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The Good Enough Parent

Why Research Supports Imperfect Parenting Over Perfectionism

In our age of intensive parenting, social media comparisons, and endless expert advice, many parents feel enormous pressure to be perfect. But what if striving for perfection is actually harmful—both for you and your children? Research increasingly shows that "good enough" parenting produces healthier, more resilient children than perfectionist approaches. This handout summarizes the science behind why imperfect parenting is not just acceptable, but ideal.

What Is "Good Enough" Parenting?

The concept of the "good enough mother" was introduced in 1953 by British pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott. After observing thousands of mothers and babies, Winnicott concluded that children actually benefit when their mothers fail them in manageable ways.

According to Winnicott, the good enough parent:

- Starts with almost complete adaptation to an infant's needs
- Gradually adapts less completely as the child grows
- Allows the child to experience tolerable frustration and disappointment

As Winnicott wrote: "The good enough mother...starts off with an almost complete adaptation to her infant's needs, and as time proceeds she adapts less and less completely, gradually, according to the infant's growing ability to deal with her failure."

Why Children Need Imperfect Parents

Winnicott believed that children need their parents to fail them in tolerable ways on a regular basis so they can learn to live in an imperfect world. Every time you don't immediately respond to your child's call, every time you serve a meal they don't want, every time you make them wait or share when they don't want to—you're preparing them for a society that will frustrate and disappoint them regularly.

Research shows that children of "good enough" parents develop:

- **Enhanced resilience.** They learn to handle life's inevitable disappointments and challenges.
- **Authentic self-esteem.** They develop confidence based on real capabilities rather than constant praise.

- **Better relationship skills.** They understand that healthy relationships include imperfection and repair.
- **Independent problem-solving.** They develop the ability to tackle challenges without constant parental intervention.
- **Greater distress tolerance.** They learn that disappointment, frustration, and even failure are normal parts of life—and that they can survive them.
- **The ability to self-soothe.** When parents don't immediately rescue children from every uncomfortable feeling, children develop internal resources for managing their emotions.

The Dangers of Perfectionist Parenting

While good enough parenting builds resilience, perfectionist parenting creates significant risks. Research consistently shows that parental perfectionism is linked to numerous negative outcomes for both parents and children.

For parents, perfectionism leads to:

- Increased anxiety, depression, and burnout
- Chronic feelings of inadequacy and shame
- Reduced joy and fulfillment in parenting
- More critical and rigid parenting behaviors

For children, having perfectionist parents increases risk of:

- **Developing perfectionism themselves.** Meta-analytic research shows that children of perfectionistic parents are significantly more likely to become perfectionistic themselves through both social learning (modeling) and social expectations (internalizing parental criticism and high standards).
- **Anxiety disorders.** Parental perfectionism is strongly associated with child anxiety. Perfectionist parents tend to use more controlling behaviors and focus on negative consequences of mistakes, which predicts anxiety in children.
- **Depression.** Perfectionism predicts increases in depressive symptoms in children and adolescents over time.
- **Low self-worth and fear of negative evaluation.** Children of perfectionist parents often develop contingent self-worth—feeling valuable only when they perform well—and intense fear of being judged negatively by others.
- **Impaired emotional development.** Children may learn to hide their true feelings or disconnect from their emotional experiences in order to meet parental expectations.
- **Difficulty with independent functioning.** Over-parenting and perfectionism can stunt children's executive functioning and ability to solve problems independently.
- **Eating disorders and self-harm.** Maladaptive perfectionism is a significant risk factor for eating disorders and self-harming behaviors in adolescents.

Perfectionism Is Increasing

Research shows that perfectionism has increased linearly over the past three decades among college students. Between 1989 and 2016:

- Almost 60% of young people in 2016 scored above typical 1989 levels for self-oriented perfectionism
- 66% of young people in 2016 scored above typical 1989 levels for socially prescribed perfectionism (believing others expect perfection from them)

Researchers attribute this increase to rising economic inequality, competitive individualism, and mounting pressure to excel academically and professionally. Parental expectations and criticism have also increased significantly during this period.

Notably, between 25-30% of adolescents now suffer from "maladaptive perfectionism"—striving for unrealistic perfection to the point of causing them significant distress.

Why Perfection Is Impossible (and Harmful)

As Winnicott emphasized, perfection is not just difficult—it's impossible. And even if it were possible to meet every single one of your child's needs perfectly, the result would be a fragile child who couldn't tolerate even the slightest disappointment.

The reality is simple: you are either good enough, or you're not. If you're not good enough—meaning you're neglectful or abusive—then you're failing your child in serious ways. But if you're meeting your child's essential needs while also allowing them to experience normal life frustrations, you're doing exactly what they need.

As clinical psychologist Dr. Alexandra Sachs explains: "An imperfect mother helps her child gain the skills to tolerate frustration, become self-sufficient, and learn to soothe himself. These are the hallmarks of grit—a personality trait that can help your child succeed in life."

Practical Implications: How to Be Good Enough

Accept that mistakes are normal and necessary.

When you lose your patience, forget something important, or handle a situation poorly, you're modeling something crucial: humans make mistakes, and relationships can survive them. Apologize when appropriate, repair the relationship, and move on.

Let your child experience manageable frustration.

You don't have to—and shouldn't—immediately fix every problem or soothe every uncomfortable feeling. Let them wait sometimes. Let them be bored. Let them struggle a bit before you step in. They need to learn that discomfort is survivable.

Model self-compassion rather than self-criticism.

When your child sees you being hard on yourself for not being perfect, they learn that mistakes are shameful. When they see you treating yourself with kindness after a misstep, they learn healthy self-acceptance.

Focus on connection, not perfection.

What children need most is not perfect parenting, but authentic connection. They need to know you see them, love them, and will be there for them—even when things are messy and imperfect.

Set realistic expectations for yourself.

You cannot be fully present and attentive to your children every moment. You will sometimes be tired, distracted, irritable, or overwhelmed. This is normal. What matters is that you're mostly responsive, mostly available, and mostly attuned to their needs.

Remember: your needs matter too.

Good enough parenting means recognizing that you're a separate person with your own needs, feelings, and limitations. Taking care of yourself—and modeling healthy boundaries—teaches your child that their needs will matter too when they grow up.

The Bottom Line

Seventy years of research supports Winnicott's original insight: being a good enough parent is not only sufficient—it's ideal. Striving for perfection harms both you and your children. Embracing your imperfections, allowing your children to experience normal frustrations, and modeling self-compassion creates the foundation for raising resilient, emotionally healthy children.

As one researcher put it: "Being an excellent parent should not compromise having a good enough personal life." You don't have to choose between being a good parent and being a whole person. In fact, being a whole person—with needs, limitations, and imperfections—is what makes you a good enough parent.

Good enough is good enough.