

CHAPTER ONE



BEND WITH IT

The Power of Acceptance

by Allyson Reynolds



Allyson Reynolds, a Midwest girl, met a California boy in Japan and married him quick. After living in both Iowa City and Los Angeles, they've finally settled in the mountain west with their four endearing children.

After participating in the first-ever *Power of Moms* board meeting (attendance 3!), Allyson's been hooked on doing whatever she can to strengthen mothers. This enthusiasm has led to various speaking opportunities, including those at The Power of Moms Retreats. Her speaking material comes largely from the stuff she writes for the website and as director of the *Motherhood Matters* blog. Before motherhood became her greatest teacher, Allyson earned a B.A. in family science.

In a parallel universe, Allyson travels the world as a freelance writer and National Geographic photographer. In reality, she tries to squeeze in as many of her favorite things as possible (her family, the great outdoors, photography, blogging, riding her bike, cooking, living like a tourist) in between treating stains and signing school papers. She blogs at allysonreynolds.blogspot.com.

“Good timber does not grow with ease; the stronger the wind, the stronger the trees.” J. Marriott

I can still see myself sitting there, swollen feet propped up on the camel-colored recliner we picked up at a garage sale, with a pile of books stacked up next to me: every “baby bible” on pregnancy, childbirth, nursing, and the first year of life. I would spend hours during that first pregnancy reading those books with the naive hope that it would ensure my success as a mother. I was going to be the best mom.

The only problem was, I didn’t count on my baby having a hard time learning to latch on, or anticipate the difficulty of functioning under the fog of chronic sleep deprivation, or doing everything on my own as my husband worked over a hundred hours a week, or the frustration of trying to be cute and stylish on a really tight budget with a flabby postpartum body. And I certainly didn’t count on my baby turning into a teenager. There wasn’t anything in those baby bibles about teenagers.

My own mother was the quintessential homemaker. She sewed matching 70’s style prairie dresses for me and my sisters, made homemade wheat bread for my brown bag lunch, and served up both green and orange vegetables for supper from her own garden. My childhood memories are full of fresh-smelling sheets, snuggling up for reading time on the couch, and singing around the piano. After this upbringing, motherhood should have come much more easily. I should have been a natural.

Looking back, I realize that maybe I *was* a natural—as natural as a new mother could be. But I was a sapling, wanting to be an oak tree overnight. And maybe I wasn’t even an oak tree at all! Maybe I was a willow, or an ash, or a pine. (Some women *do* seem better suited to carry the burdens of motherhood.) No matter, I was a sapling, trying to push back a self-loathing for all the supposed inadequacies and imperfections of my “mother self” who had barely begun to emerge.

I desperately wanted to be a “good mother.” I had imagined myself in a rocking chair, singing sweetly to a newborn as she drifted off to sleep (in my beautifully-decorated nursery), my husband playing happily with the children in the next room while I peacefully made dinner (in my well-stocked and immaculately-clean kitchen), gathering my brood around me to read books together at the end of the day (on my stylish couch next to the fireplace), or taking my well-behaved and neatly-groomed children on stimulating outings (trim, toned, and stylish myself).

But I didn't feel like a good mother at all. A good mother doesn't wake up with a feeling of dread or anxiety about being left alone all day with her baby and toddler. A good mother doesn't go to bed with the house in shambles, let her children watch TV so she can have a minute to herself, serve frozen pizza for dinner, or any of the other myriad offenses I committed on more than one occasion.

And I admit it: I didn't always like being *the mom*. I mean, I *loved* my children, but I didn't always like the work associated with being their mother. And don't good mothers love what they do? Wasn't it exactly what I had signed up for? The definition of the verb "to mother" is to nurture, protect, and care for, but what that actually looked like on an ordinary day was vastly different from the visions I had nurtured for so many years.

What was all this endless whining, crying, mess-making, disciplining, shopping, coaxing, budgeting, negotiating, laundering, calendaring, cooking, cleaning, and the constant feeling I was always forgetting something?

My list of annoyances and inadequacies seemed as endless as my misery. What was wrong with me? Where was the joy? The growth? The fulfillment I was so certain I would find in this, the most important job on planet earth—that of raising another human being to adulthood?

If only I could go back in time, I would love to tell my sapling-self a few things. Things I have long since dealt with and embraced as truth. Things that now bring me comfort and strength instead of frustration and discouragement. Things about acceptance.

Accept that Motherhood is Hard

Real hard. If motherhood were supposed to be easy, it wouldn't be so hard. (How many ways can I say this?) As a teenager, I read M. Scott Peck's book, *The Road Less Traveled*, and his words have saved me time and time again—especially as a mother:

“Life is difficult. This is the great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.”

From the sleepless nights and physical stress of the infant and toddler years, to the sleepless nights and emotional stress of the teen years, motherhood demands *a lot* from us. That truth isn't going to change anytime soon, so we may as well own it. Acceptance is the point at which motherhood becomes easier—accepting that it isn't getting any easier.

Accept that There's No Such Thing as “Done”

This is an extension of accepting that motherhood is hard, because part of what makes it so hard is the never-ending nature of a mother's work. I always chuckle a little sarcastically when I hear myself say the dinner/laundry/bills/homework/shopping are done. Whoever heard of such a thing? It's as silly as saying the children are done!

Stop trying to get to “done”—to an imaginary finish line at which you can finally stop, stand still, and say “I did it!” Yes, there are markers and milestones, times when you can take stock and feel a sense of satisfaction, but by and large, motherhood is not a project with an end point.

Accept Yourself—Warts and All

It’s hard to move forward with your life and accept the other people around you if you’re not at peace with yourself. Accepting ourselves as we are is often hindered by what I call “The Compare Snare”—comparing our weaknesses against other people’s strengths. Most notably, other mothers. Imagine for a moment a world without blogs, home shows, or parenting/decorating/ fashion magazines. How would your life be different? Of course it’s nice to get ideas and inspiration from outside sources, but how often do you go from getting ideas and inspiration to comparing, coveting, and coming to the conclusion that you just don’t match up?

Do yourself a favor: throw ‘em out and turn ‘em off. At least minimize their influence. Becoming the best mother you can be is about learning to follow your own inner compass, not somebody else’s. The sooner you can learn to accept and appreciate yourself for who you are, the sooner you can start living with a greater measure of peace and contentment.

There is also comfort in knowing that our children are blissfully ignorant of our so-called inadequacies—they think we’re perfect just the way we are (at least until they’re teenagers . . .). They don’t see our cellulite, our deflated bank accounts, our cluttered closets, let alone our undeserved self-loathing. All they see is their mother; the woman who takes care of them, feeds them, hugs them, listens to them, *loves* them. When you inevitably feel unqualified for the task at hand (and we’ve all been there) remind yourself that motherhood is ultimately about your children, and they think you are wonderful!

Accept Imperfection

About those warts. Why do we try so hard to make our lives appear “perfect” when in fact it is the imperfection that perfects us? The child with an illness or disability that teaches us how to really pray and sacrifice; the difficult teenager who pushes us to dig deeper and love more; the “daily grind” that forces us to get more organized and disciplined; the financial struggles that keep us humble and motivate us to reach out to others struggling in similar ways. You see?

Anna Quindlen shared these words of wisdom: “The thing that is really hard, and really amazing, is giving up on being perfect and beginning the work of becoming yourself.” The irony of that statement is that if you do ‘become yourself,’ you *will* be perfect, for you will be who you were created to become. It helps me to think of the word ‘perfect’ as a verb, rather than a noun. To perfect means to improve, refine, hone, work on. Instead

of trying to cover up the messiness of motherhood, embrace your perfectly imperfect life and let it work its magic!

Accept that Your Best Really is Good Enough

Can you accept that even on your worst of days and in the worst of circumstances, your best really is good enough? We tell our children this all the time, but do we afford ourselves the same kindness? It would be nice if every day was like a scene out of *Mary Poppins*, but you know what? We haven't died and gone to heaven yet, and as mentioned before, motherhood is hard. Even if you cry, lose it when you're frustrated, and give up on occasion (only to get back up again), that doesn't mean you're a failure. It means you're a mother.

And why, oh why, when the going gets tough do we add insult to injury by mentally ripping ourselves to shreds? What *is* our obsession with negative self-talk? Much like our children, we need nurturing to grow into our best selves, but we'll never get there if we spend our days saying things to ourselves we would never dream of saying to our children. Would you want your daughter to talk to herself the way you talk to yourself? It doesn't do you or your children any good, so kill the inner critic and be kind to yourself. And encouraging. And complimentary. And forgiving. And supportive. (Doesn't that feel better already?)

Accept Your Current Stage of Motherhood

Being an empty nester probably sounds the most attractive when you have a house full of small children, and having a house full of small children probably sounds the most attractive when you're an empty nester. Every stage of motherhood has its challenges and blessings, and the worst mistake a new mother can make is to think "it will get easier when . . ." or "I'll be happy when. . ." It may get easier in some ways, but you can count on it getting more difficult in others.

I recently found myself in the most adorable boutique and bistro you've ever seen. Shabby chic and chocked to the brim with the most beautiful baubles and trifles a woman could ever hope to grace her home/wrist/hair. I took my three daughters there on a whim, in between a trip to the post office and the grocery store. *Just a little look-see and cupcakes*, I told myself, because a place like that isn't really meant for small children. I was feeling that familiar feeling: suppression of my annoyance at their desire to touch every blessed thing, to talk too loud, to ask for too much. Oh, how I wished to come to a place like this alone, to buy what I pleased, and with money that wasn't already called for! And then I saw it: the sign.

“Kiss your life. Accept it just as it is. Today. Now. So that those moments of happiness you are waiting for do not pass you by. Kiss your life today. Now. Just as it is.”

I’ve never appreciated a good slap in the face more than I did at that moment.

Accept Your Reality—Both of Them

Today you may carry the burden of single motherhood, or have a rebellious teenager that wants to engage you in daily arguments. Maybe you don’t have enough money to fund all the lessons, activities, and family vacations you always dreamed of, or you shudder at the sight of your postpartum body. Perhaps you are exhausted from caring for a sick or disabled child, or you struggle with secondary infertility, postpartum depression, or— heaven forbid—all of the above!

Most of us could come up with a long and detailed list of all the injustices life has thrown our way, and we may be correct in our assessment, but there is still another reality—a parallel reality, if you will. What is yours? Today, mine is a healthy body for the day’s work, a little naked bum running down the hall, narcissus blooming on my kitchen counter, the sound of laughter, a friend for my teenager, inspiring music, and having loved ones who love me back.

Acceptance is not about throwing your hands up in the air and surrendering; it is about making peace with the bitter, as well as embracing the sweet. We create our own reality by choosing what we see. See the sweetness! See the joy, the beauty, and the tender mercies in your life as a mother. You can spend your precious time and energy wishing away your circumstances, wishing you had so and so’s “perfect” life, but the reality is, happiness does not come from having what you want, but by wanting what you already have.

Remember the description of my idyllic childhood? Could it be possible that amidst all the cookie-baking, homemade costumes, and euphoria of childhood that my own mother struggled just as I struggle now? Of course she did. My own “quintessential” mother and homemaker suffered many challenges, disappointments and heartaches over the years. No mother gets through unscathed—it’s almost a guarantee. It may take several children and decades of time, but eventually “life” catches up to most of us. Still, she was a giant of a mother, and I never knew any differently.

Accept the Struggling that Makes Us Strong

Why do we think we are weak because we struggle, when in fact it is in the struggling that we become strong? Yes, if I could go back in time, I would tell my sapling-self that it's not the type of tree you are that matters. What matters is how we build our root systems to stand up to the wind and how we use that wind to make ourselves stronger. It's the trees with the strongest root systems that endure the mightiest winds, by bending

and flexing under their pressure.

Accept the wind. Face it, open to it, bend with it, and be grateful for it. It is turning you into the mother you are meant to be.

The Perfect Body

I was surprised to look down during church today and see, folded neatly in my lap, my mother's hands. I remember sitting next to her in church, looking at her hands and thinking how old they looked. Now those old hands are mine—complete with club thumb!

I feel some pressure from society to be horrified by the fact that I don't look as young as I used to, but today I don't. As I sat looking at my hands, I thought of all that they accomplish. Just like my mother, and her mother, and her mother before that, these hands have done a lot of work.

They have washed dishes, scrubbed floors, changed *many* diapers, wiped away tears, and applied band-aids. It is only right that they are looking older and well worn. They've earned that!

I think about the rest of me, too. The slowly deepening creases on my face have their own stories to tell. Those lines mean that I have smiled much, and cared enough to worry sometimes. There are marks left by the sun, and some left by times of stress. And then there are my stretch marks—a constant reminder that I have born and nurtured many children.

In spite of the aesthetic imperfections, I am in awe of what a gift my body is to me.

It is strong enough to work hard, to love, to serve and to care for my family. It has enough flaws to provide me with trials and opportunities to grow. It somehow knows how to create beautiful little bodies for my children. What a miracle is the gift of life!

It is my body. And it is perfect just as it is.

- Christi Alston Davis

The Swing

I love to see my husband on the swing
that hovers soft across our porch out front
with Madeleine on one thigh cradled close
and Lily on the other. Early on,
before the sonogram, he wanted sons
and now he has two daughters, both with chins
that dimple like his own, and eyes shot through
with chocolate brown, like his, my favorite brown.
He points out passing cars and lizards in the hedge.
He sings *Mi gallo se murió ayer*
in silky baritone, the Spanish smooth.
Enrapt, they listen, daddy's voice a song
unparalleled, a music sweet as memory
of heaven. Nothing rivals what I see:
a cord of love as strong as that which binds
my girls to me.

- Dayna Patterson

Good Mom Redefined

Did you know?

- "Good moms" don't choose to ignore their children, and there are times I do just that. I lie in the bathtub and read my book while my boys scream and argue. "Good moms" (if taking a bath at all) would promptly exit the tub and happily deal with the situation. Sometimes I don't. Sometimes I even shut the door to muffle the sounds of chaos.
- "Good moms" don't resent the time their children take away from them. I do. Can't they see I'm having "me" time? Can't they see I am *busy*? Please, do not ask for apple juice, snacks, or a video right now.
- "Good moms" don't snap or yell at their children. Not when they are tired, or on the phone with the electric company, or trying to have an adult conversation with one of their few remaining friends. "Good moms" always talk nicely to their children.

- “Good moms” do not feel guilty about what they *should* be doing or what they *could* have done because “good moms” have nothing to be ashamed of or feel guilty about.

My four-year-old was following his usual pattern. Getting out the door had become a battle, and by the time all of us were in the car, my frustration and anger were boiling over. Although I tried to contain it, my anger overflowed, and I behaved badly. I yelled at my children, banished the barking dog to the backyard, and snapped at my husband. It wasn't pretty, and I knew that at the end of the day my husband would want to talk.

I was not in a good place to have that conversation! I ranted and downloaded every detail of my day concluding that *clearly* it was my poor mothering skills that had caused the day's chaos. I confessed my sins (as listed above) and then I said it: “Maybe I'm not a good mom.”

As the words came, a huge weight lifted from my shoulders. I felt free. A large grin appeared on my face, and I couldn't stop it. I wasn't sure why I was reacting this way, but I felt good! It was the beginning of realizing that my rigid definition of a “good mom” was unfair. I had set myself up for guilt, shame, and failure. My definition of a “good mom” did not allow room for *me*, and who I am.

As I begin to contemplate a new, more flexible idea of what it means to be a “good mom,” I am embracing the thought that maybe I can still be a good mom and raise good kids even when I occasionally do something “bad!”

- **Kim Dettmer**

Heaven Around Me

On the night of December 31, 2006, my three children and I were driving home from my parents' house when my then seven-year-old daughter, Olivia, looked beyond the seat in front of her to the valley ahead. “The world is a treasure box, and the lights of the city are the treasures!” she exclaimed.

That same night, my five-year-old son, Isaac, prayed sincerely to have a really good dream about eating a life-sized chocolate egg. And Grace, my three-year-old, asked me again if I would *please* change her middle name from Emma to Alyson. Their typical expressions of children were also expressions of hope in their newly-uncertain world.

As 2007 began to settle upon me the next day, I reflected upon the difficulty of the year behind me, and hesitated as I considered the year ahead. I solemnly recognized that I was not going to be the mother I had been in the past. I was not even hopeful about

becoming the mother I imagined in the future. I was only capable of being the mother I could be in that moment—single, working, and attempting to create a life beyond survival.

With all my focus on not drowning, I had forgotten my strength, both in my body and my mind. And failed to identify the life preserver floating right next to me. I noticed it for the first time and took hold, letting the waves of acceptance crash around me. I felt peace, as I gave up all the unnecessary flailing. My New Year's gift to myself.

Sometimes I feel I am being tossed upon a sea, a raging tempest of obstacles surrounding me, barely able to catch air at times. And yet, the storm occasionally calms just enough for me to catch a glimpse of the horizon ahead. The view is not crystal clear, but it is visible enough to keep me moving forward. My sweet children are my jewels, like the city lights of Olivia's perfect world, or the stars that seem to stare down upon us like angels and protectors during the lonely nights.

I do not have the power to stop life, but I have the power to breathe and let life go ahead of me for a moment. I can resist and risk drowning in the storm, or I can let the waves cleanse me and move me forward. There is always a choice, and anything but acceptance will surely lead to greater hardship and loss.

I accept these treasures, this journey, this view. I accept whatever it is I can give right now.

Olivia once said, "It feels like we are in a dream, and if we're real good, we'll wake up in heaven." I hope I will wake up every day recognizing the heaven that is around me right now.

- **Mary Anne Stewart**

The Reality of Me

By Hollywood's standards, I will never be skinny. My legs will always be short, my knees always chubby. My body will forever be a testament of motherhood—a little softer, a little looser, a little something more to suck in.

Me.

I am not a photographer. Sometimes I catch great moments with my little point and shoot, but they are only great because of the subjects I'm capturing, not because I know how to do anything beyond, well, pointing and shooting.

I am not a chef. I can manage meals for my family that make them happy and keep us fed. But to me, it's just cooking. Passionless. Obligatory.

I am not a musician. I can stumble my way through a few pieces on the piano—flawed, fumbled, tolerable, at best.

I am not an artist. I am stick figures. I am third grade trees.

Sometimes, I'm short tempered. I jump to conclusions. I think I know everything. Sometimes, I fail to see.

Me?

This is me.

I'm a curvy, comfortable size 10 and I own my body.

I'm a good mother, a good listener, a good friend. I can speak in public. I can make beautiful quilts. I'm a good runner, a powerful swimmer.

I am a writer.

And you know what? I like this person that I am.

In this skin, in these jeans, I am comfortable.

Sometimes though, I slip. I hesitate to embrace the reality of me and instead look at what others are, what others can do.

I compare.

And then I shake some sense into myself and remember that comparisons aren't fair to anyone. What a disservice to someone's talent to only enjoy it through a veil of jealousy, to waste time that could be spent appreciating and enjoying by tearing myself down over something that I am not, that I may not ever be.

I remember that when I love who I am, it is much easier to love others for who they are.

When I love me, I can marvel at brilliant pictures I didn't take, and revel in delicious meals I didn't cook. I can listen to lovely music and appreciate the talent of those that are performing. I can notice how great someone looks in a size 6. I can admire and respect others for their gifts, knowing that it has nothing to do with me, that it takes nothing away from what *I* can do.

So today, everyday, I embrace me, for all that I am... and all that I am not.

- Jenny Proctor

Making A Trade

I grew up fantasizing I would have it all. I would meet “him,” he and I would fall madly in love, marry, have babies, raise them, and gracefully grow old together. I would float around in expensive silk shirts and perfectly-placed hair, gadgets swinging open in my spotless kitchen, kids sitting in a perfect row waiting patiently for me to toss fresh baked cookies into their hands.

Well, I met “him,” and he was perfect. We were perfect. (You think “perfect” when you’re head over heels.) Before I knew it, we were married and I was moving in.

He was divorced and had a daughter, so as soon as the ring was placed on my finger, I became an instant mother figure in our home. My husband’s work schedule changed to weekends three days before our wedding. It was in his daughter’s best interest to keep a steady school schedule, so she was with “us” on the weekends. This meant that I not only became an instant mother figure, but I was also flying solo. I quickly found out that being a mom was hard. Having a mothering role without being the actual mother was even harder.

There was one night in particular the two of us came down with something. I didn’t know what to do. I called the one person I knew could help me—my own mother. After talking to her and then tending to my step-daughter, I went to my room, slumped onto my bed, and cried. I was awful at this. I knew that I represented a huge change for this little girl. I was trying so hard to fight the step-mom stigma—too hard. I felt she was comparing me to her mother. I felt judged and alone. And I became afraid: afraid to add pieces of me to our home, to share my own traditions and style and quirks.

That first year brought the natural ups and downs of life—miscarriages, financial struggles, schedule changes, and eventually a successful, but very hard pregnancy. I didn’t float like that woman I had envisioned (I was lucky if my dishes were done). Instead I learned to surrender and be okay with that. This wasn’t my ideal back when I was dreaming of “him,” but I wouldn’t trade him or his little girl for anything. I traded my attitude instead. I stopped focusing on how things should be or could be, and began to accept things as they were.

- Heather Doyle

The Inner Cheerleader

Recently, my five-year-old daughter, Lexi, helped me unload the dishwasher. Because she was working like such a busy little bee, I said, “Lexi, you sure are a great worker!” She looked up at me, grinning with delight and self-satisfaction, and then broke out into song: “I am a great worker! I am a great worker!” She repeated this about 25 times, and then finished it off with, “And I am a great person!!”

It was refreshing for me to see that little girl so confident and pleased with herself. There was no self-doubt, no false modesty, just joy in who she truly was. I wished in that moment she would stay like that forever.

When was the last time you told yourself you were a great worker, or even a great person? On the other hand, when was the last time you scolded or criticized your self? Self-acceptance, peace, and gratitude will spread like a warm blanket over your entire family when you quiet the inner critic and replace her with an inner cheerleader.

- Shawnie Sutorius

Good Enough

After a long day of dishes, laundry, and managing our family’s schedule, my head sinks into my pillow as I see in my mind a young woman from years ago. She sits in a rocking chair, dressed only in a robe, hair pressed against her head, limp and wet. Tears fall silently down her cheeks as she fixes an empty stare on the snuggly pink blanket that drapes gently across her arms, her new little bundle wrapped securely inside. The dark, sunken circles surrounding this woman’s eyes suggest a sleepless night, and the heaviness of her expression suggests a weight she does not yet know how to bear.

I search beyond her expression and explore her thoughts. She is trapped somewhere in the middle of her blissful, nostalgic past and the suffocating, frightful present. Throwing her head back and resting it on the pillow at the top of the chair, she recalls the lively days, just weeks earlier, when completing assignments, preparing for meetings, and gathering with co-workers for short breaks in the cafeteria consumed much of her life. She longs to return to that familiar routine and to the feeling of confidence that came from years of experience, lots of mistakes, and plenty of training.

The little one cries out, forcing the woman to engage in the moment. She attempts a various number of tricks to try to placate her disturbed child for the longest stretch of time possible. Wanting to break down, but knowing it would be pointless, the woman seeks for some clarity.

The role of mother had been worked out in her head long before her little one was born. In her imaginations, motherhood was blissful. The events of her days were in control, peaceful; she loved her life. Instead, the reality of her situation feels far from those dreamy ideas of her creation.

In her soul, she knows she must love this child, yet she isn't certain she is prepared to accept the changes that must take place in her life to shoulder such a trusted responsibility. She feels like a stranger in her own life, her feet transferring warily from bed to floor each morning onto unfamiliar territory. Prepared or not, she begins her new role in an entry-level position. She is as a character in a play—acting out someone else's life as she moves toward the whimpering sounds in the next room. She is unsure of how she will comfort her little one, but is determined to try.

The clock chimes in the other room. I roll over, once again finding my favorite pillow spot. I'm wide awake now, and I stare out my window into the dark night. I ponder the differences between my life back then and my life now—two lives that seem worlds away from each other.

Back then, I did everything I thought I *should* do. I did the things I thought would make me feel and look like a good mom. I took loads of photos, scrapbooked every nook and cranny of my baby's life (even though I dreaded the hobby), and nursed until my mutilated nipples bled and nearly detached from my breasts. I stuck to a solid routine (meal time, play time, nap time), then did it all over again two or three times until bed. I spent every waking minute of my baby's life interacting with her on the floor. I didn't know how many more repeats of *Itsy Bitsy Spider* and stackable cups I'd be able to manage. I didn't know how many more well-balanced meals I could prepare for baby when all that was calling to me was chocolate, potato chips, and ice cream. I didn't know how many more diaper blowouts it would take to finally suppress the gross-out factor I experienced each and every time.

Even if anything I was doing made me *look* like a good mom, I didn't *feel* like much of anything. I looked forward to nap time, and kind of dreaded wake-up time. I thought freedom would never come for me again. And I yearned for kindergarten!

Something was missing, but I didn't know how to fill in the holes. As time passed and two more daughters joined our family, I became more comfortable and familiar with the day-to-day life of a mom. I also slowly started to let go of guilt-ridden, self-imposed obligations. After years of engaging in a hobby that didn't interest me, the scrapbooking supplies were finally boxed up for good. After years of being the entertainment committee and schedule planner, my girls were given the opportunity to entertain themselves alone in their room for periods of time each day called "quiet time."

And after years of doing anything I could to calm them down, I finally realized that I wasn't a bad mom if my kids were sometimes left alone to cry.

Although I'm still resistant to change and not as flexible as I would like to be, I am a different mom than I was ten years ago. I'm different today because I have a different attitude toward parenting. Where I once sought to control, now I seek to influence. Where I once thought I should intuitively have all the answers, I now realize I am still learning and ask for help when I get stuck. And where I once cared how others viewed me in my role, now I parent for my children and not the approval of other people.

There was a time when I felt like I was suffocating. I was unsure of whether or not I would ever feel good enough as a mom, or whether or not I would be as good of a mom as someone else. Those days are gone.

Today, I know I'm a good mom. Not because I am always a consistent and gentle disciplinarian when behaviors around my house are less than acceptable. Not because I serve a vegetable at every meal. Not because I keep my composure under the most stressful of circumstances. And certainly not because I perfectly fulfill all the hopes and expectations my children have of their mother—or that I have of myself! No. I can't say that I do any of these things.

Today, I know I'm a good mom because I am committed to my children and to myself in this role. I know I am a good mom because I respect my children and realize they have a great many things to teach me. I know I am a good mom because I get out of bed every single morning, even on the days when I would rather be free to wander and forget for a while that I am tied to responsibilities. I know I am a good mom because I follow my heart and do the things that feel right for me and my family.

And for today, that's good enough.

- Rachelle Szymanski