

SINCE my daughter was six months old, I have been trying to snatch some me time without much joy, writes Simone Castello.

Don't get me wrong, I love her dearly and I have lots of fun playing with her but I don't get to do much at home, sometimes even being able to wash the dishes is a miracle. Michela is now over 11 months old and can crawl.

She touches everything and I feel like a prison guard-cum-bodyguard as I watch her navigate the rooms. It seems that no amount of baby proofing makes any difference to her security – like all children she is fearless.

I have been reading about the subject to see if some expert would come up with some clever idea.

Books and articles on baby websites assure me that from six months a baby can play with her toys while mum can potter around the house, so all you need to have a happy baby is a playmat and colourful, educational toys. Many mums second this advice and have normal lives now, but so far nothing has worked for me for longer than 10 minutes.

Add this to the fact Michela never sleeps much during

the day and goes to bed at 8-9pm (a few months ago it was 11-12pm) and you will realise I am dead meat by the evening.

I have tried lots of things and I am sharing them and other mums' tips with you in the hope something will work for you:

Musical mama

I have found two activities that keep her on the mat for a bit longer: listening to a cassette with me doing nursery rhyme karaoke and getting her a little piano thingy to bash.

Obviously I am not Pop Idol material, but she likes me to sing and when I don't have the energy to oblige, the tape will do well enough.

Baby is watching you

Mum Gemma suggested that household chores can be a bit more entertaining if the baby watches you do them. Kitty said this worked well for little babies if they were put in a bouncy chair so she can see what mummy is doing and Andrea put hers on a rug and gave her a running commentary as she went about the kitchen.

Shells and quality playtime

Alison said that her babies loved chewing shells. She also added that the trick to get your baby to play on his/her own is to make sure you spend proper time playing with them and giving them attention.

If your attention is a l w a y s

How baby (and save



divided, then you get frustrated because you can't do your thing and they get upset because they never get to play with you.

There is no way you can expect your baby to amuse herself for two hours a day but she might be happy with 20 minutes at a time every couple of hours.

The treasure basket

Jane's daughter was six months old and very clingy when Jane heard about this idea - which worked wonders.. Take a basket (or low-sided box) and put in lots of



to keep happy your sanity)



interesting objects that can safely be gummed - like a lemon, wooden spoon, a big shell, an old CD, a shoe horn, whatever you have around the house that has an interesting texture, shape, and is suitable for babies.

Then all you have to do is change the things in the treasure basket every now and again to keep it interesting.

She also collected another great idea from a baby group - fill small plastic see-through bottles (eg water bottles) with beads, coloured paper pieces, rice/lentils, or water and glitter... and put one in the treasure basket.

Kitty also suggested using a big tupperware box for a treasure basket. The clips of the box should be strong enough for it to be a bit of a challenge to open but easy enough to be achievable.

The Blue Peter approach

Julia was fresh from a sensory needs course and suggested differently textured pencil cases filled with things like squeaky things, bells, rice, pasta etc and sewn up to make them safe; laminates that are ironed on three sides (with a sheet of paper on top to protect the iron), filled with two paint colours then sealed with the iron again - that feels

wonderful and the paints gradually mix together; keyrings with loads of different shapes and textured things attached; inexpensive colour baskets with matching colour items inside like balls, scarves and toys.



Cupboard love

Another trick is to have a couple of cupboards or kitchen drawers at her level full of things she can pull out and play with.

Wear your baby

Andrea found that putting her 7 month old into a sling and doing the hoovering worked fine. She added that mirrors are a source of total fascination - from 8 months to 13 months her daughter would sit and chat to her reflection and be utterly delighted by herself for up to half an hour!

Bouncy

Mary used a baby bouncer, which she'd hang in the kitchen's doorway and the baby could have a good bounce and watch while she cooked dinner. Another tip is to have the baby in the high-chair and let them have various utensils to play with.

Just pass them a new one whenever they get bored.

Let's get physical

Helen signed her son up for baby swimming lessons. After each lesson he was shattered and fell asleep for at least an hour and a half.

The chocolate trap

Emma suggested leaving the baby drumming on a tin full of chocolates while mum gets on with the housework. As babies can't unwrap them they just get a chocolately mouth - and lots of fun - trying. Emma added that she doesn't advocate this as a regular standby!

Techno boy

Fiona showed her one year old how to put tapes in the video machine - he picked it up straight away and loved to put them in and out! She found that as long as they showed him 'how' to do something, he was less likely to mess anything up.