



THE MUMS ARE



ALRIGHT

Is it time to embrace the concept of the 'good-enough mother'? Sarah Lang puts the question to Kiwi mums

Recently, in a magazine profile, actress Kate Hudson cheerfully talked about getting a 'World's Okayest Mom' mug from her eldest son, Ryder, 12. As a career-driven single mother, she's open about dividing her attention, and I admire her for that. But I have to admit I wouldn't want that mug. Theo, you're not even two-and-a-half, but eventually I'll want a 'World's Greatest Mum' mug. Maybe a 'Really Extremely Good Mum' one will do.

However, my hankering for affirmation on a mug doesn't gel with my refusal to buy into impossible ideals of motherhood. As a partially reformed perfectionist and an unreformed contrarian, I know intellectually that perfectionist or competitive parenting sets you up to feel inadequate. But despite being determined not to judge myself as a mother, I still did so during my son's first two years. It's really, really hard not to.

Although my husband and I share parenting 50/50 when we're both home, as the primary caregiver I felt I should be on top of things. When Theo's eczema kept getting infected, when he refused all vegetables, when I worked one, two then three days a week, I often questioned whether I was a good mother. With so much conflicting information out there, the right thing to do was often unclear. Meanwhile my couch with crackers in its cracks and the neglected laundry hampers didn't compare favourably to social media posts of cherubic toddlers munching on celery sticks.

I can now see I was running myself ragged on 'mummy days' to stimulate and entertain my son. It was all Baby Rock'n'Rhyme, visits to the playground, library, etc, to the point where I'd get home exhausted to a messy house and Wattie's toddler dinners in a can. I felt I was falling short. But falling short of what? No one was grading me. I almost wished they were, so I knew where I stood. Then I came across the term 'good-enough mother' while speaking to a psychologist, and discovered it had been around a long time. The concept was developed in 1953 by Donald Winnicott, a paediatrician and child psychologist who >>

interacted with thousands of babies and their mothers in London. His theory was that the way to be a good mother was to be a good-enough mother.

“The good-enough mother provides physical care and meets her baby’s need for emotional warmth and love,” he wrote. A good-enough mother is very focused on motherhood. She provides security and warmth. She makes sacrifices. But she’s also a three-dimensional human being. She has faults. She sometimes feels resentment and anger. She sometimes prioritises her own needs.

The concept provided women with a simple, non-judgemental perspective, but it was never about letting them off the hook, so to speak. As Winnicott argued, the good-enough mother is best for the child too.

“To achieve this shift from the baby’s total dependence to relative dependence the good-enough mother has, by a gradual process, to fail to adapt to her baby’s needs in order that the baby can begin to learn to tolerate the frustrations of the world outside of himself and his mother.”

This way, children find that others’ needs matter. They learn to share. To wait. To adapt to reality.

Over 60 years, the concept has influenced the study of child development, slotting in alongside attachment theory. It’s been rather neglected in recent decades, but many psychologists think it’s making a comeback, and that it’s about time.

Dr Peter Gray, an American author, developmental psychologist and research professor, recently wrote about Winnicott’s theory for *Psychology Today*: “The good-enough parent isn’t just the only option for imperfect people. The good-enough parent is the best parent. If Goldilocks tried various parents, here’s the one she would choose.”

I’d heard enough to try out this approach by keeping it front of mind. I decided so long as my son’s physical and emotional needs were met, anything over and above would be a bonus. That’s not to say I stopped trying to be a really good mother in the ways that matter most to me. It’s just saying that on the days something or everything went wrong, good enough was enough, and I wouldn’t berate myself.

To avoid exhaustion, I tweaked my approach to ‘mummy days’. I decided outings were for the mornings, mixing it



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up so I didn’t get bored. Now, when my son naps, I often take time out for myself, whether that’s reading, meditating or watching *The Bachelorette*, rather than catching up on chores. Most afternoons now involve quiet time. My son loves ‘helping’ me – especially with cooking – while the expectation he will entertain himself at times has seen him invent some imaginative games.

Because I’m not trying to measure up to the nebulous term ‘good mother’, I rarely feel like a ‘bad mother’. I still don’t want a World’s Okayest Mom mug, but bringing this lens to motherhood has made me a happier, more relaxed parent. However, when I told a friend I found the concept powerful, she pulled a face.

“But we want to be better than good enough,” she said. I was surprised. “If good enough isn’t good enough, where does that leave us?” I replied. She changed the subject, but I kept wondering what other mothers thought.

So I asked for opinions among mothers’ groups on Facebook. I was inundated with responses, and observed some back-and-forth debate. Whatever their views on the

concept itself, women sure felt strongly about it, whether they’d known about it for ages or were hearing it for the first time.

“I don’t know of fathers who worry whether they’re doing a good-enough job,” said Wellington mum-of-two Anna Sedcole, “but I know hardly any mothers who don’t feel guilty at points and worry whether they’re doing the right thing.”

Renee, an Auckland working mum who wanted only her first name used, thinks the quest to be the perfect mother stems from idealising both “the perfect 1950s housewife and the modern-day superwoman. But there’s only so much of me after work, with no support from the father or family. It’s just me. Being good enough resonates with me as I’m never good enough in my own head.”

She recently started cutting back her daughter’s extra-curricular activities and setting realistic expectations for cooking, housework and cleaning. “I need the power not to be perfect.”

So does Wellington mum-of-three Sarah-Jane Szabo. “Like most modern women, I’ve fallen into the trap of trying to be the perfect everything to everyone. But

‘I don’t know of fathers who worry whether they’re doing a good enough job’

you end up being mediocre to them and sometimes downright abusive to yourself. I think if we were a little more honest with our sisters, we wouldn't all put ourselves under such pressure."

Meanwhile, many women with perfectionist leanings were ambivalent about the good-enough-mother concept.

"It's like you're getting to a certain level then stop trying," said Wellington teacher and new mum Charlotte Machin French. She thinks our attempts to excel in our careers set unrealistic expectations for motherhood. "So the idea of being just good enough at anything is something we'll eternally struggle with.

"Maybe we should think more about what we're going to be 'good enough' at to allow ourselves to be excellent at other stuff? For example, I'll only ever be almost good enough at the housework or dishes, but I'm more than good enough as a cook and an engaged parent."

Many women who felt 'good enough' had negative connotations proposed alternative terms like 'I am enough', 'a sufficient mother' and 'perfectly adequate'. For them, these are important distinctions. "Semantics matter, particularly for perfectionists like myself who arguably need the message most," Ruth Russell posted. "In some ways 'good enough' sounds like you've dropped the 'not'."

Wellington mum-of-two Wendy Harper prefers 'being enough'. "[Otherwise] I always find myself thinking, 'What on earth is good enough? How is all of this measured?' And then the cycle of overthinking and anxiety spirals."

Claire Jolly, a Wellington teacher, couldn't accept 'good enough' as a concept to aim for. "As often as I physically, emotionally, mentally can, my kids deserve more than my average... they deserve my very best!"

Later, Jolly messaged me. "Since giving birth to my second child, I've modified my ideas around the phrase. I think being good enough is actually being freaking fantastic because good enough means you've got happy, healthy kids. I still want to be an Exceptional Mum, but most days I'm good enough. And that's good enough!"

Like many women, she warmed to the concept if it's about still trying to be great mothers when and how we can, but not beating ourselves up on the bad days.

Dr Melanie Woodfield, an Auckland

I still want to be an Exceptional Mum, but most days these days, I'm good enough'

clinical psychologist, says it's helpful to remember the concept applies to parenting practices, rather than personal characteristics. Many women she works with at the Auckland DHB's Kari Centre hadn't heard the phrase. "I often remind women that they only need to be 'good enough' and to tune into their instincts about what their child needs – and what they're capable of and their limits at any one moment – rather than comparing themselves to others."

Social media can be unhelpful, says Woodfield. "It contributes to this mistaken perception other people's lives are better than ours, that they're doing more. But that's rubbish. That's what people choose to post. And coffee groups can be fabulous but often no one admits to failings or vulnerabilities.

"We come away feeling like everyone else is doing better." As mother to boys aged six and eight, she gets it.

"We feel we should be able to keep it all together. To counter that, we try harder and do more, or feel we should be doing more but don't, and that's an uncomfortable place to be. In the modern Western world, we add a whole lot of unnecessary complexities to a journey that's hard enough already."

René Syler agrees. The American psychology graduate and mum-of-two, wrote the book *Good Enough Mother: The Perfectly Imperfect Book Of Parenting*, which spawned the popular website goodenoughmother.com, and landed her speaking gigs worldwide.

"All my friends were trying to provide the perfect childhoods for their kids," she says. "I just knew there was a better way and imperfection was it. Sometimes good enough is perfect!"

Her top tips? "You have a right and responsibility to be as good to yourself as you are to everyone else in your life. And stop worrying about what everyone else is doing and just do what works for you." □

10 ways to be a 'good-enough mother'

- 1 Choose a term that resonates with you, eg 'I am enough', 'a sufficient mother', 'an imperfect mother', 'a perfectly adequate mother'.
- 2 Consciously change the question you ask yourself to 'Am I a good-enough mother?' (or whatever term you prefer).
- 3 Ask yourself what you would say to a friend who was worrying that she wasn't a good mother.
- 4 Choose to be excellent at some things (eg messy play, cooking) and accept being average at others.
- 5 For pre-schoolers, choose only one high-energy outing a day. For schoolchildren, one weekly activity is enough – for them and you.
- 6 Don't worry about others judging your parenting. They're almost definitely not doing so – and if they are, so what?
- 7 Don't feel you always have to entertain them. Let children play by themselves sometimes. It builds imagination and initiative.
- 8 Whether you're working part-time, full-time, or staying home, what works best for you is best for your child, too.
- 9 When there's conflicting information or advice, follow your instincts about what's right for your family.
- 10 Accept you can't control everything. For instance, you can create the conditions for toddlers to nap, but it's not your fault if they don't.