

## **Embracing Imperfection in Parenting by Katie Baptist, LCSW**

All my life, new years resolutions have appealed to me. I think it's because of the clean slate. January First represents a chance to start again, a new beginning with no mistakes in it. For many years on December 31st, it had been my tradition to make a list of self-improvements. My idealistic nature always held onto the promise that finally this year I would get everything just right. It is impossible to describe the overwhelming moment I experienced on December 31, 1999 when I gave birth to my first child. A New Year, a New Millennium, and a New Baby all at once! I held in my arms the embodiment of perfection! She was a clean slate with no mistakes, and inwardly I swore I would do everything in my power to be the best mother any child ever had.

If someone had told me then that I didn't have to be a perfect mom, I would have nodded wisely. I would have assured them that yes, I knew I wouldn't do everything right. But the truth was, I didn't know. I knew my mother hadn't been perfect. Again and again she used to say to us, "I'm just flesh, I'm just blood, I'm not perfect. But I'm your mother, and I love you." She said this so often that my brothers and I began to chime in with a kind of singsong parody when we sensed it was coming. Yes, I was pretty sure just what mistakes she had made, and how I could avoid them. Equipped with a college education, a stack of parenting books, and a giant dose of blind optimism, I felt I was prepared to handle any crisis.

It wasn't long before I began to glimpse the enormity of the task I had set myself. There were those nights when my colicky infant just wouldn't stop crying. Some nights I impressed even myself with my endless baby dancing and soothing Broadway solos. Other nights my emotions were so raw that in the end I was just sitting there crying along with her. Even worse, as my daughter grew, I discovered that she had an uncanny knack of finding just where the chinks in my armor lay. In seconds she could take me from confident, got-it-all-together-mom, to just-desperate-to-get-out-of-this-situation freaked out person. Illogically, I thought of parenting in all or nothing terms. Kind of like those new years resolutions that you stop the first time you miss a day. Either I get it right, or I've messed it up completely.

I should have known my ideals of perfection were doomed to failure when my second baby was born- this time not a News Years present, but arriving on March 15, the Ides of March. (Remember the ominous warning from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar "Beware the Ides of March!") This new baby presented me immediately with an interesting dilemma. Up until my son was born, I had always known beyond a shadow of a doubt where my priorities and loyalties lay. It was with my daughter. I was willing to move any mountain, cross any river, sacrifice any amount of sleep or reading time if it meant I would be acting in my daughter's best interest. Now, suddenly here was this new (and of course perfect) baby boy. If you want to watch a perfect mother lose her sanity, just give her two children with conflicting best interests! Often what would have been best for my toddler seemed to be in direct conflict with what was best for my infant. He needed mama to hold and nurse him, while at the same time she needed mama to play. Sometimes she needed help getting to the bathroom while he needed to be comforted or rocked. They never

seemed to have the need to nap at the same time, so of course that meant no naps or catch up time for me.

My perfect mother image began to collapse. More than a few times I found to my dismay that I was repeating the very mistakes my mother had made –the ones I had sworn I would never make! I began to judge myself by every flawed behavior I found in my children. I started out with perfect babies, right? It must, I reasoned, be something I did wrong. When my daughter was four and began to have nightmares, I wondered where I had failed her in developing a sense of security. When my son was two and began to throw temper tantrums if he couldn't have the very cup or the very shoe he wanted at that moment, I wondered if I might have encouraged this inflexibility by giving in too often. It seemed like everywhere I looked there was something I had not done enough of, or had done too much! If I could have just followed this parenting theory, or maybe that one more fully, perhaps this wouldn't be happening!

My mother's oft repeated lament, "I'm just flesh, I'm just blood, I'm not perfect." began to take on new meaning. I began to realize that there is a dark side to perfection. In my quest to do everything "right", I was not only failing to produce the "product" (perfect children), but it became all too clear that I was depleting my own inner resources. I found myself exhausted and often irritable. Many days I managed to make a healthy meal for my children, but neglected to feed myself! While I neglected my physical health, I also neglected my emotional and spiritual health. It seemed that I could justify any amount of output, as long as it was for the purpose of taking care of somebody else. When it came to self-care, it just didn't seem like the time or the money was justifiable. Eventually I came face to face with the fact that ignoring my own needs in my attempts to be the perfect mother was actually hurtful to my children. The funny thing is that self-care is something I have always advocated to my friends and clients, but there are worlds between saying it and doing it.

At this point in the story, I'd like to relate that I had a moment of realization that changed my life. I'd like to say that I woke up the next day completely recovered from perfectionism, with a healthy sense of how to prioritize self-care and mothering in every situation. I'd love to tell you that, but the truth is that recovering from the all-or-nothing thinking of perfectionism is a daily commitment. There are still many moments when my vision for parenting seems light years from the momentary reality. What I can tell you is that I have consciously made the choice and the commitment to come to each day with a love for what is, rather than a longing for the perfection of my imagination. I also know now that taking care of myself is a big part of taking care of my family. For me that means finding the time to do the things that feed my body and soul. I try to make something for lunch besides peanut butter and jelly some of the time, even if it means I'm the only one who will eat it. I find moments to journal and read meaningful books. I've found a yoga class that fits my family schedule, which I attend when I am able. Above all, I try to see my own mistakes and shortcomings in the same forgiving way I view my children's sometimes awkward attempts at growth.

In the end I find great wisdom in my mother's words, "I'm just flesh, I'm just blood, I'm not perfect. But I'm your mother and I love you." That last part is what stays with me.

Being a mother is not about being perfect. It's about being there. It's about bringing your love again and again to the present moment.

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