

Parent Toolkit:
PARENTING

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.

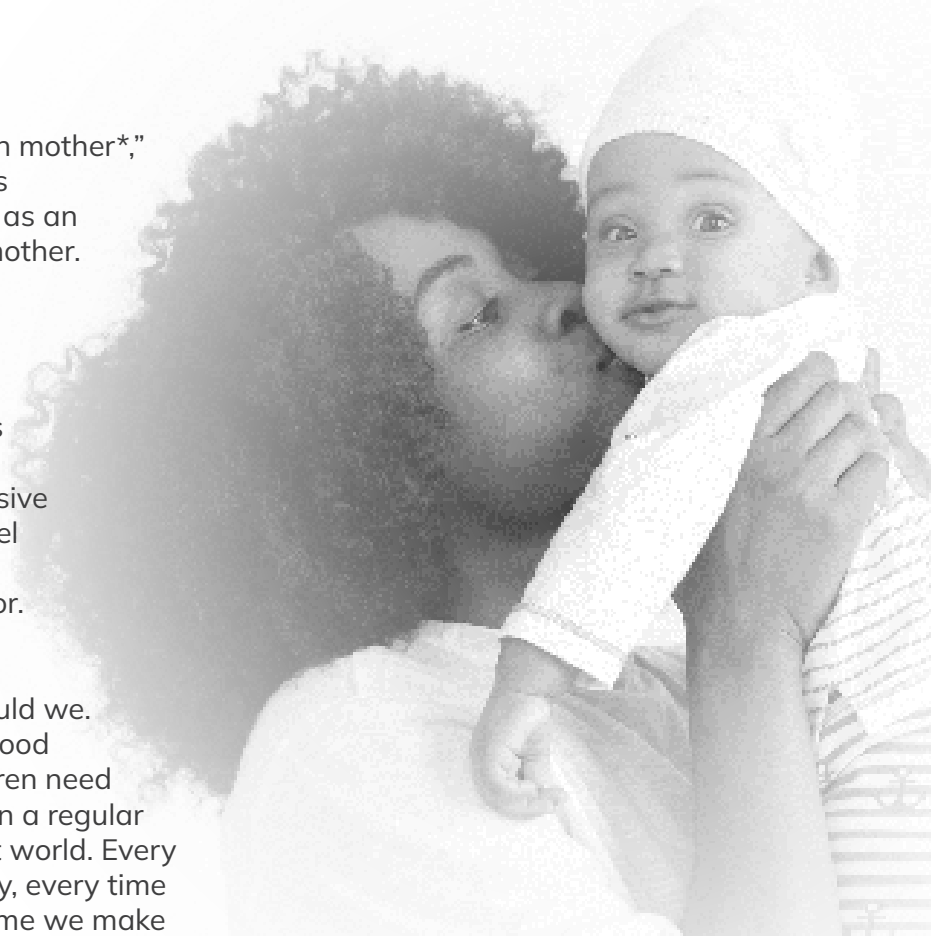
The thing is, we cannot sustain this level of attentiveness to our children forever, nor should we. That is precisely the point. The way to be a good mother is to be a good enough mother. Children need their mothers to fail them in tolerable ways on a regular basis so they can learn to live in an imperfect 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.



MYTHS OF MOTHERHOOD

MYTH

FACT

| | |
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| You should enjoy every moment of parenting/mothering. | Not every moment of parenting is enjoyable--some moments are downright miserable, and that's okay! Your enjoyment of any given moment of parenting does not define your worth as a parent. |
| Moms like their babies all the time. | Children can be confusing and frustrating at times, but feelings in a moment do not represent your overall bond with or care for your child. |
| Breastfeeding is natural and therefore should come to you naturally. | Breastfeeding requires skill on the part of the parent and the baby and for some can be very challenging. The ease with which breastfeeding does or doesn't come to you and your baby does not determine your worth or skill as a parent. |
| Asking for help is a sign of weakness | Humans were not meant to parent alone! Traditionally, people lived in close proximity to family or friends that would provide support. Receiving help helps you to be a better parent. |
| There is a right way and a wrong way to parent. | There are many parenting styles, and all children respond to parenting styles differently. There is no one right way to parent. |
| We are shorting our children when we take care of our own needs. | Taking care of our own needs allows us to be more present and able to enjoy the time we do spend with our children. |
| Breastfeeding is the best way to be bonded to your infant. | There are countless ways to bond with your infant. You are not putting you/your baby at any emotional disadvantage if breastfeeding is not the right choice for your family. |
| A good mom bonds with her baby immediately. | The speed of bonding is variable from parent to parent and pregnancy to pregnancy, and there is no "cut off" for bonding at which point your relationship with you baby will be irreparably harmed. |
| Mothering comes naturally. | Mothering is a skill just like any other. Some of us may start out with more "skill" than others for various reasons, but these skills can be learned in due time. |
| A good mother loves being a mother. | Being a parent can be extremely challenging at times, and take us away from other parts of our lives that we previously greatly enjoyed. Good parents don't have to love being a parent all the time. |
| All mothers are coping better than I am. | Because of shame/stigma, many parents are not up front about the challenges they are facing. Parenting is challenging for everyone. Period. If someone looks like they never struggle, it's just because they're not sharing the hard parts. |
| The best way to give birth is naturally without medical intervention. | The ideal way to give birth is in a way that minimizes harm to mother and baby, and this is not always possible naturally or without medical intervention. |
| A good mother knows how to instinctively care for her baby. | All babies are different. They all have different preferences and different cues and some are pretty tricky to figure out! Good mothers do not always instinctively know what their child needs, but they are always striving to understand their baby's needs better, something that requires practice and dedication rather than instinct. |
| A desire to be an employed/working mother means I am less committed to my kids. | Just like each baby has a different temperament and different interests, so do parents! If a parent is happiest when they are free to pursue their passions outside of the home for work, that is likely also when they are able to be the best version of themselves for their child when they are at home. |
| A desire to stay at home with my kids means I am better suited to remain outside of the workforce. | Some parents may be torn between staying at home with their children and going into the workforce. However, staying at home is not the default "right choice" for everyone and it is possible to cultivate just as loving and close of a relationship with your children if you work outside of the home. |

THE NEWEST PARENTING SKILL: SELF-COMPASSION

If you take care of yourself, you'll be happier and better at taking care of others.

By Kristin Neff, PhD

The work of parenting involves caring for and meeting the needs of another human being 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And like all demanding professions, burnout is a hazard of the job.

What is self-compassion?

We are all used to working on our self-esteem by asking ourselves, “Am I being a good parent or a bad parent?” The problem is that having high self-esteem is contingent upon experiencing success. If we don’t meet our own standards, we feel terrible about ourselves. Self-compassion, in contrast, is not a way of judging ourselves positively or negatively. It is a way of relating to ourselves kindly and embracing ourselves as we are, flaws and all.

There are three core components of self-compassion:

1. Treating ourselves with kindness: When we fail to meet our own standards, we are often much harsher and more cruel to ourselves than we ever would be to a friend, or even someone we don’t like very much. Self-compassion reverses that pattern. In moments of difficulty or when making mistakes (especially when making mistakes), you treat yourself as you would treat a good friend in the same situation – with encouragement, sympathy, patience, and gentleness.

2. Recognizing our common humanity: When something goes wrong, we often view it as abnormal. “I shouldn’t have taken so long to get ready in the morning, making my daughter late for school. Parents like Karen are always on time.” You end up feeling isolated in your suffering when, in fact, our imperfections are exactly what connect us all. Self-esteem prompts us to ask, “How am I different than others?” Self-compassion involves wondering, “How am I the same?” And the answer is that we are all imperfect. There are probably many moments when Karen makes a mistake or gets things wrong, and that’s what makes you both humans and moms.

3. Being mindful: In order to be compassionate to ourselves, we need to be able to recognize that we are suffering. Paying attention to how we talk to ourselves and treat ourselves in challenging moments lets us see that we are hurting and that we need to give ourselves love, too. Think of all the self-inflicted turmoil and stress we cause by constantly criticizing our imperfections: “I’m such a slob and the house looks like a pigsty.” or “I’m too bad at math to help my son with his home practice.” Once we notice and become aware of how painful and counterproductive these self-attacks are, we can take another approach - being kind and supportive to ourselves when we don’t meet our parenting ideals.

One of the things unique to mammals is that we are programmed to respond to warmth, gentle touch, and soft vocalizations. That’s what keeps vulnerable infants close to their mothers and safe from harm. So when we provide that kind of touch and calm reassurance to ourselves, we actually reduce levels of stress hormones and boost the feel-good ones. Then we feel safe, comforted, and in the optimal frame of mind to do our best.

And that, of course, is every parent’s goal. One from which we will fall short time and time again. But that is the beautiful, messy lesson of human experience. And if we are able to recognize that and keep our hearts open to ourselves, we can be more open-hearted with everyone else, especially our kids.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

A village, meaning a community that we hope to share our joys, our responsibilities, our struggles and our lives. Communities where we know one another and can ask for help with ease; where we watch over one another. However, the village may be difficult to find at a time we need it the most.

In the absence of the village...

We put too much pressure on ourselves to make up for what an entire group of people once supported. And while we attempt to meet these unrealistic expectations, we do so at a time of life when we are tired, without clarity and feel a sense of isolation.

Without the village...

We convince ourselves that we must make up for lost interaction and learning opportunities that once existed within our own neighborhoods.

Our sense of well-being suffers...

It is an unfair expectation that we should feel confident, joyful and courageous at a time when our needs are going unmet. The absence of this village reflects in our image of ourselves and it is difficult to name. Without naming the lack of support, we begin to believe we are inadequate and must do more.

When we name the absent village...

We can reset our expectations and be clear that we are not the problem. When we feel a lack of support and community it is only natural that we feel a sense of loss, lack of confidence, low mood and loneliness.

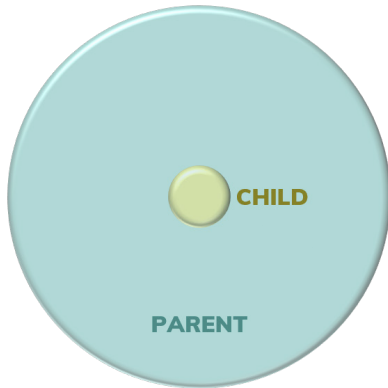
Transitioning from isolation to action means we must grieve the loss of our village and move towards the wish to create the community that best supports us.

- **Honor your needs.** Many mothers enter this transition with unmet needs while they are expected to focus on caring for others. Speak your needs out loud. Even if it comes out with uncertainty. Your needs are important. The chance of getting your needs met increases when you speak about them.
- **Practice connecting.** Connection and relationships are necessary for our health and happiness. It takes courage and effort to begin new relationships and continue to foster current connections.
- **Acknowledge your strengths.** Use your strengths to connect with others. Finding people with common interests and experiences can help us feel full and engaged in our lives.
- **Set your limits.** Mothers are frequently encouraged to care for others and do more than their part. Remember to set your limits and leave room to care for yourself.
- **Practice Self Compassion.** Make space to care for yourself and make sense of your experiences. It will help you clarify your needs.



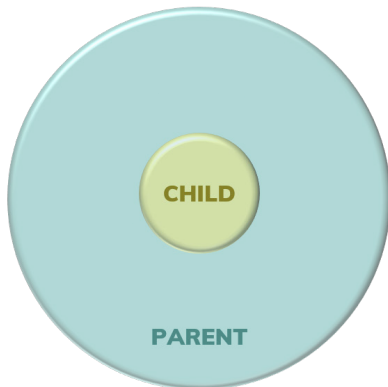
CO-REGULATION

Children are not born with an ability to manage and regulate their emotions, so they rely on their parents for co-regulation to different degrees throughout the course of their life.



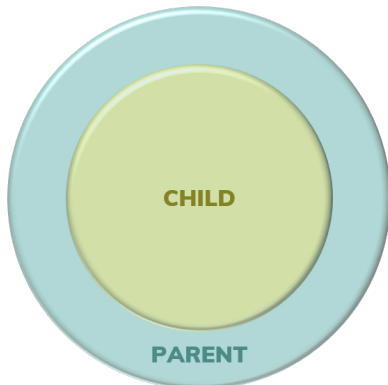
INFANT

Parent regulates the child's feelings and behavior



PRESCHOOL/ SCHOOL AGE

Child and parent regulate feelings and behavior together



OLDER CHILDREN

Child regulates feelings and behavior with parental support

The child's capacity to regulate feelings and behavior and their core sense of self develops over time like the rings in the trunk of a tree develop year after year.

SPECIAL PLAY TIME: PRIDE

Praise
Reflect
Imitate
Describe
Enthusiastic

Goals using PRIDE:

- Create connection, enjoyment and warmth in play and communication.
- Finding opportunities to lead and follow.
- Engage child in individual and group play.
- Increase the child's self-awareness and self-esteem.
- Increase attention and awareness to the play task.

| Do Skills | Definition | Rationales | Examples |
|----------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Praise- Labeled | Stating specifics about what you like about child's play, behaviors, accomplishments, words, cooperation, or personality. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates connection and warmth • Increase positive interactions • Increase self esteem • Provide clarity about desired behavior | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great job stacking the blocks • Wonderful job sharing with friends! • I like the way you are playing with an inside voice. • Thank you for asking with your words. |
| Reflect | Repeating or paraphrasing what the child says | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Places the child in the lead of communication • Reflecting your interest to the child • Demonstrates acceptance and understanding • Increases communication and speech. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child states, "The turtles are fighting" and shows the turtles hitting. • You respond: "The turtles are not happy. They are using hands to hit." |
| Imitate | Doing exactly what the child does or joining with the child in play. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permits the child to lead the play • Teaches cooperative play. • Shows interest and approval towards the child's play ideas | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am making a tower, just like you. • Oh, I love your idea. I am going to share my blocks with James also. |
| Describe Child's Behavior | Talking and describing aloud about what the child is doing. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforces child-led play • Models speech • Increasing attention to the play task • Organizes the child's thoughts and activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Here we go, you are flying the plane in the air. • The baby is crying, now you are feeding the baby. |
| Enthusiasm (use it) | Show excitement, enthusiasm, playfulness, and interest | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holding interest of child • Creates joy and connection | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Playful words • Animated body language to match words |

Credit: Parent-Child Interaction Therapy Book by Cheryl Bodiford McNeil and Toni L. Hembree-Kigin, 1995