

A PIECE OF MY MIND

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The Good-Enough Parent

The venue was a career development session for pediatric infectious diseases physicians, and mine was the voice of experience. Tension sizzled in the conference room air. "How do I do this?" someone asked. "I'm a constant wreck." The comments continued. "My spouse travels a lot." "My spouse is also a physician." "Will it ever get better?" "I don't see how I can keep this up much longer." "My kids are so important to me, but so are my patients. And, my research."

"Life/Work Balance" was the title of the session. Balancing personal life and medical life? I thought. That's a Sisyphean challenge, one doomed to failure, and to try to push that rock uphill will only feed into the problem: yet more anxiety, a greater sense of inadequacy, more internal torture. "Let's be honest here," I told the group. "There is no balance in personal life and medical life. It's a matter of lurching from one crisis to the next." But glorious islands of joy wedge themselves between the calamities.

My husband (a surgeon) and I (a pediatric infectious diseases physician-scientist) spent the years of our children's youth straddling this imbalance. We had our own equation for success as physician-parents, or, rather, we had an equation that we invented, we applied to the issue, and we hoped for success: No television set. Cook together. Eat together. Read together. No long commutes to work. An army of helpers: babysitters, alternative babysitters, emergency babysitters, drivers, cleaning people; all of our relatives were many hundreds of miles away from our home, and we were on our own. We kept materials around the house for creative play. In truth, the kids found materials for clandestine play, such as boards and nails and hammers to a construct a skateboard ramp in the bedroom and a tree fort in the back yard. They secretly found laundry detergents and bathroom cleansers to concoct magic potions, blankets to make tents over the living room furniture, and rope and a shoe box for an elevator to ferry the guinea pig from the second-floor balcony to the first-floor carpet.

The result of our equation for good parenting? When I asked my older son what it was like to have a mother like me—the lone employed mom in the neighbor-

hood—he answered, "You were the only one I had. I didn't know anything else. It was fine." The younger son said, "What I remember about every Christmas was that Dad was gone." There were four of us in that family, each with his or her own needs, preferences, impressions, perceptions, passions, bruises, and hurt feelings. In retrospect, I think our chaotic household worked well for three of us and less well for the fourth. But still, our sons have built wonderful lives for themselves. We are extremely proud of them.

I looked at the earnest faces of the young physicians in the life/work balance session. They had labored very hard to get this far in their medical careers, and they were all ultra-high achievers. Under the glare of the conference room lights, they were so very stressed, so very sincere, so very intense in their search for guidance. They didn't realize it, but they have the right stuff to be excellent parents. "Look at our little patients," I said to them. "Every day we marvel at their resiliency." We, as clinicians, put them through hell, and then, back in the cocoon of their loving parents, they spring back. Hell sometimes happens, in every life. We can count on our own children to also be resilient.

Donald Winnicott, the brilliant British pediatrician and psychoanalyst of the 1940s and 1950s, said it best. The goal is not to be a perfect parent. That, like a purple unicorn, doesn't exist. The goal is to be a good-enough parent. (Winnicott, reflecting his era, spoke of a "good-enough mother.") He didn't mean mediocre. Nor average. But good enough. One who blunders from time to time and lets his or her children see what stumbling, getting up, and moving on looks like. One who is a role model for enjoying crossword puzzles or math or mushroom risotto, for playing the violin or the harmonica, for fixing the broken screen door, for patching a fallen hem with Scotch tape, for scrambling the eggs that cracked when the carton fell out of the fridge, for being resilient.

The world is a complex, imperfect place, and our children must learn to live in it and to weather the imperfections, their own, our own, and those of others. As with everything else important, they will learn that best from us, their good-enough physician-parents.

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