

We Don't Need *Perfect* Mothers

Rachel Ramer

When my sisters and I face relationship challenges, we occasionally say to each other, "What would Mom have done? Let's *not* do *that*." This may seem disrespectful, casting our mother as a horrible role model, but the truth is, we sympathize with the struggles she faced and how she dealt with them. She grew up in a world where females were openly taught to acquiesce to the will of the men in their lives. The church, the workplace and the home all reinforced this. Society taught her not to stand up for her own needs, and she passed this tendency on to her daughters. We struggled to dismantle this message for ourselves.

On the other hand, she read to us when the house needed attention. She prioritized our education. She worked hard raising five children and she contributed to paying the bills, sometimes taking on two jobs. During that time, she encouraged us to be in choir and orchestra, to take singing, piano and art lessons. She let us find our own paths and supported our dreams. Still, Mom did not have the skills to help us with some of the crises we faced. The gaps in her understanding left holes in our lives. At times, she left us vulnerable. And yet...we knew she loved us.

"Good Enough" Mothers

British psychoanalyst and pediatrician Donald Winnicott would have called her a "good enough mother." To be clear, his understanding of "good enough" was a mom who had insight about when it was wise to back away from meeting every need. This was a mom who allowed her children to fail because rescuing them could stunt their growth. While people may disagree when the timing is best for a mother bird to push babies from a nest, the "good enough" mom had an intuitive sense of that critical moment.

Whether or not the "good enough" mom is insightful regarding the growth of her children, carefully calculating her child's independence and self-sufficiency, or the mom who makes mistakes and who doesn't fully understand this dynamic, the outcome can be nearly the same.

The key is love. Not the kind of "love" of Marie Barone from *Everybody Loves Raymond*, who made the lives of

her family miserable. And yet, when she embarrassed her oldest son, Robert, by attempting to keep him from joining the FBI, he recognized that his overbearing mother feared for his safety, and that she loved him. Imperfectly. Obnoxiously. ["Lucky Suit" 2002].

This is not to give abusive, neglectful mothers a pass. At first, I recoiled from the term "good enough" as with someone unwilling to do the job well. Yet, a lesson I learned in parenting is that when we strive for perfection, we create anxiety and sadness in our children. "Good enough" means alleviating pressure not only from our children but from ourselves.

Willing to Embrace Change

I found out recently my mother held views later in life I didn't know she held. A family friend who had been with Mom when she was diagnosed with cancer, who watched over her for Mom's two remaining years, talked with her about multiple issues while I was several states away raising young children. Mom had changed her mind about issues that surprised me.

One of my sons told me the most important thing I taught him was that it's okay to change our minds when we have more information/insight. I had no idea this was the message that would stand out to him, or that I had, up to a point, previously taught him the opposite. He had to grow up with an earlier version of me—one less experienced about relationships, one less perceptive, one clumsily striving for perfection.

Recently, when he was traveling by plane across several states, I asked him to keep me posted on his journey. A year earlier he had taken a trip to Colorado without my knowledge. So, he thought he would be funny by texting me details about switching flights, exactly when he landed, and where he was at different moments. I loved it. I didn't want to be an annoying, hovering mom, but I loved knowing *I could indulge in the imperfection of the mom who needed reassurances*.

We don't need perfect mothers—we *need good enough mothers*—those who love us, those prone to mistakes who are willing to embrace change. □

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