



# APC of Stark Co.

*Attachment Parenting International*

**February 2007 Newsletter**

## *Good Enough Parent*

From *Mothering Magazine*, Issue 131

By *Marybeth Lambe*

Chengming bursts out of the schoolyard. Newly arrived from China, she still speaks Chinese and babbling away in rapid-fire Mandarin at a confused classmate. Suddenly Chengming spots me and her face is suffused in joy. "Mommy!" she screams in happiness. "Mommy Mommy Mommy!" On the last call she has reached me, and her arms swing wide. I sweep her into the sky and we laugh together. How can the world contain our exultation?

On a windy, stormy night, our five youngest are gathered around me, all squeezed onto Mark's and my big bed. The bickering of "Who sits there?" and "Who has more covers?" has finally quieted and, amazingly, we are singing. We begin with "Sweet Baby James" and continue with "Five Speckled Frogs" and "Wheels on the Bus." I pause to listen to their voices, at times soft, at times loud with laughter. My husband catches my eye and we grin at each other.

Who knew? we seem to say to each other. Who knew life held such treasure? I did not know I could have such tenderness, such devotion, such fierce passion for a child, for all our children. I had no idea of the power of the emotions that would sweep through me once I became a parent. Love seems too small a word to frame these feelings.

But parenthood is not made only of such pearls of joy and wonder. Sometimes—many times—parenting is difficult. How many times have I lain awake in bed, exhausted and worn out, yet unable to lose myself in restful dreams as guilt gnawed at me? Sometimes, in tears, I would remember how I was too rushed, too busy to see and feel those moments of love.

As a mother and family-practice physician for more than 20 years, I am often struck by how all of us struggle to meet the impossible ideal of being "perfect" parents. Sometimes, the guilt is so powerful it blinds us to daily joys. Even when we are doing a good job as parents, we are somehow never good enough, and we punish ourselves. If we were perfect parents, why couldn't we have fed her all the right foods? Why didn't we have more patience? Why didn't we toilet-train him sooner—or later? Why did we yell when we should have listened? Why didn't we have smiles on our faces at all times? The litany of self-criticism is endless. How can we free ourselves from the stereotype of the "perfect" parent?

Good-enough parenting is not about being lazy or less interested or less loving parents, but about being more forgiving. It acknowledges that parents, like children, have needs. Each family must find what is important and let the rest slip away. But this is easy to say. How is it actually done?

Jean Brautigam Mills, a family therapist for 25 years, commonly sees such parental anxiety in her practice. "Many times parents fret so much about what is the 'right and best thing,' they become unable to be emotionally available to model how to be a 'good, imperfect person.' When so much energy is spent in trying to be the perfect parent, the child picks up these cues that perfection is the goal and imperfection is intolerable." She further notes that "Such implied expectations often manifest in the children, who become overwhelmed in their inability to be 'perfect.' They come to my office with struggles in low self-esteem and self-confidence."

No child on earth needs a perfect mother or father. Children must learn that within the family, sometimes they are first in line, sometimes last, but they are always loved. Even when they are not the center of attention, they are treasured. A child comes to appreciate that his parents still love him, even when they are at work or upstairs folding the laundry. On the other hand, a selfless parent teaches a child that in order to matter, a person must always be pleasing someone else. Myths we carry inside ourselves

Nancy, one of my patients, wants to be the perfect parent, like the mothers she reads about in childcare magazines. Everything Nancy does she does well. For her son, Michael, she makes wonderful art projects and delightful handmade puppets. She enrolls him in fascinating after-school classes and is always ready to answer all his questions—even at the least opportune moments. She reads to him endless stories and sings till she is hoarse. She is Michael's soccer partner whenever he asks, and she wonders whether he would do best in piano or in violin lessons. Perhaps both? Michael's room is an enchanted place, with forests painted on the walls and clouds and stars on the ceiling. Nancy makes him nutritious meals three times a day and irons all his clothes—even his play clothes. She sits patiently by Michael's side as he plays on the computer, and she lies down next to him each night until he falls asleep.

Nancy would seem to be everything a mom should be, but she is often exhausted and irritable. She feels overwhelmed, and secretly resentful of Michael. She can't imagine having a second child—this first one has completely fatigued her. "But isn't that what I'm supposed to do?" she asks. "I want to be the best mother in the world for Michael."

Brautigam Mills says that "As parents, we don't have a clue what we are getting into. You get a manual with any ten-dollar electronic device, but kids come without instructions, and the job is a thousand times more difficult and important. We live in a disposable world, but kids are forever! We end up frantically trying all the 'expert' advice on how to help our child become a matchless success, and can't understand when we wear out with the effort."

All of us struggle against the shadows of these perfect images: the mother who keeps the house spotless, the laundry starched and ironed, a smile plastered on her face. The parent who is always receptive to a child's moods, who can stop a temper tantrum mid-scream, and rush home from the office without missing a beat. The father who is never too weary to read just one more story, play one more game. Even before we give birth to or adopt our first child, we fantasize about our ability to parent. We never be too tired, too irritated, too bored, or too anxious to be anything other than perfect.

We start off down the road of parenting full of these good intentions, then run into one dilemma after another. We never recover, we never stop stumbling, but still we judge ourselves by these standards these myths of the perfect parent. Like Nancy, we end up perpetually exhausted and disappointed in ourselves: Aren't we supposed to be perfect?

### **Fears and Competition**

Much of our frenzied activity as parents is based on fear. We love our children so much, and we fear the increasingly competitive world our kids will face as adults. If we don't run our children to piano and ballet and soccer, won't they miss out? Won't they be left behind if they don't attend a good preschool, if they aren't enrolled in after-school art classes, if we don't haul them to museums and concerts and try to teach them to read from the age of three? After all, doesn't parenting mean wanting to sacrifice so that your child has every advantage?

We seldom stop to question such notions. Yet if an "expert" told us we could help our healthy infants to walk at six months by putting them in special splints, we would laugh. Children walk when they're ready to walk. Yet we hurry to teach our children reading, music, and sports before they're really equipped to learn. We don't do this to be cruel. All of us, as parents, are insecure. We want to be such good parents and to give our children every advantage that we can. If close friends have enrolled their children in enrichment activities, then perhaps we should too. When our children suffer from ennui, we worry that they lack stimulation. In the face of all this, it's hard to remember that boredom and peaceful solitude, too, are important for children, and that children learn when they are developmentally ready to learn, and not before. It's hard to just slow down.

"Children need downtime even more than we do," says Brautigam Mills. "I see children who have such tight schedules they have no time to play. To play! Kids need play to manage their daily stress. And not these new concepts of play dates every Thursday from 2 p.m. to 3:15 p.m. Play is open and unstructured and provides more benefits than ten 'enriching activities'! If parents want to know and influence their kids, play with them. Mud pies have become endangered on the acceptable activity list, but the recipe? Ask your child."

The late noted author and family counselor Eda LeShan put it this way: "We must make it possible—no, make it imperative—to give children the pleasures of childhood. Let them enjoy quiet dreaming, private exploration—free time with no strings attached. All of them need time to goof off. Fields must lie fallow for certain periods and so must children. Plateaus in development result in a richer development later on."

The good-enough parent steps away from the rat race. Many clinicians have become alarmed at parents who believe pushing reading or math at their young children will help those children get ahead. Dr. David Elkind, PhD, of Tufts University expresses his deep reservations about trying to teach children at too young an age. "Those calling for academic instruction of the young don't seem to appreciate that math and reading are complex skills acquired in stages related to age. Children will acquire these skills more easily and more soundly if their lessons accord with the developmental sequence that parallels their cognitive development." He also explains that "The logical structure of reading and math requires syllogistic reasoning abilities on the part of the child. Inasmuch as most young children do not attain this form of reasoning until the age of five or six, it makes little sense to introduce formal instruction in reading and math until then. The theory is borne out by a number of longitudinal studies that show that children who have been enrolled in early-childhood academic programs eventually lose whatever gains they made vis-à-vis control groups."

Elkind has reviewed several older studies, such as those by Carleton Washburn, an Illinois educator who experimented with exposing children to reading at different ages. As Elkind summarized, "The children who had been introduced to formal instruction in reading later than the others . . . were more motivated and spontaneous readers than those who had begun early."

The Plowden Report examined British children as a whole and came to similar conclusions. This immense survey found that those children raised in rural settings and without benefit of early-learning programs did as well as children who had more rigorous education at an earlier age. In fact, rural children—who were taught to read much later than their urban cohorts—did better in higher grades and achieved more prestigious school placements than did children exposed to earlier education. Sometimes parents contribute to the illusion of perfection within their circle of friends by fooling and competing with each other. Whose baby crawled first, spoke first?

Which child takes ballet, piano, martial arts? Who made it into the most prestigious preschool, private school, college? William Doherty, a University of Minnesota professor of marriage and family therapy, worries about this pattern: "[T]hanks to overzealous parents, things get out of hand. Adult notions of hypercompetition and overscheduling have created a culture of parenting that's more akin to product development, and it's robbing families of time together. . . . Frantic families equal fragile families. "Being busy is the latest middle-class status symbol," says Cleveland psychologist Kathryn Kozlowski. "When the moms' groups get together, they ask one another, 'So what's your little one doing?' " Parental competition and overscheduling are wearing on parents as well. Moms and dads complain of feelings of ineptness, exhaustion, and confusion. Margie, another of my patients, recalls breaking down while attending her daughter's soccer game. "I was supposed to be at Jason's Little League game at the same time as Erin's soccer game, and my in-laws were coming over that night. Millie had Chinese lessons in an hour, and I hadn't even thought about what I was going to serve for dinner. The dog barfed on the living-room rug, and my boss had left four messages by 8 that morning. I just started pacing the sidelines and saying, 'I can't go on like this.'" What Margie didn't expect was the overwhelming support she received on that rainy soccer field. "All these parents who seemed so together, much more together than me—they kept nodding their heads, 'Uh-huh, I know just how you feel.'" She grins at the memory. "I was feeling like I was the worst parent in the world, and it turned out I wasn't alone. Just knowing that made a world of difference."

### **Becoming a Good-enough Parent: Taking care of yourself**

It can be hard for new parents to remember that their needs are critical if they are to be competent parents. Gayle Peterson is a family therapist who specializes in prenatal and family development. "Finding your own way as a mother means that you must take your needs as well as your baby's into account," she explains. "It is difficult, if not impossible, to attend to the needs of your child if you do not take care of your own. Good mothering is not perfect mothering. Achieving a balance of the needs of all family members is the key to good-enough mothering. Becoming a mother does not need to rob you of your selfhood. Stay away from martyrdom. Martyrs never make good mothers; what is gained in giving is taken away in guilt."

### **Get enough Sleep**

Exhaustion is incompatible with good parenting. Sleep-deprived, worn-out adults can barely care for themselves, let alone an active, needy child. Lack of sleep can cause chemical imbalances and even temporary mental illness. Is it any wonder that the ability to parent then falls apart?

The good-enough parent understands this and makes sleep a top priority. Let the housework go, eat toast and eggs for dinner, cancel the visiting company. Do whatever you can to catch up on serious sleep deficits. Even if it means hiring a babysitter when you feel you should be interacting with your child.

sleep deficits. Even if it means hiring a babysitter when you feel you should be interacting with your child find time to nap. Yes, it would be nice to have clean clothes to wear, but not if it means staying up when you can't sleep. 4

Decide which sleeping arrangements give you the most sleep. For some parents, having their child sleep in a crib in a separate room works best; others get the most sleep when they allow their children to share

the family bed. We used a family bed until I realized I was getting kicked more than I was sleeping. I then taught my children to snuggle into sleeping bags on our bedroom floor when they felt the need to sleep near us. There is no single correct method, no perfect way, but you will be a better parent if you get enough sleep.

### **Find Time to be an Adult**

Before we became parents, each of us had a life. Though we worked hard, we found ways to relax, to express ourselves, to relieve tension. Once we have children, many of us throw away much of what was pleasurable in our old lives. I was so thrilled to be a mother that it never dawned on me that I shouldn't practice parenthood every waking moment. I felt guilty when I was listless, or when I resented the energy and the devotion my children seemed to require.

We do our children no favors when our lives revolve around only their needs. Whether or not you work outside the home, you need to find some way to refresh your spirit and remember what it feels like to be an adult. This may mean hiring a sitter while you escape for an hour's walk several times a week, or it may mean joining a childcare co-op to give yourself time to work in the garden. It may mean signing up for a Bible-study group, biking down an inviting road, or having time to chat with an old friend.

Good-enough parents understand that they need relief from parenting. We cherish our time outside in the fresh air, with friends, or even just lovely solitude. We are better parents for having this time away from our children, and we model for them the importance of caring for our own mental health. We come back to our children renewed and ready to tackle the exhausting work of parenting.

### **Spousal Relations**

Children are the joy of a relationship. They can also be a source of marital conflict, even divorce. How can we protect married couples from the rigors and strains of raising children? "Pleasure has a place in parents' lives," notes New York child psychiatrist Dr. Alvin Rosenfeld, coauthor of *The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap*. "Our closest relationships should be a source of pleasure, not constant pressure and tension. . . . [E]very child we have ever known has done better if he knows his parents are happy, and are getting pleasure from life and their relationships."

Sometimes it's hard for me to avoid speaking to my husband as if he were simply another person to be scheduled and instructed. At such times I sound like a special agent running an urgent covert operation. Sometimes I have to remind myself to just stand still, shut up, and breathe—to catch my husband's gaze and give him a grin to remind us both that we are in this together.

### **Laugh**

There was our son, marching onstage at the end-of-year concert. It was the middle of the school day, and I craned my neck to see if Mark had managed to escape work to make a quick appearance. Earlier in the day, our oldest son had hustled all the kids off to school while I was busy with one of our Jersey cows, which was having trouble calving.

Apparently, the school had sent dress instructions home with students days before, and we had somehow missed them. Now on stage were all those rows of children in clean white shirts and dark pants or skirts—and then there was Shen Bo. He had obviously dressed himself that morning and was brightly attired in a red shirt two sizes too big, floral shorts, mismatched purple and red socks, and his favorite red boots. His face was grubby, and he was beaming. I don't know why, but he'd slung a thick leather belt across each shoulder and resembled nothing so much as a young bandito marching home from a successful raid. I wasn't dressed much better. There had been no time to change my grubby clothes, and I'm sure I smelled faintly of cow manure. In the old days, I might have wasted time feeling ashamed and inadequate. Clearly, if you noticed my ragtag boy up there—and how could you not?—you would know what an inept mother I was.

This time, I decided that we'd done the best we could that day. Shen Bo was proud he had dressed himself, big brother Brendan had pitched in, and our cow's calf had been successfully delivered. Mark slid into the seat next to me and we held hands, grinning and waving at Shen Bo as he stood and (cont. on p. 5)

mark slid into the seat next to me and we held hands, grinning and waving at Brian as he stood among the rows of children, seeming not to notice that his outfit was unlike any other on stage. He was proud and (can't from a cheer) cheerful voice. Did other parents raise their eyebrows? Probably. Did I care? Yes, I did—but not enough that I missed the fun and bubbling joy of all those children singing their hearts out.

On many another day, before and since, humor has saved us. Hang on to your sense of humor. Raising children is serious business, but if you can't laugh at yourself, you're sunk. Laughter is good medicine, the only all-purpose human antidote. It doesn't cure parental imperfections, but it can help wounded pride. Remember the parent's prayer: "Dear Lord, if this is a test, please grade me on the curve. Amen."

**Forgive**

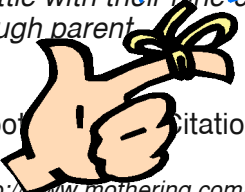
By forgive I mean forgive yourself. As a parent, I have done more wrong, stupid, and angry things than you can imagine. All I can do now is try to be better today. It is one thing to review your blunders; it another to use them to paralyze yourself with guilt. As long as you do your best to be a careful, responsible parent, you can relax and enjoy your work, your children, and your spouse. Don't blame yourself every time something goes wrong. You're not an inadequate or bad parent because your child isn't perfect. Give yourself a break.

**Good-enough Parenting: Advantages for your child**

When we back away from our attempts to be paragons, we give our children an incredible gift. Brautigam Mills says that "The good-enough parent is all that is really needed to raise children who become normal adjusted adults. Let's start by giving up this 'perfection' business. No one is perfect—not you, and not your child. Mistakes in parenting are opportunities to teach our children [that] when mistakes happen, there is a process whereby we can admit it, know what must be done, and move on to recovery or forgiveness." When researchers studied babies and young children raised by "superparents," they discovered something unexpected. These children suffered what clinicians called "baby burnout." Everything had always been done for them. They had been raised like hothouse flowers, and as a result, their creativity—their willingness to explore the unfamiliar—had been smothered.

When we impose frenetic schedules on our children and ourselves, we keep them from discovering how to simply be. They inhale our worry about doing everything just so—more to the point, our fear of doing anything wrong—and become just as hesitant and fearful as we are. But by not being overwhelmed with a barrage of choices and toys, and being challenged by simple toys and the time to create, children can develop the longer attention spans that true creativity requires. By modeling for them how we, their parents, can take time for ourselves, we help our children understand that everyone has value.

Marybeth Lambe is a physician and writer. She and her husband live on an organic dairy farm near Seattle with their nine children. After 22 years of parenting, Marybeth still struggles with being a good-enough parent.



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\*\*Footnote citations were omitted due to lack of space. Email at: [http://www.mothing.com/Style/Emily\\_Gul/inspiration/good-enough-parenting](http://www.mothing.com/Style/Emily_Gul/inspiration/good-enough-parenting)

**books that you have  
borrowed so that others  
may borrow them.**

**\*\*\*\*Our sling library is no  
longer available.\*\*\*\***

API of Stark Co. morning meeting - Feb. 13, 10:00 a.m.  
API of Stark Co. evening meeting - Feb. 22, 6:00 p.m.  
All meetings are held at The Breastfeeding Center in Massillon.

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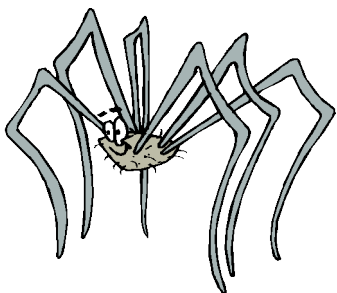
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## Websites:

**Attachment Parenting International:**

[www.attachmentparenting.org](http://www.attachmentparenting.org)

**API-Canton Home Page:**

<http://www.orgsites.com/oh/apicantoncircle/index.html>

**API-Canton Discussion Group:**

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/APIheartsofCanton>

**The Breastfeeding Center:**

<http://www.thebreastfeedingcenter.com>

2800 Lincoln Way East (front door faces Elizabeth Ave)

Massillon, OH

330-837-0220

## Membership Corner

### NOW HIRING!

We are looking for co-leaders to help lead meetings. Requirements include: membership to API, having parented AP with one child for at least one year, and attendance to prior API meetings. We are also in need of a group treasurer, activities coordinator, enrichment meetings leader, fundraising coordinator, and greeter. In order to hold a group position, you must be a member. Please see Traci if you are interested.

Membership is not required to attend our meetings but your yearly dues are important to promote and sustain the activities of our group and support the work of API's national headquarters. With a yearly \$35 membership fee you are not only insuring continued education and support for yourselves and other families within your community but you will receive four quarterly issues of API news, have access to our book and sling lending libraries, have access to a research database and become a part of an international network of parents, professionals, and organizations who support attachment parenting. If you are interested in making flexible payments, please see us after the meeting, or by phone or e-mail.

Thank you to the following families who are supporting API through membership:

The Singree Family  
 The Dunnerstick Family  
 The Keoshian Family  
 The Corey/Hall Family  
 The Kemp Family  
 The Mullane Family  
 The Garrett Family