



Embracing good enough

By Christina Quick

Who said moms have to be paragons of perfection?

The first-grade teacher's request seemed simple enough. Each child was to decorate a slotted box to take to school for Valentine's Day.

"If you don't have time to do a box, a paper lunch sack will work fine," the note in my son's backpack assured me.

But every mother knows better. Like CIA operatives, we're trained to recognize the coded message: *A paper lunch sack will work fine if you want to be remembered forever as a slacker mom so void of maternal drive and creativity you could do no better for your precious offspring.*

We've seen the magazine illustrations depicting

seamless kids' crafts made of plastic beads, chenille wire and foam. We understand by now what's required of us.

Hoping for inspiration, I checked with a friend. A veteran mom who had already sent three kids through elementary school, she nodded knowingly when I mentioned Valentine boxes.

"I probably went a little overboard," she confessed somewhat sheepishly.

She described several of her projects, including a box shaped like a robot her son could move around his classroom by remote control.

"But whatever you do, I'm sure it will be fine," she added. "You could always just go with a paper sack."

I couldn't help feeling inept as I sat at the kitchen table that night staring at an empty cracker box and an assortment of craft supplies. It didn't matter I'd already put in a full day. Duty called.

After explaining he wanted his container to look like a curbside mailbox, complete with a life-size post, my son went to bed early.

Sometime around 1 a.m., after scrapping several initial attempts, I realized this thing

had gotten out of hand. In between painting and pumping a hot glue gun, I had removed yards of newsprint from a roll, thinking the cardboard tube would make an ideal post. The wadded paper was knee-deep in my kitchen floor when I decided the tube was the wrong size. I wondered bitterly why the magazine pictures never showed this sort of thing.

The final irony came several hours later when my son awoke with a fever. Unable to go to school, he spent Valentine's Day watching cartoons with his grandparents while I dragged my sleep-deprived body to work.

No matter. I had passed the test, demonstrating my unflinching willingness to promote familial bliss at any cost. Isn't that what mothers are expected to do every day? At any rate, that's what many women have come to believe.

So why are we so demanding of ourselves? And why do we often feel guilty in spite of our best efforts? Whether we're trying to console a colicky baby, plan a birthday party for a 5-year-old or dispense fashion advice to a

teen, it's hard to ignore the cacophony of voices that insist we somehow find a way to do better.

"Whatever mothers are doing for their kids, they never feel it is enough," says Dr. Susan Douglas, co-author of the book, *The Mommy Myth*:

The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women. "Mothers believe they must keep doing more, more and more, and never make a mistake."

Douglas, a communications studies professor at the University of Michigan, says the media place tremendous pressure on mothers through everything from advertisements for the latest children's products to stories about mothers who appear to have it all.

"In magazines and on television there's an explosion in profiles of seemingly perfect, rich celebrity mothers and all the things they're doing to ensure their children are catered to in every possible way," Douglas says. "These images set an unrealistic, impossible standard of what it takes to be a good mother."

Alongside such stories are alarming studies forecasting doom for children whose mothers feed them red dye and nonorganic produce, overstimulate them, understimulate them, live in the wrong school district, work outside the home, and on and on.

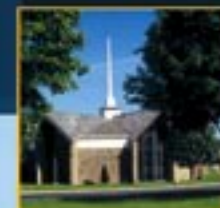
"We're told you make one mistake and there is permanent psychological or physical damage," Douglas says. "Trying to do the best for your kids is one thing. Trying to be perfect is something else. Too many women are attempting to meet a set of standards that's impossible to achieve, where the to-do list never ends."

A friend of mine, a single mom, told me, "I feel like nothing I do is right. I'm running in circles trying to manage it all, but I know I can never make up for the fact there isn't a dad in the picture."

Advertisers prey on maternal

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— Dr. Susan Douglas**

insecurities by suggesting children will be further disadvantaged by not having the right gadgets and educational products.

“The message is if you’re not buying your kids this computer game or this Mozart toy, other savvy mothers are going to do that, and their children are going to leave your children in the dust,” Douglas says.

Dr. Christina Powell, an ordained AG minister and Harvard researcher, says Christian moms are not immune to cultural demands for perfection.

“Within Christian circles, almost more than in secular circles, we feel the pressure to

read all the stuff in Christian bookstores and apply the advice of all the experts,” says Powell, a mother of two and founder of Life Impact Ministries in Boston. “I’ve met moms in churches who are stressed because they’re listening to every piece of advice and trying to get everything exactly right.”

Powell advises moms not to measure themselves by society’s standards, but to look to God and His Word as their ultimate standard.

“There are fads in parenting as there are in everything else,” Powell says. “The expert advice that’s out there now is different from what was being promoted 20 or 30 years ago. But the

Bible’s truth is timeless.”

She notes the Bible teaches that children are a blessing from God — not just a vessel to be filled or a bundle of needs to be met, but a gift to be cherished and enjoyed.

“Sometimes that means putting down the parenting books and getting down on the floor to read a children’s book instead,” Powell says. “I’ve seen a lot of uptight women who are trying so hard they’re missing the fun and the blessing that can happen just from gazing into the eyes of their child and enjoying the gift God gave them.”

Powell says it’s impossible for moms to do everything and be everything for their children. Most women can’t even do all

that the mom next door, or the one on television, seems to be doing. But God hasn’t called us to be paragons of perfection. He calls us to follow Him and depend on Him daily, allowing His strength to be showcased through our weaknesses.

“The most important thing we can do is trust the guidance of the Holy Spirit,” Powell says. “After that, we should trust our own knowledge of our children to help us discern their needs.”

The bottom line, according to Powell, is that children don’t need perfect moms, perfect families or perfect situations. What they do need are adults in their lives who love and value them — and continually point them toward a

perfect God.

Douglas, a mother herself, says women would benefit from relaxing and accepting that their best really can be good enough.

“When your kid comes home and says, ‘I need two dozen blueberry muffins tomorrow for school,’ not every mom can stay up until 2 a.m. and bake them,” Douglas says. “Trying to be perfect is impossible. It’s OK to be good enough.”

As for my kids’ projects, I now try to avoid late-night scrambling by planning ahead as much as possible. My second-grade daughter likes to help paint and operate the hot glue gun when we make Valentine boxes. The results may not be picture-perfect, but

we enjoy spending the time together. I’m learning it’s best to make the most of these moments because they won’t last forever.

When I asked my son last February what kind of box he wanted, he gave me an exasperated look.

“Mom, I’m in fourth grade! None of the guys in my class do boxes anymore. A paper sack will be good enough.”

And so it was. **tpe**

CHRISTINA QUICK is staff writer for *Today’s Pentecostal Evangel*. E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

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