

Through her column in the *New York Times*--which won her a Pulitzer Prize in 1992--as well as her column in *Newsweek*, Anna Quindlen is one of the best known journalists in the country. In addition to publishing collections of her nonfiction, she is the author of four novels and two children's books, *The Tree Came to Stay* and *Happily Ever After*. The following argument--which draws upon her experience as a child and as a mother--originally appeared in *Newsweek* during the winter of 2005.

### **The Good Enough Mother**

There was a kind of carelessness to my childhood. I wandered away from time to time, rode my bike too far from home, took the trolley to nowhere in particular and back again. If you had asked my mother at any given time where I was, she would likely have paused from spooning Gerber's peas into a baby's mouth or ironing our school uniforms and replied, "She's around here somewhere."

By the new standards of mothering, my mother was a bust. Given the number of times I got lost when I was young, she might even be termed neglectful. There's only one problem with that conclusion. It's dead wrong. My mother was great at what she did. Don't misunderstand: She didn't sit on the floor and help us build with our Erector sets, didn't haul us from skating rink to piano lessons. She couldn't even drive. But where she was always felt like a safe place.

The idea that that's enough is a tough sell in our current culture, and not simply because if one of my kids had been found wandering far from our home there would have been a caseworker and a cop at the door. We live in a perfection society now, in which it is possible to make our bodies last longer, to manipulate our faces so the lines of laughter and distress are wiped out. We believe in the illusion of control, and nowhere has that become more powerful and more pernicious than in the phenomenon of manic motherhood. What the child-care guru D. W. Winnicott once called "the ordinary devoted mother" is no longer good enough. Instead there is an uber-mom who bounces from soccer field to school fair to play date until she falls into bed at the end of the day, exhausted, her life somewhere between the Stations of the Cross and a decathlon.

A perfect storm of trends and events contributed to this. One was the teeter-totter scientific argument of nature versus nurture. When my mother was raising kids, there was a sub rosa assumption that they were what they were. The smart one. The sweet one. Even the bad one. There was only so much a mother could do to mold the clay she'd been dealt.

But as I became a mother, all that was changing. Little minds, we learned from researchers, were infinitely malleable, even before birth. Don't get tense: Tense moms make tense infants. (That news'll make you tense!) In a prenatal exercise class, I remember lying on the mat working on what was left of my stomach muscles, listening to the instructor repeating, "Now hug your baby." If I had weak abs, did that mean my baby went unhugged? Keeping up with the Joneses turned into keeping up with the Joneses' kids.

This craziness sounds improbable in the face of the feminist revolution that transformed the landscape of America during our lifetime. But at some level it is the fruit of that revolution, a comeuppance cleverly disguised as a calling. Every time we take note of the fact that work is not a choice but an economic necessity-- "most women have to work, you know"--it's an apology for freedom. How better to circumvent the power of the new woman than with the idea of mothering not as care but as creation? Every moment for children was a teachable moment--and every teachable moment missed was a measure of a lousy mom.

Quicker than you could say nanny cam, books appeared, seminars were held and modern motherhood was codified as a profession. Professionalized for women who didn't work outside the home: If they were giving up such great opportunities, then the tending of kids needed to be made into an all-encompassing job. Professionalized for women who had paying jobs out in the world: To

show that their work was not bad for their kids, they had to take child rearing as seriously as dealmaking. (Fathers did not have to justify themselves; after all, no man has ever felt moved to say that most guys have to work, you know.)

It's not just that baking for the bake sale, meeting with the teachers, calling the other mothers about the sleepover and looking at the SAT camp made women of both sorts crazy, turning stress from an occasional noun into an omnipresent verb and adverb. A lot of this was not particularly good for kids. If your mother has been micromanaging your homework since you were 6, it's hard to feel any pride of ownership when you do well. You can't learn from mistakes and disappointments if your childhood is engineered so there aren't any.

So much has been written about how the young people of America seem to stay young longer now, well into the years when their grandparents owned houses and had families. But their grandparents never had a mother calling the teacher to complain about a bad grade. And hair-trigger attention spans may be less a function of PlayStation and more a function of kids who never have a moment's peace. I passed on the weekend roundelay of kiddie-league sports so our three could hang out with one another. I told people I hoped it would cement a bond among them, and it did. But I really wanted to be reading rather than standing on the sidelines pretending my kids were soccer prodigies. Maybe I had three children in the first place so I wouldn't ever have to play board games. In my religion, martyrs die.

Our oldest child wrestled custody of his life away from me at a fairly early age, perhaps inspired by an epic bout in which I tried to persuade him to rewrite a perfectly good fourth-grade paper to turn it into an eighth-grade paper. Perhaps I'd been addled by the class art projects, some of which looked like the work of a crack graphics design team--and were. I asked the other day about his memories of my mothering. "You sorta freaked out during the college application process," he noted accurately. But then he wrote, "What I remember most: having a good time." You can engrave that on my headstone right this minute.

There's the problem with turning motherhood into martyrdom. There's no way to do it and have a good time. If we create a never ending spin cycle of have-tos because we're trying to expiate senseless guilt about working or not working, trying to keep up with the woman at school whose kid gets A's because she writes the papers herself, the message we send our children is terrible. By our actions we tell them that being a mom--being their mom--is a drag, powered by fear, self-doubt and conformity, all the things we are supposed to teach them to overcome. It just becomes a gloss on that old joke: Enough about me. What about you? How do you make me feel about myself? The most incandescent memories of my childhood are of making my mother laugh. My kids did the same for me. A good time is what they remember long after toddler programs and art projects are over. The rest is just scheduling.

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What does Quindlen mean when she says, "We live in a perfection society now" (paragraph three)? To what extent do you agree that in a "perfection society" people find it harder to "have a good time"? To develop your position, be sure to discuss specific examples; these examples can be drawn from anything you've read, as well as from your observations and experience.