

IN SEARCH OF PERFECTION

The Pressure, the Pressure

Lessons learned on the front lines of modern motherhood

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The images of motherhood that loomed large when I was growing up came from two sources: TV and the church.

On television, the classic sitcom mom wore a dress with pearls and had dinner and maybe a martini ready when her husband came home from work. In church, there was Mary, in her sky-blue robes, smiling serenely at the baby Jesus or gazing vaguely at the floor. Her perfect holiness seemed so unachievable, I didn't measure my mother against her. But I did wish my mom, who was prone to sporting shorts and bare feet, would greet my father at the door in heels, pearls and wifely sweetness as the TV moms did.

Expectations of what a mother should be change according to era, reflected in and refracted by the culture. That solicitous TV mom gave way to the wisecracking mom, but women still fall prey to the whammy of idealized momminess. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 71 percent of women in the labor force had children under 18 in 2005, yet we are still striving to meet 1950s-era cultural expectations of stay-at-home moms. Wooed by the post-feminist promise that they could "have it all," today's women find they have to do it all.

That may not sound fair to the husbands and partners of these women, who presumably share the load. But even among those of us who enjoy a 50-50 arrangement, women often approach their 50 percent differently. To many, it still feels like 100 percent.

As some brain researchers have concluded, and psychologist Michael Gurian explained in his 2004 book, "What Could He Be Thinking? How a Man's Mind Really Works," men are better at compartmentalizing. When they're at work, they're at work, it seems. But when a working mother is at her job, at the same time she's aware she has to make an appointment with the pediatrician to get her son's rash checked and she has to take her daughter to Sports Authority after dinner to get new soccer cleats. She knows she needs to stop by Safeway on the way home to get cupcake mix to bake cupcakes for the class party, and on her lunch hour she needs to pick up invitations for the birthday party, or thank-you notes if the party has already happened or a present for someone else's birthday. She needs to stop by Walgreens to get acne

medicine for her teenager and lice shampoo for her younger one because there has been an outbreak in her class and she was possibly infected, so as soon as she gets home she'll have to strip the beds and wash all the sheets too, just in case.

Part of the stress we as mothers feel is trying to make it look as if we have everything under control, and our co-existing lives aren't bleeding into each other. We can't let on that we're worried about how he did on his math test or whether she got the part in the play or if the bully took his lunch money or the mean-girl clique whispered lies about her. We can't reveal that our kids are on our minds, in the foreground or the background, even when we're using our brains and hands to do other things.

When a child is sick, more often than not it's the mother who takes off work to stay home, or comes home from work when she gets the call from school that her little one has just puked in the trash can or fallen off the play structure and broken her arm.

When the weekly school newsletter arrives, as a mom I see it as an errand-generating machine. Between the lines about the Spring Concert, the Science Fair and the Coat Drive for the Poor, I see marching orders to buy dress-up clothes and new shoes for the concert, because she's outgrown the ones she had for the Winter Concert. I know we have to make a trip to Michaels for the big cardboard display board and other art supplies so my kid's experiment results will look bright and attractive. And I fear I'll have to spend an hour going through closets and storage boxes to find discards to donate.

And if I read the announcement but then forget about it, I may find myself on the night before a project or donation is due, dashing out to the store in the dark of night or digging in the garage with a flashlight and a sense of regret that I left this to the last minute.

In our hearts and in our heads, moms are constantly aware of the biological and cultural imperative to nurture our children, physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. The trouble is, the meaning of "nurture" has gotten a lot more complex, and working women are in a perpetual time crunch. In an era when we can barely manage to get dinner on the table, much less clean the house, the mother's job description keeps getting longer and longer. We are expected to orchestrate our kids' social lives, arranging play dates and sleepovers and memorable birthday parties. We coordinate carpools, pickups and drop-offs with the precision of an air traffic controller. Mothers tend to be the ones charged with finding child care, babysitters, summer camps and the right school, in an era when going to the local school is often not the only or preferred option. We also often manage our kids' sports careers: Is he on the right team? Should she "play up" to an older age bracket? Did I miss the signups? Can we afford the registration fee? Should we join the more competitive and more expensive traveling team? Are her soccer socks clean for tomorrow's game?

Many moms feel the need to be college counselors, finding the right SAT prep course, making sure their child is taking the right classes required by the desired schools. One woman I know had a spread sheet to keep track of her daughter's applications -- 10 in all, at \$50 to \$60 a pop. I remember that my parents'

contribution to my college application process -- besides writing checks for two very modest fees -- was asking, "Hey, you done with those applications yet?"

In addition to taking on all these roles for our kids, there's now a cultural expectation that we stay young-looking, slim and hot. Cosmetic surgery is booming. Anti-aging cream is more coveted than ice cream. Highlights are de rigueur at the first sign of gray, so legions of Baby Boomers have formed a giant blond army. I'm not advocating that moms let themselves go, but I know that in previous times, mothers have been revered for being super-loving, not supermodels.

The burden of being a perfect modern American mother is a heavy one. Every time I don't pass the cupcake test -- when a more perfect mom brings homemade cupcakes to a school event to which I could barely manage to haul a package of store-bought -- I feel inadequate. But if I can shake off the out-of-date cultural expectations and peer pressure, I can focus on the really important jobs, all of which I share with my husband: providing good, healthy food, eaten together as a family, helping with homework, cuddling on the couch, having fun together on the weekends, tucking someone in at the end of the day, listening to my children, cheering them on and offering comfort for every skinned knee, literal or metaphorical. That's the mom I want to be: more than a chauffeur and maid, less than a college adviser and sports agent. Just Mom.

Luckily, my middle school daughter won't have the same cultural baggage to throw off when she grows up. TV has fed her images of sassy single moms, divorced moms, remarried moms, working moms, lesbian moms, gay dads, cool dads, involved dads. She's seen onscreen and in life that there is no one perfect version of motherhood or parenting. It's an idiosyncratic affair. The part that's universal is love.

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