

Lessons learned from five years of mothering

 By [Judith Middleton](#)

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Read a certain kind of magazine article, book or blog post and you will be tantalised by a vision of the perfect life. In this life, perfectly groomed women run their own multimillion rand businesses from home, regularly serve fresh veg that they've organically grown and cooked themselves to parties of 12 around beautifully set tables, make exquisite crafts with their well-behaved, snot-free children and volunteer at least one morning a week at the local homeless shelter.

Nobody outside the movies really has that kind of life and if we try to achieve the impossible we are only setting ourselves up for misery, guilt and their toxic buddy, resentment.

I learned this the hard way, needless to say. When my son was born five years ago, I thought working flexible half days would help me achieve the magic balance between being a perfect mother and a businesswoman. But life turned out to be more complicated than that: neither babies nor clients have half-day demands. Trying to please everyone, all the time, soon sent me into a spiral of guilt and exhaustion that drained my vitality for a few long years.

Exercise, eat properly and take time out

If I'd known five years ago what I know now, I would have put my own needs far higher up the priority list. A mother who exercises, eats properly and takes time out for herself is likely to be in a better mood, more of the time, than a mother who doesn't. A mother who nourishes her own resources has more available to give to her children. And a mother who takes charge of her own fulfilment is a much better role model to her sons and daughters than one who gives too much and resents it.

Children, unfortunately, are not compatible with being in control 100% of the time. Maybe, when my child didn't want to eat his lunch and I was panicking about the 2pm meeting across town, I should have spent the time doing a puzzle together instead. Or let someone else feed him and go to the meeting with a clear mind. I tried so hard to get it all "right".

Be present in the moment

Thinking about it now, perhaps my son didn't need as much of my time as I thought he did. (Did I just admit that?) Perhaps if I'd come home at five, intellectually stimulated and satisfied in the knowledge that I'd done a good day's work, it would have been easier to switch off the incoming calls, relax and be fully present with him.

I have found more balance now. My son has taught me how to slow down, be present in the moment and actually enjoy spending time talking about caterpillars. I've taught him - or am trying to teach him - that mothers are not slaves, that good

things only come through hard work (no matter how smart you are) and that it's good for us to have high expectations of life, but we can do this with love and compassion for ourselves too.

I won't pretend that life is perfect, though. The task of integrating work, family and the rest of our lives is a delicate daily balance. But we do each other no favours, as parents, when we deny that love comes at a price. Let's rather acknowledge the price we pay - and the true value of what we get in return.

The learning has been priceless and I feel a fraction more qualified to be the mother of an extraordinary little teacher aged five.

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