

A PIECE OF MY MIND

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A Good Mother

How do I know if I am a good mother?

Throughout high school, college, and medical school, I chased after positive praise in the form of honor rolls, accolades, and awards. With hard work and a type A personality, I collected them, each form of external validation a sort of feather in my cap. A cap that was never complete, but in constant need of bigger, more colorful feathers. I ultimately chose a career in surgery because as a surgeon, immediate feedback is abundant. A lot of it is negative, but at least it is obvious where one stands.

During the 9 years I spent as a surgical trainee, I grew so accustomed to criticism that the absence of it was itself a form of praise. In residency, we joked that if one of the grouchy attending surgeons let out fewer than 5 exasperated sighs during an operation with us, we had succeeded. Frequent nitpicking and reprimand became comfortable and familiar, sporadic praise an unexpected delight.

Now too, as an academic surgeon in practice, it is easy to seek and find both positive and negative feedback.¹ If a manuscript I write is rejected following peer review, or an operation takes longer than I think it should, I make changes and improve. Alternatively, if a patient of mine has a smooth recovery from an operation or a resident compliments my teaching, I feel

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satisfied: a box is checked, a metric met, a goal achieved. Even better, when a patient with pancreatic cancer, still alive 18 months after surgery, brings me homemade cookies at Christmas, my glass is full.

But what about as a mother? How do I know that I am doing a good job?

My own mother worked as an elementary school teacher to support my father through his surgical training, ultimately staying at home to raise my older sister and me.² Sharp-witted and intellectually curious, I imagine she would have been a museum curator or literary critic had she grown up in a different decade. Occasionally bemoaning the monotony of laundry and dishwashing, she nevertheless devoted herself fully to motherhood, regularly prioritizing our needs over her own. Now for me, as a working mom, it has been hard to reconcile the practical example my mother set as an attentive, full-time parent, with the career ambition she worked so hard to instill in me. Ultimately, despite my

intense aspirations for professional success, a drive to emulate my mother has been the real undercurrent in my life, an unseen but strong tide pulling at me beneath the surface.

A good friend gave a lecture at an academic surgical meeting about the elusive concept of “work-life balance,” sharing the idea that our time can be represented by bubbles or spheres that alternately shrink or swell in importance based on the changing demands and circumstances of a given time. She explained that when she experiences a postoperative complication, her clinical bubble expands, and her time is spent sitting at the bedside, worrying about her patient, making more frequent rounds. When a grant deadline is approaching, her research bubble outgrows the others for a time. I immediately related to this idea, imagining the shimmering spheres of my life floating in front of me, each growing with my breath, some so much that they might accidentally burst.

During the pandemic, I have been working hard to keep up, “treading water,” as my residency program director used to call it. The bubble that represents my family—my husband, 2 children, and 80-year-old mother-in-law—has ballooned so much since last March that it has nearly eclipsed the other bubbles.

I am still operating, seeing patients in clinic, making rounds in the hospital, sitting through countless Zoom meetings. But like most parents in this weird time, my internal focus has shifted, and the shift has been fairly seismic. And it's okay: first and foremost, I am a mother.

There is no doubt that the prolonged quarantine and social distancing resulting from COVID-19 has had a tremendous impact on the professional and personal lives of adults. But as a parent, it is clear that the effects on children are more profound by orders of magnitude. The pandemic has been so hard on my 4-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son, some of the effects tiny little ripples that are barely noticeable and others massive waves that knock us all down, face first into the sand. It is too hard for me to actually write about some of these, at least not yet.

The effects of the pandemic have permeated nearly every aspect of my children's lives, and this comes out in unusual and unexpected ways. When my son first went back to in-person school last fall, he asked me repeatedly if he could look at photos of his friends on the school website. I ultimately realized this was his only way to see them smile without masks on. After a few months, I realized that he does not use the bathroom at school. In order to limit exposures, the only bathroom he is allowed to use is inside his classroom, which he understandably finds embarrassing.

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Just a few weekends ago, I walked into our playroom to find that he had set up a pretend laboratory that consisted of homemade medical intake forms and test tubes. He insisted on testing each family member for coronavirus. Fortunately, his testing revealed we were all negative, including the dog.

The kids' sense of time is now divided into 2 distinct eras: before coronavirus and after. When my daughter shares memories with us, she determines how long ago the event took place according to whether or not she was wearing a mask at the time. She often likes to talk about what she will do when "coronavirus is over," simple requests, like taking ballet lessons, singing in choir, or having a birthday party.

At dinner recently, my husband and I asked both kids what they are most proud of accomplishing in the past year. After spending several minutes in quiet thought, our son answered. He admitted that last summer, he had been nervous about going back to school and being expected to wear a mask all day. He was most proud that he had been able to do this after all. This stood out to him as an even greater accomplishment than learning to ride a bike, reading chapter books, or understanding second-grade math. I think he is right.

Of course, the pandemic is by no means over, and we are still in the middle of a vague and seemingly endless time warp. But for the time being, our children are proud of themselves, and we are proud of them.

While the spheres that represent my clinical and academic career have shrunk for now, the bubble of time and energy that my family needs has grown exponentially in dimension. And so, in the absence of discrete, professional success, the measure of my merit as a mother has grown in its relative importance to me over the past year. I have spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to be a better mom, wondering what my own mother might have done in this situation. But unlike my professional life, feedback at home is elusive, and if I am not looking for it, it is easy to miss.

Recently, my son wrote a story for his younger sister about a unicorn who wants to learn how to dance but is nervous that she will

not be good enough or will be teased by other unicorns. Ultimately, the unicorn overcomes her anxiety and goes to the dance class, but only after her mother promises that she is proud of her, no matter what. Can I read between the lines and see this as a message of mothering success? Has my love and reassurance helped him overcome some of his own anxiety this year?

When I had a parent-teacher conference with my daughter's preschool teacher, she remarked with astonishment that each concern that I brought up was identical to the concerns that she had on her own list to discuss. Does *that* mean I am doing something right? Am I paying attention to the right things? I'd sure like to think so.

I recently finished reading the popular novel *Nothing to See Here*, by Kevin Wilson,³ about several children with a condition that causes them to spontaneously combust into flames when they get upset. One of the children's mothers explains, "It happened, and it was terrifying, but then [he] was still [himself] afterward. He was sweet. He was mine. And I felt like, okay, I can do that. However many times it happens, I can do it."

During this odd time of quarantine and family isolation, there have been times when it feels like my children do this too: they burst into flames as their ability to cope with the demands placed upon them is overwhelming. They are scared. They are bored. They cannot hug me when I come home from work until after I change clothes. Their world seems both mundane and unpredictable, at the same time. As their mother, the flames are terrifying to watch at times. But they are mine, and I am there to put the fire out. Again, and again, as many times as it takes.

Yet how do I know if what I am doing is enough? What is the measure of success, here, exactly? There are no pats on the back, no certificates or medals, nothing to put on my curriculum vitae. There is no award for devoting inordinate time and energy to mothering during a long and drawn-out pandemic.

There is only my breath, blowing into our bubble, praying that it won't burst.

Conflict of Interest Disclosures: None reported.

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2. Snyder RA. This quiet lady. *JAMA*. 2020;323(3):215-216. doi:10.1001/jama.2019.21664

3. Wilson K. *Nothing to See Here*. HarperCollins Publishers; 2019.