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THE PERFECT MOTHER MYTH

Written by Emily Hourican

Ten years ago this month, I had my first baby. A boy. He was utterly beautiful, and inspired in me a joy and a love I could never have believed possible. I made him a promise, in the moments after his birth, that I was going to do this **right**. I would cut no corners, neglect no detail, spare no effort. This baby was going to be launched into life with every possible advantage I could give him.

Right there in the labour ward, I planned an ideal future for both of us, and smugly enumerated the ways in which we had started well. Lots of yoga and swimming during pregnancy, just like the books recommended. Some 'positive visualisation' (hard to ignore that little voice that kept telling me 'you are so creepy!', but I tried). A natural birth (I doubt that much of what happened in that labour ward seemed natural to my husband; in fact, in retrospect I realise that the shell-shocked look on his face had less to do with the wonder of new life, than with the screaming, blood and gore he witnessed on the way to it), and of course breast-feeding.

Of course breast-feeding! The Holy Grail of 'good mothers', the ABC of Best Possible Starts. It produces babies with higher IQs, better health, greater empathy, more resilience to allergies, less likelihood of obesity... Doesn't it? Actually, no, not proven, anyway. Although it definitely does help with reducing instances of gastro-enteritis, many of the other wonder-claims are still pretty spurious. But I wasn't hearing that, ten years ago. I was entirely focussed on hunting down the recipe for Perfect Motherhood, determined to follow it to the letter. Co-sleeping, baby-led weaning, skin-to-skin contact, lots of fresh air and classical music; really, it was very simple.

Actually, it was pretty hard. Especially breast-feeding. Painful – the squeamish can turn away now, but for the rest of you, I will just quickly mention bleeding, cracked nipples and the rock-hardness of a cheap South American boob-job – and constant. Those books that cheerfully said 'breast-fed babies tend to feed every three hours...' were like a kind of mocking ambient track to the relentless 20-minute cycle of feeding that my little darling was engaged in.

Much of the rest of the Perfect Motherhood recipe proved equally disappointing, in the same way that following a recipe for a cake, and finding that, even though you have faithfully implemented every stage, the results are a bit, well, flat, is disappointing.

By the time the baby was four months old, I had begun to realise that something was very wrong, presumably with me. No matter how hard I chased it, the ideal vision of motherhood never quite seemed to materialise in my life. There was more crying (baby's and mine), more mess, more bewilderment, fewer aerodynamically-designed kitchens and designer clothes, than I had expected. None of it seemed to be going according to plan. Not my plan anyway. Maybe because I couldn't quite fix what The Plan was in my mind. Each time I thought I knew exactly what I was doing, something new would be thrown at me. 'Studies show babies who cry it out are more independent and self-confident,' a headline would scream, and suddenly I would be wracked with doubt again. Was picking him up every time he uttered a squeak actually a **bad** thing...?

By the time Baby was five months old, I was in a real mess. I had started back at work, and every day at lunchtime, I snuck off to the truly revolting loos – rarely clean, often filthy – that our offices shared with the comedy club downstairs (there was nothing funny about those loos), locked myself in and expressed for his next day's feed. Those were certainly some of the most miserable hours I have ever spent. In a filthy loo, with my breast pump and sterilised bags, in agonies of missing the baby, torn apart with guilt, and somewhere, deep inside, conscious that what I was doing was ridiculous, over the top, unnecessary. I probably seemed like an extreme lactivist, but I wasn't. Just a miserable, insecure, heartbroken new mother.

So why did I do it? Why not just cheerfully measure out some formula, give him a bottle and give myself a break? Because I had fallen, hook, line and sinker, for the Myth of the Perfect Mother. This idea that we not only can, but must, create the perfect environment for our children. That every single thing we do has deep, far-reaching consequences for their development. That if we 'fail' at any of the mummy stuff – feed them non-organic puree, forget to teach them chess, offer praise in the 'wrong' way (yes, there is a 'wrong' way) – they are Doomed, Doomed I tell ya! By the impossible standards of the Perfect Mother Myth, I felt a total failure by the time my child was six months old – not only was I using disposable nappies and had only the sketchiest of 'routines', I was back working when I should still have been wearing him in a sling for constant skin-to-skin contact; hey, in their eyes, the game was over for me almost before it had begun.

Tired, frazzled, emotionally fraught, I was still determined to do this ‘right’. But every book I read seemed only to make me feel worse. Their ‘simple solutions’ to the various problems that beset new babies, seemed impossibly complicated when applied to my baby. Their recommendations never made any difference to the feeling of panic and chaos than ran, like an underground river, through my life, and the smug calmness of their tone made me want to tear my hair out and run screaming into the distance.

So I upped the ante. I decided to Have a Bath with Baby.

All the baby books went on about what a **lovely** idea this was – the ‘perfect’ way to bond, to get that all-important skin-to-skin contact, and quality time. The books wanted the whole family in the bath together, but I drew the line at that. Although I did insist my husband join us in the bathroom at least. He sat on the edge of the loo, head buried in the newspaper, trying to ignore what was going on around him. I, meanwhile, sat in a tepid bath (any water hot enough for me was going to scald the baby), that wasn’t deep enough, trying to stop the baby’s head from slipping under, and thinking “well this isn’t ‘lovely’. It’s horrible!” Then, guiltily, “God, I wish I was in here on my own, door locked, adorable baby safely on the other side of it, with scorching hot water up to my chin and a Jilly Cooper novel...”

It was a revelation. From there, I began to work other things out. If the books could be so very wrong about Having a Bath with Baby, what else might they be wrong about? Well, an awful lot, as it turns out. Over the next ten years, through two more babies, I slowly started to work out the giant con that is the Myth of Perfect Motherhood. And how very damaging it is.

We live in a society that is completely neurotic about the bringing up of children. There are more books – by many multiples – than ever before, telling us how to parent like Eskimos, like cavewomen, like the French, with logic, with magic, with grace, with Jewish teachings, with mindfulness... and on and on and on. Barely a week goes by without a new ‘study’ being written up in the media, claiming that ‘children who learn to swim early have better physical development’, that ‘children who go to bed at a regular hour perform better on cognitive tests’ and even ‘children who tell lies become more successful adults.’

The relentless scrutiny around how, when and where we bring up our children has reached truly obsessive levels. Paying attention to it is like being in a pinball machine when it hits multi-ball – stuff comes at you, hard, from every side; always urgent, always prescriptive, always promising a brighter future for your child.

Partly this has to do with the recent re-jigging of the old Nature v. Nurture battle, with the balance now tipping heavily in favour of nurture. Fifteen years ago, nature was believed, by the various experts who inhabit this field, to have a very significant role to play in the final outcome of a child's development – around 60%, to nurture's 40%. This was good, it meant that blame – and there is always blame – could be shared reasonably equally between parents and genetics. These days, you would be lucky to attribute anything much beyond eye-colour to the parcel of genes. Everything else is down to us, certainly all the bad stuff. 'I blame the parents,' was always the smug response by the unimaginative to childish misbehaviour. Well, now **everyone** blames the parents. And the parents, of course, blame themselves.

Along with our neurotic child-focussed culture, is a growing general culture of catastrophisation. 'Take vitamins or you'll get cancer!' 'Exercise or you will be obese and have Type Two diabetes!' 'Invest in a pension or you will be a penniless old crone.' And the combination of the two is delivering a sucker-punch to parents.

Feeding off that intense pressure is now an entire industry geared towards exploiting the fear and ambition of us parents. It is part and parcel of the usual avalanche of inadequacy-marketing, and for mothers, this translates to: 'buy this buggy, your baby will be better protected.' 'Wear these clothes, you will be yummier.' 'Order these educational DVDs, your child will be smarter.' 'Follow the teachings of this book or your child will be spoilt.' 'Praise your daughter for every single thing she does or she will have low self-esteem and become a drug addict and teenage pregnancy...!' This is where Motherhood turns into Mothers**should**, with all the world busily queuing up to tell you what you **should** be doing, wearing, eating, reading, with your child. And ticking off the consequences if you fail to do these things: spoilt child, fat child, insecure child, lazy child, under-achieving child, can't-go-to-sleep-by-himself child. Lots of advice, all of it conflicting, most of it hysterical.

And of course it is a sure-fire winner for the marketing folk, because never are you more vulnerable than in the six months or so after the birth of your first baby. Never before have you wanted to do anything as well as you want to do this – be a good mother to your darling baby. Never have the stakes been so high, and the consequences of failure so dire.

The act of having a baby separates you from your old life as surely as cutting a kite string on a windy day. You will eventually get some of the old life back, in greatly altered form, and of course you will get a wonderful dimension to your new life; love and joy such as you could

never have imagined. But you will also, very possibly, get hefty doses of loneliness, frustration and boredom.

Certainly I did. When I look back on the early months with my first son, what I remember, apart from the immense love and grit-teeth exhaustion, was the sheer weight of time stretching before me, and the puzzle of what to do with it. Pre-baby, my life was so busy, there were not enough hours in the day to cram in work, socialising, visits to the gym, shopping, and so on. Now, with this darling little infant at my side, the days stretched in front of me, vast and shapeless. Within a few weeks of his birth, I was making the kind of mental calculations that went: “Ok, we could go to the park, but he hates being in his buggy and howls all the time. So maybe we’ll go to the National History Museum, even though he’s way too young for it. At least it’s warm. And then if I have a bun in the National Gallery café, that should take us up to 4.30, and then it’s nearly time home time...”

The loneliness is as much a psychological state as a physical one. Yes, you are isolated and don’t see anyone much except the lady in the chemist who always says ‘gosh, he’s grown,’ even though you were in there the day before, getting yet another wonder drug for infant colic. But you are also mentally lonely, cut off from the old You. I think this is because, in order to step fully into the new world that contains your baby, and function in it, you need to distance yourself from your old world. With time, the two will mesh perfectly, but for the first months, the effort involved will leave you feeling disengaged from what you used to know and rely on. It’s like moving to a new country, with a new language you don’t speak very well and some pretty odd customs you need to get your head around.

And in this vulnerable state of hopeful newness, desperately determined to do right, you are a prime target for the drone-attacks of Mothers**should**. The endless mirror-image held up, showing what your life **should** look like, and the deeply unflattering contrast with reality. The Mothers**should** model seems to involve lots of home baking and creative play, kindness and consistency at all times, careful ‘choices’ around things like after-school activities, beautifully-designed bedrooms with fun, durable child-sized furniture, Mozart playing in the background while baby coos delightedly. Reality? The house is probably chaotic, the food is straight from the ready-meals isle of the local supermarket, the baby is crying, the older children are whining, you are permanently rushing from one duty to the next, squashing down the sneaking feeling that you are short-changing everyone, and the background music is far more likely to be the endless spin-cycle of a washing machine trying to get through the daily mountains of laundry.

I believe we need to wean ourselves off the images of perfection, stop chasing the idealised vision of motherhood that we see in ads, or described in baby books, because in searching for that and lamenting its lack, we are missing the very wonderful stuff that is going on under our noses. In focussing on the ways in which our reality differs from the idealised pictures, we risk missing out on the hilarious, wonderful antics of our own children. We are wishing them away, wishing them different, wondering why the picture doesn't look like the one on TV.

And often, because we are so seduced by the Myth of Perfect Motherhood, we are pretending, to anyone who cares to watch, that our lives are carbon copies of the ideal. How many of us will admit that some small part of ourselves longs to go back to work? To go away for a few days alone? That we have shouted? Been impatient? Turned on the TV early for some peace? That our children sleep in our beds every night, because we can't face the endless battles over bedtime? That we let them eat plain pasta with butter because it saves a meltdown?

And by not telling the truth, even in these small things, we are colluding with the Mothershould industry and pretending to a level of order and perfection that is completely unreal, and undesirable. Instead of subtly dismantling it from within, via a thousand honest conversations in playgrounds and at school gates across the country, we are letting it proliferate and multiply until it makes so much noise, that it is drowning out the most important voices. Our own.

Because the thing is, the person who best knows how to bring up our children is not the 'guru' with the madly-prescriptive sleep plan, its not that lady on TV who talks in a slow, cooing voice about the innate mindfulness of children. It isn't the government, or the WHO, no matter how many 'studies' they have at their fingertips. It's not the woman next door who has five kids. It isn't even our own mothers, helpful as they may be. It's us. Ourselves. Left alone to work it out, we know perfectly well how to raise our own children, in our own families, according to our own principles. We know it because it is etched into us, an instinct that goes back far beyond the span of our lives. And I'm not talking about some kind of Earth Mother clutching her bosom and intoning 'I feel it **here**,' about her decision to chew her baby's food and spit it into his mouth. It's really a lot simpler than that. It's about being as honest with ourselves as we can, and choosing based on simple Utilitarian principles of the greatest good for the greatest number, ie, what is possible, in your family, at that particular time. And after that, getting over it.

It's time to stop agonising, stop getting sucked into the doom game that Mothers should play with our children ('Do this, or **else**...!'. It's like a gun to the head, and the bullet is always your child's unhappiness, dysfunction, inadequacy). Stop feeling guilt over nebulous failures. Stop planning for a future we cannot predict, stop bewailing the fact that the present doesn't look like a Martha Stewart spread. What have I learned in ten years, with three children? Very little, except that it will all be fine. They will go through phases of being impossible, and so will we. And we will all come out of it. There will be times when the delicate balance of home life will feel as if it is tipping into chaos, and then it will right itself and we will all muddle on, messy, happy, hopeful.

So let's laugh off that vision of the beautiful smiling mother in her dream kitchen with delightful compliant children while a fat ginger cat suns herself on the windowsill between the pots of home-grown herbs. Stay deaf to the latest study showing that children who eat quinoa do better at maths. And turn instead to our own noisy, chaotic, possibly muddy houses, with our own adorable, ornery children, who might be watching TV, playing Wii or flinging bricks around, and embrace it. They are our reality, we are theirs. Could anything be more beautiful?

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