

Finding Your “Momstyle”

Michelle has one of the toughest jobs in the world. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, no breaks and no sick leave. Michelle is a Mom. The job is made harder by the fact that no one told her about the real job requirements or emotional demands. Before she had her first baby, she saw Moms lounging at the park with smiling infants, became misty eyed at Pampers’ commercials, and envied Moms with darling babies at grocery stores. Now she finds herself feeling ambivalent about motherhood, and surrounded by expectations she can’t meet. She worries constantly about being a good mother. She’s sure that the way she feels isn’t normal.

Ironically Michelle’s reactions are true for the majority of women who become mothers. In the Motherhood Report, a large group of mothers were interviewed to find out how women really felt about being mothers. The researchers found one in four women were realistic about what motherhood would be like. Only 3 percent of the women started with negative images of being a mom while 70 percent admitted they had unrealistically positive fantasies. Here’s what the Moms said: 25 percent of the women thought motherhood was a positive experience; 25 percent thought motherhood was a negative experience. The majority, 50 percent, were completely ambivalent about the experience.

Why do most women enter motherhood like Michelle, completely unprepared for the reality that lies ahead? There are three reasons; social myths, social pressures and unfinished emotions from childhood.

But the commercials say babies are angels - right?

As adults, we watch angelic infants with wings float through diaper commercials. As children, we practiced with baby dolls that looked cute and did what we wanted. Other women may even tell us about the joy of pregnancy, the immediate bonding with a baby, and the ecstasy of breastfeeding. Then reality rudely intrudes. I once heard a new mom mutter, “Where was the joy of pregnancy? Was it the fatigue, the nausea, or the physical discomfort - did I miss something?” These popular motherhood myths make women feel isolated and abnormal. If a new mom gets frustrated with her baby, takes time to bond, or thinks breastfeeding is inconvenient or painful, she may worry she isn’t motherhood material.

Don’t new mothers get superpowers?

Social pressures also encourage mothers to be martyrs. Once a woman becomes a mother, the list of expectations exceeds God or superman. She shouldn’t need sleep, ever get angry, or have any needs -- other than caring for her baby. The more a mother sacrifices, the more she’s succeeding in her job. If a Mom sometimes resents her baby, feels trapped, or misses her formerly carefree life she feels bad because she doesn’t know that other women also experience these feelings.

Why do I feel like a baby myself?

Unfinished emotions from childhood come up with every turn of the motherhood experience. During pregnancy women often regress emotionally, feel dependent, and crave protection (along with pickles and ice cream). No one tells mothers-to-be, that pregnancy is only a training ground for re-experiencing every stage that their baby goes through. Even without a conscious memory, new mothers will physically and emotionally start remembering *their* infancy. Darcy, a new mother told me she remembered feeling terrified that she and her husband would divorce after her baby’s birth. She thought

she was going crazy. She finally asked her mother about her own babyhood. Her mother told her that when she was three months old, her father and she had separated for three months due to serious conflicts. The mother had never previously told her daughter about the separation.

And then there are those pesky hormones...

On top of all these challenges, add the hormones that rush through a new mother's body and you can see why so many mothers burn out. The burn-out can happen immediately with post-partum depression or more gradually. Symptoms can include overeating, not eating, insomnia, sleeping too much, fits of rage, inability to concentrate, constant anxiety, constant crying, or feeling numb.

What's a new mom to do?

How can you immunize yourself from burning out when you're a new mother? Start by choosing a "momstyle" that works for you. When you become a mother you enter a zone of "shoulds" that can mess with your gut instincts about what's best for your children and you.

"To work or not to work," is an initial question many mothers puzzle over. No one can tell you what the right choice is about working. Motherhood is a great opportunity to compare who you thought you were with who you really are. Many women who happily commit to being full-time Moms are going crazy by the time their baby is three months old. Other Moms committed to climbing the corporate ladder, are shocked to find they'd trade the boardroom for the baby's bedroom any day of the week. The choice of working is a trade off between economic necessity, how much emotional satisfaction you get from work, and your relationship with your child. Only *you* have the right to evaluate the trade-offs for you and your family.

Stop trying to live up to unrealistic expectations. Find a support group (formal or informal) where you can tell the truth about your motherhood experience without being judged. Mothers feel everything from passionate love to passionate hatred towards their children. The entire spectrum of feelings is normal.

If you need help get it. Mothering is a big job. No matter how much we swear we won't do what our parents did, we often automatically repeat our parents' words and actions. Parenting is a skill and doesn't come naturally. Learning through classes, books, tapes or therapy can be helpful.

Change your goals from being a perfect parent to being a good enough parent. Accepting your own weaknesses and inadequacies means your children will be able to do the same for themselves. If you make a mistake, admit it.

Don't give up your own life. What did you do that recharged your batteries before children? Make time to do those activities now or you will quickly lose yourself and your enthusiasm for mothering.

Set limits and meet your own needs. The idea that a good mother never says "no" means a child doesn't learn to deal with frustration, learn self-discipline or learn empathy for others.

Make time for your marriage. If you sacrifice your relationship to your children, your children will suffer in the long run. Your marriage is where kids learn models for how to be intimate and love.

Like any job, motherhood can be fulfilling, and satisfying if you have realistic expectations, and the support you need to do the work. Give yourself permission to find your own "momstyle" and listen to your instincts about what your kids and you need.

Most moms fiercely hope that their kids grow up knowing how to love and take good care of themselves. Most moms also know that kids learn from what you do not what you say. The gift of self-love is a legacy parents teach through their lives not their words. Carving out a unique mothering style that takes care of you, and trusts yourself (even if your choices swim upstream against cultural pressures) will give your kids permission to do the same.

Sidebar:

The War Between Moms

The choice to work or stay home has become a battleground between mothers that need each others' support. Some members of the media, religious leaders, and social leaders have changed what *should* be a personal choice for a personal lifestyle into a morale combat zone. For instance, if you listen to Dr. Laura, the radio psychologist, you may hear that you'll ruin your baby's life if you don't stay home full-time. On the other hand, research shows that stay-at-home Moms are the most depressed group in America.

Staying home has been perceived as a luxury that women who have the resources should enjoy. If a woman's economic situation means she has to work, she may feel pitied as "less fortunate." If a woman doesn't have to work, but wants to work, she may be seen as "selfish." A husband may also feel social pressure to keep his wife home or guilty that she has to work. All these beliefs can cause parents to do what they think they should do rather than what will make them happiest.

There's no one formula that fits all when it comes to mothering lifestyles. Even the research is confusing. Some studies prove the benefits of working, other studies prove working or working part-time is best. When mothers get pitted against each other, they lose their ability to see common interests. The toughest job in the world becomes even tougher when mothers fight with their natural allies -- other mothers. Developing tolerance for different "momstyles" would allow mothers to use each others' strengths rather than targeting each others' weaknesses.

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