



Being Mom Enough: The Mom Your Children Need, the Woman You Want to Be

Mother's Day is right around the corner, a time to honor all you women who are doing what often is described as the most wonderful and most difficult job there is. As moms, we often feel pressure to measure up to idealized notions of motherhood – to be all, do all and even *buy* all for our kids. But is that what our children really need? For 10 years, as mother-daughter co-hosts of the weekly audio-show *Mom Enough*, we have worked to challenge some of the myths of motherhood and bring research-based information (along with some personal confessions and a good dose of emotional support) to help moms like you (moms like us!) figure out how to be “mom enough,” the moms our children need, the women we want to be.

What Does It Mean to Be “Mom Enough”?

As moms, most (if not all) of us walk a fine line each day between being “mom too little,” “mom too much,” or finding that sweet spot of being “mom enough.” Thank heaven, research shows that children do not need perfect parents! But they do need a level of emotional availability and warm, sensitive care that is “good enough,” a phrase coined in the early 1950s by British pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott. As child development research continues to show, from infancy to adulthood, there are certain key elements children need in order to thrive and grow up well. As summarized below, those are the elements of being “mom enough” (and “dad enough” too!).

- **A Secure Base**

Babies thrive when parents respond sensitively to their cues and signals, fostering a strong sense of security. Within safe, predictable, loving relationships children develop trust in others and confidence in their own ability to express needs and solicit the care they need. Soothed and comforted at times of distress, young children begin to develop the ability to calm themselves and, over time, to regulate emotions and impulses. Self-regulation is central to a child's ability to focus attention, accept direction and get along with others – essential skills for school and life. Throughout development, moms and dads continue to be a child's secure base, a place the child can return for love, comfort and guidance.

- **A Rich Language Environment**

This means talking to children long before they can talk back; engaging children with stories, songs and rhymes; asking “why” and “how” and “what if...” questions that stretch the children's minds and vocabularies; and introducing children from the earliest months of life to the wonderful world of books.

- **Opportunities for Free Play and Exploration**

Infants and young children are naturally curious and eager to explore. They learn and advance their own development through active exploration and mastery of the world around them. Especially with encouragement and sensitive guidance from parents (but not over-direction!), young explorers build motor skills, cognitive concepts, confidence, initiative, creativity, problem-solving and positive social skills.

- **Limits with Love and Logic**

Even though children often raise a fuss when their desires are thwarted, without limits they feel insecure and overwhelmed by their impulses. Without clear limits, young children will be hard-pressed to learn to set reasonable limits for themselves as they get older. To learn and grow optimally, young children need limits expressed in clear, developmentally appropriate language; simple reasons that teach the value behind the limit (e.g. “That’s dangerous” or “He feels sad when you take his toy”); natural or logical consequences when they violate limits; and recognition and encouragement when they behave positively. (Catch them being good!) These lessons are magnified when, after children misbehave, parents help the children think about what they could have done differently and what they can do the next time a similar situation arises.

- **Opportunities to Contribute**

Children thrive when parents give them opportunities to discover what they can contribute to the wellbeing of their family and community. From the toddler who gently pats mom's back when she doesn't feel well or the preschooler who does his part to clean up after free play, to the fourth grader who reads to the kindergartner or the high school student who launches a conflict resolution program, young people need to be allowed, encouraged and supported in identifying and using their unique qualities and skills for the common good.

What About Being “Mom Too Little”?

The key elements children need – the elements that a “mom enough” provides – may sound simple. But, even when we know these things are important, it isn’t always easy to provide them in the midst of our complex, challenging lives. As we listen to the struggles of parents around us – and as we experience the struggles in our own lives – we see several things that often trip us up and cause us to be “mom too little.” These include:

- Hurried, stressful lives that sap our energy to be emotionally available to our children and lead us to react rather than respond thoughtfully to our children’s needs
- Intrusions of ever-present technology, both in our children’s lives and our own, which often interfere with the high-touch, face to face interactions that keep both children and adults healthier and happier
- A lack of a strong support network for ourselves, leaving us in an emotionally depleted state that makes it difficult to give our children what we don’t have for ourselves
- Our own childhood history, especially if we did not experience good enough parenting ourselves. (The good news, though, is that research shows that it’s not so much how you were parented that determines how you parent your children, but it’s how you have come to think about your history. As we have learned in our own family, therapy and supportive friends can help us reflect honestly on our past, choosing the things we want to leave behind and the things we want to carry forward. This has been the focus of much of Marti’s research and work with high-risk families and she has written about it in many of her professional publications.)

What About Being “Mom Too Much”?

Over the last two or three decades there seems to have been a cultural shift toward “helicopter parenting,” overprotecting and over-directing our children to the point where they don’t have a chance to build their own skills to navigate life’s ups and downs or to use their own creativity and initiative to plan their own activities. Related to that, many of us end up doing so much for our children that they don’t learn how to do for themselves. A friend of ours who was director of a mental health clinic in Sweden refers to “curling parents” who sweep away all the snow so the curling stone glides smoothly over the ice. Although our intentions may be good when we try to create a smooth road for our kids, we deprive them of crucial learning experiences when we yield to the temptation of being “mom too much.”

Another facet to being “mom too much” is succumbing to the myth that a woman must sacrifice herself to be a good mother. So sometimes we feel guilty when we take time for ourselves – “me time,” as we call it. But research shows that both moms and children benefit when mothers maintain interests, activities and accomplishments that go beyond the role of mom. Moms are healthier, happier and less stressed when they make time for themselves. And when children see their mom engaged in a career, further education, community service, favorite activities and close friendships, they are inspired to do the same. Although there are times when parents need to put their children’s interests ahead of their own, it is not necessary to put the rest of your identity on hold and just be “mom” until your children grow up. You also will do better as an empty-nester and as you age if you have maintained strong interests and a good support network.

Join Us on Our Mom Enough Journey!

Bottom line is that a “mom enough” maintains a full, rich identity as a woman – just like you are doing by joining us at “A Night Out for ME.” We look forward to seeing all of you beautiful women again next spring. Meanwhile, we hope you will listen to our weekly shows (a new show posted every Monday) and check out other resources at momenough.com. We welcome your comments on our website and our Mom Enough Facebook page. We are honored to have you with us on the journey to being “mom enough” – the moms our children need, the women we want to be!

Marti Erickson, Ph.D. & Erin Erickson, MPH, MN, RN
Notes from their A Night Out for ME[®] presentation
A 10-year Anniversary Celebration of *Mom Enough*[®]
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