The Pacifier Effect

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Some of you know that I watch movies a lot - it's my one major vice. I don't do TV, or sports, or anything else that involves a television-style tube unless there's a keyboard attached. But I watch a lot of movies. Given that, with this type of addiction, I can't watch the same ones over and over again, I tend to see a lot of offbeat flicks. One that showed up here a few months ago was a Bill Pullman thriller called "The Zero Effect." Unfortunately, there's nothing in The Zero Effect – a cult drama about a recluse who did the Sherlock Holmes detection bit to an extreme – that has to do with this month's scribbles. I just wanted to use the title – so here's my chance!

The average American family has two kids. A lot of one, a lot don't have any, some have three. Four isn't uncommon, but the quantity still raises eyebrows. And five or more – well, don't get me started on why I want to have six. The point is that not many people have direct experience with a family of four or more kids. And there's a phenomena that doesn't manifest itself fully until the fourth shows up. Here's how it goes.

After the first kid is born, and eventually is old enough to take a pacifier, its parents are, of course, understandably anxious, and so to protect the newest addition to their family, go to great lengths. This includes boiling the pacifier before giving it to the baby – it must be clean, of course, free of any type of germs. Then they fret to get it positioned into the kid's mouth, and then fret some more each time their precious spits it out. Some first-timer parents go so far as to keep a kit with multiple pacifiers handy; after all, once the baby spits out the first one, say, onto their food tray, or, heaven forbid, an ordinary table that may not have been washed for hours, you can't very well just put the pacifier back into their mouth, can you?

The second kid gets nearly the same treatment. However, with a second kid, there's just not the same amount of free time – so the boiling of a pacifier is usually replaced with running it under hot water and drying it off. Nearly good enough. By the end of the term, cold water will suffice in an emergency. With number two, though, the parents are tired of having to keep a supply of clean pacifiers at hand, so they succumb to one of those pacifier straps that attaches to the shirt collar or overalls strap.

The third kid, well, these are experienced parents. This means the parents have now seen the wide variety of junk the kids have managed to stuff in their mouths while the parents weren't looking. They've survived without major trauma so far, and it appears that the boiling or thorough washing of the pacifier may have been overkill. And, besides, who's got time anymore? So you brush it off on your shirt or your jeans, and stuff it into the kids' mouth. If they spit it out, there's bound to be another kid handy who'll think it's fun to play fetch.

Along comes baby #4, and, frankly, even trying to clean it off is too demanding. So the experienced parent of four inspects the pacifier, decides that "it's not THAT dirty", and hands it to the kid, who, hopefully, can figure out how to get it into their own mouth.

So how does this factor into a newsletter about software development? Well, customers (or users) are a lot like kids. The first time you get one, you fret and spend untold hours worrying about every little thing. The second one is nearly as big a deal – after all, twice is not a trend, and you don't want to blow it with this second one either. But eventually you get used to them, and each successive one becomes less and less a big deal.

There's a danger here – though – you don't want to take them – the next kid or the next customer - for granted. Just because you've been through the bike riding lessons or teaching them to drive a car or dealing with their first boyfriend time and time before doesn't mean that these events are any less important for kid number four.

And just because you've been around the block a few times as a developer doesn't mean that you can treat your next customer or user as if their concerns are unimportant – to them, it's their first time. While you may have a bit more wisdom, and thus not worry to death the details as much, you still want to pay

attention to the small stuff with each and every kid – and customer. Cuz it's all small stuff – and it's all important to them.