregivers and babies' heads to watch which of the neural circuits are the ones that are lighting up inside the brain.

And what they found absolutely fascinatingly is that when you're having these conversations and you're sharing an emotion of delight or of sadness or just of concentration, it's exactly the same circuits that actually activate through the brain. And they've called what they become known as mirror neurons, that the neurons in our brains actually can mirror what's happening in somebody else's brain. And what's really interesting about it is that those mirror neurons are also the things that fire up when, if you're watching TV and you're not even in the situation and there's this romantic piece or the sad conversation and somebody's crying and you kind of feel it as well, you're also having those mirror neurons.

So it's an incredible innate capacity within human beings to really connect with the emotions of another human being. And that's what's going on for her. Yeah, sure.

We are fascinating creatures. Fascinating little scientists. That's what we are.

Wonderful. So that's the delight of the age. Last time when we chatted, we talked a little bit about how she was sleeping.

And of course, this is the stage where often we start to see the light at the end of the tunnel, they start to sleep through and then sometimes that can become a little bit scary again. Where are you with sleep at the moment? Because I think, if I'm not mistaken, she was having a dream feed and then sleeping through until about one or two. Am I correct? Yeah, that's right.

So big news. Very exciting. We dropped the dream feed.

I'm extremely proud of myself. Look, I figured what's the point of having you on the other end of the phone if I'm not going to take your advice, right? So we essentially, for some reason, I decided to do it the week my husband was away for work. So that was perhaps not the best timing, but actually it was okay.

So I just took the bull by the horns and had made the decision and I put her to bed that night at six o'clock. And that first night she woke up at, instead of obviously being fed at 10, she woke up naturally at about, I think it was about 11 o'clock. At which point I tried to settle her, but I could tell she was kind of needed a bottle.

So I fed her again and then I think she woke up at four or something like that. And we essentially went through this process. Yeah, she went through this process where that time moved from 11 to 11.30 to 12 to 12.30. And very, very quickly, which is often the case, to be honest.

And I remember this was Santee as well. I'm terrified of making a big change, especially with something like sleep. But then I kind of do it and inevitably it's actually, it works out quickly and easily and much better than I anticipated.

So yeah, within a few days, she is now, I think it's been about 10 days now that and she now wakes up, goes to sleep at six, doesn't make a peep until normally between half past 12 and one. So she gets her bottle then and that's just a lovely quick process, 20 minutes in and out. And then I have to wake her at six, nine times out of 10.

Wow. She is doing brilliantly, Julia. And I think often parents think they must do the dream feed because if anybody wants to know, go back and listen to the previous episode with Julia.

But the reason parents think they should do the dream feed is that if they get that feed in a 10, their little one will then, they won't have to wake up at a terrible hour, like one or two, but inevitably you're going to wake up at that time anyway. So what you were doing was 10 and between one and two. And effectively now, you're still doing the one and two, which you were doing anyway, but you're not doing the 10.

So she's dropped and now what will happen? And the reason I am so, and you know, it's quite different because a lot of parenting advisors do say, the dream feed, but actually what ends up happening is that you, you impact on their own natural way to actually link their sleep cycles by waking them. And inevitably either they get hooked on it and it's difficult to drop, or they actually get dependent on the feed because they learn that when they're awake, they need to have this feed. So, you know, I think I'm not waking a little one as soon as they're gaining weight and letting them wake you, you know, during the night, they will start to push it out naturally and what you'll find from now.

So what to expect is an interesting thing because people at 17 weeks do get anxious because the 17 weeks sleep regression. So if all things go well, she should now start to move that one 30 to two to three, and then move it out to four. And then eventually by six months old, it'll be at 5am and have basically been sleeping through.

What does sometimes happen is that they slip another one back in at 10 o'clock suddenly, which really or 10 or 11, which completely throws you because it's not what you what you're wanting. The important thing with that feed is first of all, don't listen, don't respond immediately, just listen, just just listen to her see what she's doing. And if she's kind of making a little bit of a noise, don't go in.

But if she's really crying, obviously, you then will go in and respond to her. That's number one. Number two, try and settle her with any other method other than feeding.

So that would be potentially popping a dummy in potentially patting, turning her on her side reswaddling her if she's still swaddled, which is unlikely, but you do whatever it takes to resettle her. And then the third thing is you then as long as she's gaining weight nicely, you then give her some a little bit of cold boiled water. So this is a very uninteresting feed to wake up for you give a little bit of cold boiled water as long as she's gaining weight.

And then fourth, if she if she will not usually what they'll do is they'll fall back asleep and wake 20 minutes later or an hour later, whatever, and it's super frustrating, then you're going to give her the milk. But try and just move through those four phases first, and then you give her the feed. And then you continue through the rest of the night.

What I don't what I don't recommend people do is dummy, dummy, dummy, dummy all the way until whatever time they woke up the night before, which is often what we do, what we do is they've made it till 2am, they've made it to 3am. So anything before then, I'm just going to dummy them. And the problem with dummy, dummy, dummy until three or 4am is that's when you start the habits developing because then they start to get a dummy habit.

So it's much better rather to feed on the second waking if they've been working. So listen, and resettle, cool boiled water, feed in that order, you know, as she needs it and see how that goes. And usually by doing that, we're giving them enough opportunity to learn to self soothe, which is of course what this is all about.

Yeah, okay, that's good advice. I'm going to keep that in my mind for what's to come next. And it might not happen.

You know, I mean, one of the ways to avoid it happening is to make sure that every feed day and bedtime, she falls asleep without milk. And that's, you know, I think that's important, you know, she has milk, but she is put down awake, but drowsy. Because where we often see the four month sleep regression or 17 week sleep regression, really becoming a problem is if we're feeding to sleep in the evening, because then they learn at this stage that the only way they can get to sleep is with the sucking of milk.

So just make sure that all day sleeps and bedtime, she's putting herself to sleep. And then you actually might not see it happen at all. Yeah, um, look, I'm, I'm hopeful.

I think with Santi, he was also pretty good at going down kind of drowsy, but awake for all of his feeds. And then things went haywire. But she Yeah, at the moment, that's certainly the case.

And I've because I think also, it helps that she's been in her cot from day one. So and I, you know, I kind of know the theory. So I had always put her down awake, sometimes she's not even drowsy.

Sometimes it's just awake. And so she's always sort of had to go through those motions herself. And actually, she handles it quite well.

So hopefully that that helps going forward, but time will tell. It can make a huge difference. Yeah, I'm interested that you had her in her own bedroom right from the get go.

I did that with my little kitties as well. And you know, there's so many different opinions on it. And I mean, as you know, I'm definitely one for there is no one size fits all.

And any anybody who says that baby should be doing X or Y is wrong. Just they are wrong. They some babies and moms want their baby in their bed in the bedroom and others like you and I wanted our little ones in their own nursery.

And my reasoning for that, which is probably the same as yours is that I sleep better. And I'm a better mom when I sleep when I sleep between feeds. And that was my rationale.

And I knew my baby was safe. I had a monitor on. And she was her bedroom was very close to mine, I could respond to and I did respond.

But having her actually listening to all of her noisy baby noises while she was sleeping, I just I couldn't do it. So I was very much probably on the same page as you. Yeah, no, no, I there was absolutely nothing to be gained by listening to her shuffle all night, to be frank.

So yeah, and you know, I, I like my independence of a weird thing to say, but I'm quite happy to be in my own space. In fact, I quite crave my own space. One of the things that I was actually worried about thinking about having kids was that invasion of your space, which is inevitable, and there is nothing to be done about it.

And it's certainly something that continues, especially the Sunday. And but you know, the thing is, the fact is, you love them. So actually, most of the time you welcome it.

But you know, I do find that where I can, I like to make my own space because it helps me stay sane. Yeah, absolutely. And keeping your own space is such an interesting concept, because I am the same.

And I have always from the time little ones were born, prioritize mine and my husband's relationship as well. And because I always knew that the kids would one day exit and mine largely have. But he would always be there.

And I wanted to make sure that that that was preserved. So we always had things like I mean, we did ever since James was five weeks old, he was my firstborn. We had Thursday night date nights.

And we just always did it. It was you know, it was a thing that we would get in a babysitter, even when he was little, he was just five weeks old, we just went out for like 20 minutes, whatever it was, grab some takeaways and eat, eat wherever we were, and come back home. But we've always done that.

And I just think it's, you know, and then as the kids got older, when they when they went into preschool, we have both of our moms were very, very involved. And so they would come and move in for us to go away for one week every year alone together. And we've just always done that.

And yeah, I mean, it's too early for you now. But certainly, you know, they or maybe it isn't. I mean, it's very personal.

But especially if you've got good caregivers. And you know, I mean, my kids, all three of them were brought up by three mothers and a father. So there was me, there was my mom in law, my mom, sorry, four mothers and our nanny who was was completely consistent.

And all of us understood everybody signals, we all knew the routines and our children's upbringing was very, very consistent. And then of course, it was Philip as well. So yeah, I've always prioritised and maybe that's selfish, maybe people that could be criticised, but I have always prioritised my independence to an extent as well.

Yeah, I think it comes back to whatever works for you. And I personally don't think that it's selfish. I don't prescribe to the concept of mom guilt either, to be honest, like, I don't know what there is to feel guilty about when you work so hard to be a good parent.

But yeah, I also I for me, literally this morning with a friend of mine at gym, we were laughing because she was saying she and her husband are going out for a date night tomorrow. And it's the first time and they can't even remember how long because her kids are a little bit older. And so she doesn't have a nanny anymore, because they're all kind of, you know, school going age.

And she was saying to me, like, she knows that I will go on a date night once or twice a week, because we have such wonderful help at home, that I can leave the kids quite easily in the care of our nanny. And we can pop out whether it's for an hour down the road or to a party for four hours, you know, it's something that's easy for us to do that we love to do. And we still really want to make a point of doing so we're lucky that we can but it's also a thing that does also keep us sane.