



Dear Friends,

This article came to my attention recently and I think it is one that all of us need to remember from time to time.

Parents Don't Have To Be Perfect!

By Brad E. Sachs, Ph.D.

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In previous generations, being a good enough parent seemed simpler than it is today. If mom kept a clean house, volunteered for the PTA, and baked cupcakes on her kids' birthdays, she was doing great. If dad offered up firm discipline, provided sufficient financial support and was around from time to time to play a game of catch, he was A-O.K.

Now the definition of good parenting is far more complex and the demands on people's time are excessive. I can guarantee that there are moments when you don't feel like a good enough parent. Just remember, when it comes to raising children, there is no such thing as perfection.

Parenting is more art than science, and being a good mother or father depends less on what you do and more on the spirit in which you do it. That is why acknowledging that you are far from perfect, that you have made mistakes and will do so again, is so essential. Here's how to deal with the doubt every parent faces.

LET YOUR FEELINGS FLOW

Being a loving parent doesn't mean that we will always feel loving. Sometimes we are more likely to feel like a dry ravine where the river of affection has, for mysterious reasons, ceased to flow. This can be very disturbing to most of us who had expected those warm waters to flow perpetually.

Every parent feels a natural ambivalence. Yet we are expected somehow to be unfailingly understanding and supportive, which deprives us of the opportunity to experience any spontaneity in our emotions and makes it equally difficult for our children to be open to the full range of human feelings. Mothers and fathers who feel that they constantly have to be on "good behavior" – never distracted, impatient, or disappointed – place great pressure on their children to be the same way, which can be quite constricting.

The reality is this: Breaks and ruptures in your empathy for your child are normal and they have a hidden payoff. They help normalize your child's own breaks and ruptures, so that she knows there is nothing permanent about them, or anything to make her feel that she is a bad person.

All of us suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous offspring, but the anger and resentment we feel are not the opposite of love – indifference is. That is why we have to create an atmosphere of tolerance for the complex mixture of feeling that is an unavoidable part of family life.

KNOW YOUR LIMITS

Well-meaning parents are sometimes convinced that being a good mom or dad means being constantly attuned to their child's every thought and feeling. Yet such attunement is neither possible nor desirable. Pursuing it too conscientiously robs a child of the experience of sorting out her own interior struggles and uncertainties which is crucial for developing self-respect.

We might hope that trying to discuss and put into words each nuance of what our kids are contending with will immunize them against feeling any loneliness, fear, or ache, but these feelings are part of the human condition, and to some extent need to be accepted as such rather than avoided.

Good communication between parent and child is of supreme importance, but teaching a child how to think, feel, and act on one's own is equally vital. Of course, you should be there for your youngster, but sometimes you have to step back and let her work out her problems on her own. Doing so will help your child feel confident in her connection with people, but also comfortable about being independent and different from others.

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ALLOW FOR DOUBT

Child rearing is too elaborate an endeavor to insist on clear-cut certainty and consistency. The sheer variety of situations that we are confronted with in workaday family life makes it unlikely that we'll always follow through on our tightly held convictions. Often, we will be hard-pressed even to remember what those convictions are.

The fact is that some introspection and flexibility has real virtue. By not being rigid we teach children the value of their persistence model open-mindedness, foster their ability to think, and help to conserve our energy for larger battles. Giving in from time to time or providing children with the opportunity to persuade you to do things their way will not harm them. On the contrary, you are more likely, ultimately, to build their capacity to work in partnership with others.

LET THEM GO, LET THEM GROW

Most of us were taught to believe that by being very vigilant and attentive, we could avoid, or help others to avoid, injury. But being overly cautious and protective of our children can actually increase their vulnerability to harm, in the sense that they won't develop the self-confidence and savvy necessary to handle the many surprises and setbacks, challenges, and choices that life will inevitably present.

Leaving them with a difficult teacher for a semester rather than rescuing them by insisting on a transfer, giving them the chance to be coached by someone other than yourself, going away for a long weekend and leaving them with a capable babysitter are all legitimate ways to help instill in your children a sense of faith in their capacities.

THINK CHANGE, NOT BLAME

A guilt-drenched parent always raises a guilt-drenched child. Constantly blaming yourself for your parenting mistakes is like taking the wrong medicine: You keep swallowing it in larger doses, hoping it will produce results. But of course it never does.

There is nothing wrong, and much that is right, with recognizing that you made a mistake as a parent. This insight is most useful when it's seen as information that can be used for self-growth rather than self-indictment.

Therefore, a good parent should apologize when she's overreacted or made a mistake. The best way is to say you're sorry and also point out the behavior that contributed to your anger. "I shouldn't have screamed at you, but when I repeatedly ask you to turn off the TV and do your homework, and you ignore me, I find it difficult to control my temper." Nobody feels good when she has unloosed her fury on a child, but it can carry with it an important message: "If you are consistently going to behave inappropriately or uncooperatively, you will generally not like the consequences." When kids can find some meaning in parental rage, their sense of security will be only temporarily shaken rather than significantly impaired, and feelings of closeness and trust can be restored, often at a higher level.

Parents who can remind themselves to understand and accept their weaknesses teach their children that the essence of being human is to continuously fall short of our goals, and yet to keep striving just the same.

FORGET ABOUT THE JONESES

Comparing yourself to other parents does nothing but erode self-esteem. You may be measuring how you stack up against a friend, a neighbor, a colleague, a sibling, or a grandparent, but no matter who it is, you're bound to feel badly in the process.

No other parent had the same childhood, or has the same child as you do, so it's pointless to try to assess your standing by looking through the lens of someone else's life. Besides, it's impossible to know what really goes on in another family. While it's easy to imagine that parenting comes to others a effortlessly as breathing, what I've seen is that raising a child brings even the most self-confident people to their knees at some point, whether they admit it or not.

There's nothing wrong with a little healthy competition with other parents if the result is that it motivates you to be the best mom or dad you can be. But beyond that, it's always best to trust that despite your fantasies about your counterparts, you are the parent your child was destined to have. Go ahead and act in ways that make good on that trust.