

The Gift of the Good Enough Mother

OUR KIDS NEED US TO FAIL SOMETIMES

"I am not ok with being with a good enough mother. I work too hard to settle for that."

One of my closest friends (and one of the most devoted mothers I know) said those words to me a couple of years ago, and I've never forgotten them. On a personal level, I was heartbroken to realize that my friend was putting so much pressure on herself. On a professional level, I was saddened to see that once again one of my favorite parenting and child development theories had been totally misunderstood.

Usually when I hear someone use the expression "good enough mother," it's either spoken by mothers like my friend, who equate "good enough" with "not enough," or by mothers who use it to explain why they aren't the perfect mother.

It's become about whether we cook a multicourse meal every night or bring a holiday craft project and snack in for the entire preschool class. The good enough mother is now a failure to be avoided or an explanation for not having done better.

Unfortunately, for both our children and ourselves, both of these explanations totally miss the point.

Children actually benefit from imperfect parenting

The phrase "good enough mother" was first coined in 1953 by Donald Winnicott, a British pediatrician and psychoanalyst. Winnicott observed thousands of babies and their mothers, and he came to realize that babies and children actually benefit when their mothers fail them in manageable ways. (I'm not talking about major failures, such as child abuse and neglect, of course.)

The process of becoming a good enough mother to our children happens over time. When our babies are infants, we try to be available constantly and respond to them immediately. As soon as they cry, we feed them or snuggle them or change their diapers – in other words, we do whatever it takes to help them feel better. This is important because it teaches our children that they are safe and will be cared for.

The thing is, we can't sustain this level of attentiveness to our children forever, nor should we. That is precisely Winnicott's point. He believed that the way to be a good mother is to be a good enough mother. Children need their mother (or primary caretaker) 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 give them our undivided attention, every time we feed them a dinner they don't want to eat, 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 behavior impacts 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 always 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, and 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 ok to feel bored or annoyed or sad or disappointed. They won't learn, time and again, that life can be painful and frustrating, but they'll get through it.

In short, building our children's resilience is the gift of the good enough mother.

Perfection is not an option

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. I don't need to explain to you that it's just not possible to meet every single one of our child's needs, whether it's another bowl of macaroni and cheese, a desire to cover the wall with marker, or a wish to stay up all night watching Dora episodes.

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. No mother wants that for her child.

The reality is that either we are good enough or we aren't, most of the time. If we're not good enough, then we may be letting our children down in myriad unpredictable, possibly irreparable, ways. If we are good enough – which I believe most of us are – then we mostly get it right, and sometimes we get it wrong. Our children may feel annoyed or frustrated or sad because we have let them down, but in that moment, in those many small moments, they learn that life is hard, that they can feel terrible, and they will bounce back.

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.