

# Being a “Good Enough” Parent

## Objective

To help parents see that it is unrealistic and even unhelpful to try being a perfect parent. Rather, parents can strive to be “good enough,” while teaching their children important resiliency skills so that they learn to handle life’s inevitable problems on their own.

## You Should Know

Many parents strive to be the “perfect” parent, thinking that they can shape their children’s lives to maximize their potential for success and happiness. But being a perfect parent is an impossible task and trying to be perfect may do more harm than good. The popular term “helicopter” parent refers to parents who hover over their children’s lives, trying to protect them from every problem and stress. However, overprotecting children actually keeps them from making their own mistakes and learning from them. By contrast, parents who ignore or tune out or are otherwise emotionally unavailable to their children can also do harm.

Theories about parenting vary widely throughout the world. The term “good enough” parent was originally used by British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (“good enough mother”). Then the concept was expanded upon by attachment theorist John Bowlby, who said that in order for infants to form a secure attachment, which helps them grow and manage life’s challenges, a caretaker must fulfill the child’s basic needs for food and shelter but also provide a sense of emotional safety and authentic human connection.

Every parent has flaws. Every parent makes mistakes. But if they are basically available and attuned to their child as a separate, individual person, the child can grow optimally into an independent adult, even with what are called “empathic failures” or mistakes of attunement. So you don’t have to be perfect, just “human.” This worksheet is designed to help parents learn about the attributes of good enough parenting and offer ideas about what they can do to help their children be more resilient.

## What to Do

Here are some of the attributes of good enough parents for you to review. On the lines below, write down your reactions and reflections to each statement. You might reflect on your own experience as a child in relation to your own parents, in order to learn more about yourself as a parent.

*Perfection is an impossible ideal. Good enough parents don’t expect nor demand perfection from their children. What do you think?*

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*Good enough parents recognize that life has its ups and downs, failures and successes. They spring back from disappointments and take them in stride. What do you think?*

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*Good enough parents see their children not as extensions of themselves, nor are they objects to fulfill the parent's own needs and desires. Children are seen as separate people, smaller and dependent, but separate nevertheless. What do you think?*

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*Good enough parents honor their children's individual needs and wants and treat them respect. What do you think?*

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*Good enough parents make an effort to listen to and understand their children as they are, rather than dictate to or make demands of them to be something else. What do you think?*

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*Good enough parents care about letting their child be a child, rather than focusing on what the child will be like or achieve as an adult. What do you think?*

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*Good enough parents apologize if they make a mistake; they are able to see their own flaws and own them. This is a good model for their children, too. What do you think?*

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*Good enough parents don't do for their children what their children can do for themselves. They are comfortable letting go and letting their children discover how to do things on their own, even if imperfectly. What do you think?*

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*Good enough parents are comfortable being physically present with their children, offering them face-to-face time, responding to them visually, and attuning to their need to be "seen" and "heard." What do you think?*

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*Good enough parents are available to comfort and soothe their children when they are hurt or distressed and are able to tolerate seeing their child experience some discomfort sometimes if no danger is present. What do you think?*

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*Good enough parents are curious about and cheer their children's independence and individual development, helping them to find their own way, their own interests, and their own skills and talents, which might be separate from their own goals and desires. What do you think?*

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## **Reflections on This Exercise**

1. From the list above, which aspect of good enough parenting would you most like to work on for yourself?

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2. How, specifically, would you like to improve your skills at parenting? This might involve

reading, researching, joining a support group, hiring a parenting coach, attending seminars, seeing a therapist.

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3. What about your past might influence or get in the way of your own experience as a parent?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?

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