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Flawed & fabulous moms: Why great parenting isn't perfect

by Rachel Sarah

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"That sure was fun!" I said to my 6-year-old daughter recently as we were leaving a birthday party at a local bowling alley.

But my daughter was pouting. "You didn't see my strike," she said.

"Yes, I did, honey," I said. "I saw all the pins go down."

"No, you didn't," she stomped her foot. "You were talking to the other mommies. You didn't even look at me. All you do is talk, talk, talk."

The pang of guilt hit me hard. She was right: I *was* talking to the other moms when it was her turn. But I did look up just as all the pins toppled over. Was it too late?

Ah, my precious kindergartner has learned how to push my buttons. And guess what? It often works.

That's because I want to be a good mother. What mom doesn't?

Good, better, best

A good mother. This phrase sparks enthusiasm, hope, the glow of positive intentions. After all, we moms by our very nature are driven to do right by our kids.

Paula Spencer and her kids

So what is a "good mother" — how much flexibility have we got in there? Is there an official scorecard? Am I "the best mom I can be"?

"'Best' and 'mom' are two words that shouldn't be used in the same sentence," says mom-of-four

Paula Spencer, author of the forthcoming book *Momfidence! An Oreo Never Killed Anybody and Other Secrets of Happier Parenting* (Crown/Three Rivers Press, 2006).

"Raising kids isn't like trying to make a 4.0 or win a race," she adds.



Hilary Miller and Nicholas

Unfortunately, in too many minds "good mother" means "perfect."

"Absolutely, I feel like I have to be the perfect mom. There's a lot of pressure to have your child be exposed to as many learning and growth opportunities as possible — make them an uber child by being an uber parent," says Hilary Miller, account director at a marketing company in Denver, Colorado, and mother of Nicholas.

"It's unrealistic to think you can work full time, spend lots of quality time with your kid, be at all the playdates, birthday parties, and sports games, cook the healthy dinners, help them with homework. But whatever you're doing, it can feel like it's still not enough," she adds.



June Cleaver had it easy

Motherhood long ago moved beyond just keeping a tidy house, cooking square meals, and giving hugs. Today's bar is high: making sure the kids are physically healthy and emotionally fulfilled, their lunchboxes and dinner plates are full of the best nutrition, their weekends busy with enriching experiences — all while we hold down anything from a part-time job to a full-time career. But being the Martha Stewart of motherhood just isn't reality for most of us.

Who cooked up these crazy expectations anyway?

Well, while we were napping, paparazzi photographed another dozen celebrity moms to be lauded in next week's issues. Pictures of them lovingly toting their offspring are flanked by quotes from "anonymous friends" about how devoted they are, how delightedly they change diapers. The celebrity herself notes how fun and fulfilling it is making organic baby food, and how motherhood is wonderful and she can't wait to have more. And all the while she manages to film movies, organize fundraisers for charitable causes, and appear on Jay Leno.

Are these the new Stepford moms?

Actually, the nanny was cropped out of the photograph, you can't see the bags under the celebrity's eyes thanks to her giant sunglasses, and the paparazzi missed her meltdown in the car minutes earlier when she couldn't get little baby Orchid Moonflower out of her car seat.

And next week, she'll be raked over the coals for not putting baby sunscreen and a hat on Orchid for that perilous trip from the house to the car.



Sophia Raday and son

Who asked the experts?

As our society becomes more child-centered, parents feel more and more in the service of their children — and more pressured to do everything right. There's a pervasive sense of blame that tells us, no matter how your kid turns out, all his flaws point back to you: The wrong kind of discipline, the wrong foods, the wrong reading materials, even what you eat during pregnancy will affect your child. Is it any wonder we want to be "perfect"? We want to stay off the firing range!

We now know more about the long-term consequences of our parenting, and the pressure's on. Our parents didn't have Oprah and Dr. Phil to show them where they screwed up, but we do — and they're constant reminders of the risks of getting it wrong.

And of course, we know that no matter what we do, somewhere years from now in a therapist's office, our child will be talking about us. A lot.

But there's also a sense that modern life is competitive, expensive, and more difficult and we have to give our kids every advantage to succeed. So is it any wonder that more and more experts are weighing



Sherri Helwig and Taggart

in on exactly the right way to parent — and we're eating it up?

Thousands of parenting books are in print — just look on Amazon.com and try to count. Book titles such as *Coaching Your Kids to Be Leaders: The Keys to Unlocking Their Potential*, *Developing Your Child's Emotional Intelligence: Self Control by Age 3 in 10 Simple Steps*, and of course, *How to Really Love Your Child* (just in case you weren't sure) can make it seem like no matter how well you think you're doing, there are still more mountains to climb to be the ultimate parent.

"No one knows your child better than you do. Everyone can give advice on what they think we're supposed to do and it should be taken as just that — advice," says Colleen Newman, mother of two in Westminster, Maryland, and founder of My Baby and More Parent Coaching and Educational Services.



Colleen Newman and Wes

"Parenting advice books can be a wonderful resource — if you don't take them too seriously," says author and mother of four Paula Spencer.

She urges moms to "scan and skim" advice books, but discourages them from "trying to follow a whole style of parenting with its own label: attachment parenting, proactive parenting, scream-free parenting, or anything involving a prescribed schedule."

"Use them to give you a big picture of things like child development so you have a sense about what's normal child behavior, or to find ideas on how to solve a particular problem, such as colic or toilet training," Spencer explains. "Compare the advice across a number of different books and don't fall into the trap of thinking any one has all the answers."

Mom versus mom

It's not just external forces putting pressure on moms, though. Unfortunately, we also judge each other.

"Moms who work look down on moms who don't and vice versa," says Miller. "I had people saying, 'Why didn't you breastfeed longer?' 'Why is he in daycare already?' and 'Ooh, I didn't leave *my* child alone during his first two years.'"

"We need to appreciate people's different ways of raising their kids," she adds. "Mothers are constantly criticized. But you have to do what's true to your heart, and that's good parenting. Everyone will have opinions on what's right and wrong, and there's nothing to say what you're doing is right or wrong, but we're all giving it our best, really."

"We need to support each other to do the best we can, even if our choices are different from other moms'," says Rebecca Kaminsky, mother of two boys in Berkeley, California, who writes about her experience with postpartum depression on the Web site [Literary Mama](#).

Still, each woman interviewed for this article agreed that *she* is probably her own biggest critic.

"I'm hard on myself with everything," says Darcel Harmon of Cleveland, Ohio, who also suffered from [postpartum depression](#) after having her daughter, Nakiah, two years ago. "But I also realize that I'm still learning and I'm the best mom I can be to my daughter."

We've got to lighten up on ourselves.



Mom of twins Karen Spring

"I'm so *not* perfect," laughs Karen Spring, mother of 3-year-old twin boys in Deptford, New Jersey. "I used to feel guilty about disciplining my twins, but now I realize how important it is," Spring adds. "A timeout isn't hurting anyone now and then. I also try not to panic over every little fall, bump, and bruise. My boys are both smart, well rounded, and speak exceptionally well and I secretly say to myself, 'Geez, despite everything, you must be doing something right.'"

Leslie Crawford, mom of two in San Francisco, California, says, "Personally, I've found that when I let down my 'I must be perfect and have a perfect family' guard — whether it means having a messy house, letting my son be grumpy, or letting my daughter cry — all is better in the end. It's more relaxed; we all are."

Stop the insanity!

Many moms, like Jen Lawrence, mother of two in Toronto, who blogs at [MUBAR \(Mothered Up Beyond All Recognition\)](#), admit that they're "often checking the clock" after a long day with the kids. And then, "I feel guilty that I am not totally present when I'm with my children," adds Lawrence. "When I feed my 6-month-old son, I often spend the time sketching out a blog post in my head rather than gazing into his eyes."

"For a long time, guilt was my middle name," says Karen Putz, who lives in a suburb outside of Chicago. "With my first two kids, I tried to do everything by the book. I made sure the house looked great, the kids were served delicious meals, and I stayed on top of everything like a hawk. But having a third child changed that."

After giving birth to her third, she stopped trying so hard and "started looking within. Today, I'm much more relaxed as a mom and I don't try to prove anything for someone else. Instead, I have my own goals and I'm living my life as a mom in a way that's good for *me* as well as my kids."

The mothers interviewed agree that there's at least one winning solution: Ask for help. Spread the responsibility around. It's supposed to take a village after all, right?

"You don't have to do *everything*," says Karen Spring. "When you have your baby, let others help you out wherever and whenever. And if people ask what they can do to help, never say, 'Nothing.' When people walk in your door, if they ask if they can help, tell them what to do, whether it's folding your clean laundry, emptying your dishwasher, feeding the baby, giving the baby a bath, whatever it is. Let people bring you meals, hold the baby when it fusses, or straighten up your kitchen."



author and daughter Mae

Parenting experts agree that mothers need to be supported and encouraged. Doris Jeanette, a psychologist in Philadelphia who works with mothers, says, "They need to trust and go in the direction that they know is correct for themselves."

Give me a break



Mom Yvonne Lefort

Yvonne Lefort, mother of an 8-year-old son in Moraga, California, and facilitator of the mothers' group [Rediscovering Yourself in the Midst of Motherhood](#), says, "Many moms feel guilty about taking time for themselves."

"But moms need breaks!" she says. "They need to nurture themselves so they can be better moms. Too many moms let themselves run on empty. Being a good mother also means taking care of yourself so you can give more of yourself to your children."

Indeed, it won't actually do your kids any good if you're stressed about being the perfect parent. Taking care of yourself is a priority. It's the "airplane oxygen mask approach": Put on your own mask first so you can better help whoever's sitting next to you.

In fact, a study published in March 2006 concluded that a mother's mental health directly affects her kids. Kids whose moms were treated — successfully — for depression were much less likely to become depressed themselves. But if the mom's depression continued, her children were more likely to become depressed, too.

"If you have a depressed mother, you ought to do everything you can to get her better, because there's a double effect," says study author Myrna Weissman, a professor of psychiatry and epidemiology at Columbia University and the New York State Psychiatric Institute in New York City.

But Hilary Miller says she thinks it's not fair that we're only "allowed" to take care of ourselves because it has an impact on the family. "Hello, people forget you're not just a mother — you're an individual who deserves to have a life and take care of yourself, too."

"You are important as a woman and an individual, not simply as a mother and wife," agrees mom-of-ten Kathryn Sansone in her book *Woman First, Family Always: Real-Life Wisdom From a Mother of Ten* (Meredith Books, January 2006). "During 18 years of marriage, with children, I've learned that if a woman gives up an aspect of herself — either the woman in her, the mother, or the wife — the other two facets will suffer."



Kathryn Sansone and family

Moms are often expected to be martyrs. But we also buy into that role. So how do we put out that self-roasting bonfire?

"As with anything important, taking care of yourself requires both conscious commitment and action," says Sansone. "Taking care of yourself means staying focused on your priorities while at the same time giving yourself a break when you need to."

Sophia Raday, mom to a 4-year-old son in Berkeley, California, is married to a policeman and Army Reserve colonel who works very long hours. She gets "me-time" by planning dinners with other mother friends. "The kids entertain each other and the parents can have a glass of wine and do that stop-and-start-and-stop-again conversation thing."

Michelle Combs, mother of two sons in Costa Mesa, California, says that taking a break doesn't necessarily mean being away from your kids. "Playing basketball with my boys or singing lame karaoke songs at the top of our lungs helps me to blow off some steam — without having to drop them off at a sitter's," Combs says.



"The one thing that no one ever told me was that being a mother is the hardest job you will ever have," says Cindy Kuehnle, mom of a 1-year-old son in Waldwick, New Jersey. "I don't think there is any way to prepare for it, just try to set realistic goals for each day. And don't forget to give yourself a break."

This includes forgiving yourself — daily, if needed. "You're gonna screw up, but you have to remember that it's not the end of the world," says Miller. "Let it go. Move on. I turned out okay, my husband turned out okay, I think our kids are going to be okay, too."

Cindy Kuehnle and Eamon **The BabyCenter Seven: Wisdom for Happier Mothering**

1. We all have guilt — just don't let it take hold. "Every mom has her own tailor-made set of guilt triggers," says Paula Spencer, mother of four. "I think we feel guilty precisely because we are so well intentioned and want to do the best we can by our kids. I don't think it's entirely possible get rid of guilt — you just have to stop taking it seriously."

2. Sharing makes you realize you're not alone. "Seek out support," says Colleen Newman. "By sharing with others you'll be reassured that you're not alone. Don't be afraid to talk about how your toddler flushed your razor down the toilet. They will probably tell you about the time their toddler used their toothbrush to clean the toilet! Laughing about the absurdities of parenting makes everything a lot easier."

3. Your instincts are just fine. "Good parenting comes from the heart and gut," says mom Elaine Whitesides of Michigan. It's not about being perfect, she explains, but simply living by "the golden rule" of treating others the way you want to be treated.

4. It's a learning process. "I learned to take care of myself gradually, and I continue to learn valuable lessons about how best to do that," says Kathryn Sansone, whose children range in age from 8 months to 18 years. "Now, ten children and 19 years of marriage later, I can say that on most evenings when my husband walks through the door, I can smile."

5. Taking care of yourself is important. "Do one thing each day that nurtures you," says Yvonne Lefort. "Take a bath, go for a walk, listen to your favorite music, make yourself a cup of hot tea, call a friend, read a chapter from a good book, buy a new lipstick! Do something nice for yourself each day, even if it's only for a few minutes."

6. You are doing your best. "We are all doing our best, even when we fall short," says Sybil Lockhart, mother of two girls, ages 5 and 9, in Berkeley, California. "Since we can't do any better than our best, we may as well call that perfect."

7. Your kids will be okay — really. "I just look at how well he is doing," says Sherri Helwig, mother of a 4-year-old son in Scarborough, Canada. "Although I sometimes wonder if this is actually *because* of our faults rather than in spite of them. When our son sees us make mistakes — and take responsibility for those mistakes and fix them — I think he learns a valuable lesson."

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