

THE GIFT OF THE GOOD ENOUGH MOTHER

By Carla Naumburg

Usually when I hear the phrase “good enough mother*,” it’s either by those who see “good enough” as “not enough,” or by mothers who are using it as an explanation for why they aren’t the perfect mother.

Unfortunately, for both our children and ourselves, both of these explanations totally miss the point. The process of becoming the good enough mother to our children happens over time. When our babies are infants, we try to be constantly available and responsive to them. We do what we can to help them feel better. We teach our children that they are seen and heard and that they will be cared for.

The thing is, we cannot sustain this level of attentiveness to our children forever, nor should we. That is precisely the point. The way to be a good mother is to be a good enough mother. Children need their mothers to fail them in tolerable ways on a regular basis so they can learn to live in an imperfect world. Every time we don’t hear them calling us right away, every time we don’t listen as well as we should, every time we make them share when they don’t want to, we are getting them ready to function in a society that will frustrate and disappoint them on a regular basis.

Children need to learn, in small ways every day, that the world doesn’t revolve around them, that their every request won’t be honored, and that their behaviors impact other people. They need to learn—through experience—that life can be hard, that they will feel let down and disappointed, that they won’t get their way, and despite all of that (or perhaps because of it) they will still be OK.

If our children never have these experiences—if their every need is met every time—they will have no ability to manage the challenges that will inevitably arise. They won’t learn that it’s okay to feel bored or annoyed or sad or disappointed. They won’t learn, time and again, that life can be painful and frustrating and they’ll get through it. In short, building our children’s resilience is the gift of the good enough mother.

There’s one other important point we need to remember about the good enough mother—she’s not only a gift to her children, but she’s also unavoidable. It is, quite simply, not possible to do better than good enough. Perfection is not an option. Even if it were somehow possible to be the perfect mother, the end result would be a delicate, fragile child who couldn’t tolerate even the slightest disappointment. None of us want that for our children.

Each time we let our children down, and they get through it, they get just a little bit stronger. That is the gift of the good enough mother, and it’s time we all embrace it.

