

12 Simple Secrets Real Moms Know

GETTING BACK TO BASICS
AND RAISING HAPPY KIDS

Michele Borba, Ed.D.

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MORE PRAISE FOR

Michele Borba

"12 Simple Secrets Real Moms Know is a godsend for all the anxious, stressed-out mothers who worry that they're not 'doing enough' (and that's pretty much everyone!)."

—Christiane Northrup, M.D., author, *Mother-Daughter Wisdom* and *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom*

"As a member of Congress, I am faced daily with the challenge of balancing my work in Washington, D.C., with the most important job that I will ever have—being a mother to my two children. I am a firm believer in the importance of parental involvement and the tremendous influence mothers can have on their child's development. I appreciate the message that this book champions and the guidance it provides to mothers struggling to foster a brighter future for their children."

—Mary Bono, member of Congress, California's 45th District, and mother of two

"Michele Borba has done it again. She's given mothers a book full to the brim with wisdom, stories, and tips on how to raise happy, well-adjusted children."

—Mimi Doe, author, *Busy but Balanced*; founder, SpiritualParenting.com; and mother of two

“Michele infuses you with the wisdom and warmth of her more than twenty years of teaching, shares the savvy of her in-depth research of over 5,000 parents, and helps return you to the heart of successful parenting.”

—**Stacy Debroff, author, *The Mom Book*, and founder of momscentral.com**

“A practical, easy-to-read guide, full of great examples to help mothers teach their children the skills that will eventually be invaluable for greater success and happiness in college.”

—**Richard Kadison, M.D., chief of the Mental Health Service, Harvard University Health Services**

THE 12 SIMPLE SECRETS OF REAL MOTHERING

1. A mother who loves teaches worth.
2. A mother who is firm and fair gives her children a moral code to live by.
3. A mother who listens shows her children they matter.
4. A mother who is a good role model gives her children an example worth copying.
5. A mother who teaches values inspires character.
6. A mother who supports her children's strengths builds their confidence.
7. A mother who encourages independence cultivates self-reliance.
8. A mother who applauds effort nurtures perseverance.
9. A mother who accepts her children's shortcomings nurtures resilience.
10. A mother who takes time for her children helps them build strong relationships.
11. A mother who laughs teaches joy.
12. A mother who takes care of herself holds together her happy family.

—Michele Borba

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*With love to the most extraordinary example of
real mothering: My mother, Treva Ungaro*

acknowledgments

One of my favorite quotes is by François Rabelais: “A child is not a vase to be filled, but a fire to be lit.” This book could not have been written without the remarkable mothers who told me their stories. They are the ones who inspired in me the notion of “real mothering.” In particular, special love goes to George and Bonnie Englund, Don and Marilyn Perlyn, and Jim and Anamarie Anthony for sharing their parenting secrets and touching my own life in more ways than they can ever know.

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Every book is a group effort, and there are a number of people whom I gratefully acknowledge for helping me make this book possible. I thank Jossey-Bass/Wiley executive editor Alan Rinzler for his friendship, superb insights, exemplary skill, passion, and guidance through every possible step. At Jossey-Bass and Wiley, Alan is surrounded by the finest publishing staff around, whom I thank for their support on all six of the books we've now worked on together: Jennifer Wenzel, Catherine Craddock, Erik Thrasher, Meghan Brousseau, P. J. Campbell, Paula Goldstein, Carol Hartland, Michele Jones, Sophia Ho, Lori Sayde-Mehrtens, Jennifer Smith, and Karen Warner. In particular, I thank my publishers, Debra Hunter and Paul Foster, for the privilege of writing for them over these many years together.

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Once again, no writer could have a better support system than her own family. To my husband, perpetual supporter and best friend, Craig, and the three greatest sons, Jason, Adam, and Zach, thank you once again for putting up with me. This is the twenty-first book we've written "together," and I would never have been able to do this without you.

And finally to the memory of Max Englund: a child whose life was far too short, but who still taught me so much about the power of love and resilience. I swore I'd someday write about this remarkable boy. So Max, here's to you! I hope I told it right.

Michele Borba
Palm Springs, California

note to the reader

All stories in this book are about children and their mothers whom I have interviewed, known, or worked with over the last twenty years. A few stories are composite cases of children I have treated. Actual children's and mothers' names are included, except in those instances where a parent asked that her name be changed to protect her privacy. The exceptions are mothers interviewed for newspapers or written about in books, and those are noted in the References.

Unless otherwise noted in the References, stories and tips are based on interviews I conducted face-to-face, by phone, or through email exchanges with 150 mothers while writing this book. I also surveyed over five thousand additional parents in my workshops about what they felt mattered most in real mothering. Many of their responses are included in boxed tips. A sample of the U.S. cities where these interviews took place includes Albany, Aspen, Atherton, Berkeley, Chattanooga, Chicago, Coco Beach, Dallas, Diamond Bar, Essex Falls, Hays, Kalispel, Las Vegas, Little Rock, Los Angeles, Memphis, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Nashville, New York City, Oakland, Oklahoma City, Orlando, Palm Springs, Reno, Sacramento, Salt Lake City, San Diego, San Jose, Santa Clarita, Seattle, Tulsa, and Palm Springs. Canadian cities include Bonnyville, Brandon, Calgary, Cold Lake, Edmonton, Kelowna, Lac la Biche, Ottawa, Saskatoon, Simcoe County, Toronto, Vancouver, Westminster, and Winnipeg.

introduction

What Is a Real Mom?

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day. . . . "Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with but REALLY loves you, then you become Real. . . . It doesn't happen all at once . . . , but once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."

—Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*

Hey, Mom: Are you real? Is what you're doing as a mother going to "last for always"?

Sure, that may sound like a silly question, but the answer is going to tell you a lot about just how effective you are as a mother, how influential you will be on your children's lives, and whether they will grow up to be happy adults with character and confidence. It will also make a big difference in just how happy your family is now, today, every day.

But you may ask, "Isn't everyone real? Isn't whatever I do as a mother automatically real?"

Well . . . no. Not necessarily. A lot of us moms are wondering these days if all the incredible amount of "stuff" we're doing for our kids really matters in the long run and if what we're doing is really the best thing for our families. Of course we love our kids to pieces and would do anything in the world for them. That's never been in doubt. But many of us feel torn, pushed, and pulled in different directions.

Whether we work full time or part time or are stay-at-home moms seems to make no difference. Most mothers are feeling the same. There are so many parenting choices and opportunities these days, so many new mothering options and strategies, so many new products that are supposed to make our kids brilliant and successful. And all that new research keeps hitting us in the face with what we must do pronto or else. And then there's the pressure of trying to keep up with all the other moms and all that they do for their kids that could give them the edge over ours.

So we're running around making all these appointments—the test prep classes, the soccer practices, the recitals, the Chinese lessons, the gymnastic meets, the camps, the Suzuki drills, the tutors and coaches. And we're trying to play all these different roles: we're the limo driver, the party planner, the wardrobe mistress, the volunteer car washer, the super-organized woman with the longest to-do list on the block. The more we do, the more there is to do. The more we try to keep up with the latest parenting trends and competition for status and achievement, the more pressure and anxiety we experience. The more we wish we could keep it simple, the more complicated and difficult it seems to become.

Is it any wonder that we moms have major doubts about what our role should be? Are you at all concerned that the complicated and demanding roles we're playing, however unintentionally, are being dictated to us from somewhere else, by some expert or guru or lady down the block? Do other feelings bubble up? Is there a little voice in the back of your head that's asking, "What are you doing? Do you really think this is right? So what if everyone else is doing it—why are you doing it too? Does mothering have to be so difficult?" Do these "mothering" roles and frantic activities represent our authentic selves, our core beliefs, our basic

maternal instincts and intuition, what we know is right for our unique and special kids? Are these roles real?

REAL MOM TALK

“I Stopped Trying to Be Perfect”

I’m often guilty of trying to be all things to my child, only to find myself living in a manic world of to-do lists, high-intensity parenting, and guilt. So I’ve been working on a new strategy. *Instead of being a perfect mom, I’m giving myself permission to be a “good-enough” mom.* This winter, one of the volunteer leaders of an extracurricular activity my son enjoys had stepped down, and they needed another parent to take his place. My son was eager for me to volunteer. I was tempted. Of course, the perfect mom would have made time and relegated her needs to the bottom of the list. But after giving it some thought, I decided I needed to say no. My son was a bit disappointed initially, but my absence hasn’t diminished his enjoyment of the program, and it means he sees his mother in a calmer state. I think that’s a fair trade-off. I’m not the perfect mom, but I’m beginning to feel okay about that, and I am learning that good-enough works too.

—Jane Schneider, editor of
Memphis Parent magazine,
single mom of a ten-year-old son

Okay, have I got your attention? Do you agree that all the stresses and pressures of being a mother today can wrench us away from being real and sticking to our intuition of what's best for our kids? So how do we get back in touch with what really matters to our kids? How do we know what is real?

I'll tell you.

Defining Real

Real is one of those words that everybody uses but whose meaning nobody really knows. So here's what I believe.

- Real comes from deep inside.
- Real is instinctive and intuitive.
- Real is authentic and genuine. There's just no faking it.
- Real is never borrowed. It's staying true to you.
- Real has no pretense, fabrication, phoniness.
- Real is simple. It's not complicated or difficult.
- Real comes naturally.

So what does a real mom look like?

- A real mom doesn't worry about what other moms are doing or saying.
- A real mom knows her children so well that she makes her parenting decisions based on their unique needs.
- A real mom is clear about her personal values and code of behavior, and sticks to them.
- A real mom knows what's important for her family and keeps those priorities straight.
- A real mom has confidence in her maternal instinct and isn't pushed around by the latest pressures and trends.

- A real mom knows that what matters most is a close connection with her children so that her influence lasts for always.

And what does a real mom do? Above all, she stays true to herself and connected to her kids, and she doesn't deviate from what she knows is best for her family.

- Real moms have a life of their own.
- Real moms break the rules for their family.
- Real moms let their kids wear the same clothes two days in a row.
- Real moms go on a date with their husbands and aren't afraid to miss the PTA meeting.
- Real moms give their kids pots and pans to play with.
- Real moms leave their food on the tray and head for the parking lot when their kid has a meltdown at McDonalds.
- Real moms make their kids do their own homework.
- Real moms aren't afraid to say no.
- Real moms give themselves time-outs.
- Real moms tell their kids they don't have to play

Beethoven's "Für Elise" at the family reunion.

- Real moms know it's not personal when their kids say, "You're the meanest mother in the whole world."
- Real moms say "Good job" when their kids get an A but hold off on the brand-new Lexus.
- Real moms make their sixteen-year-olds set their own alarm clocks.
- Real moms tell their kids to pay their own library fines.
- Real moms ask Uncle Harry to put on the lampshade and do his juggling act on the kitchen table as the birthday party clown.
- Real moms let their kids be bored.
- Real moms say, "Not in our family" when their kids complain that "But everyone else does."

- Real moms say, “I’m not an ATM machine” and tell their kids to save money.
- Real moms admit they’re wrong.
- Real moms know they’re not perfect.
- Real moms leave the dust when the playgroup comes over.
- Real moms admit when they’re grouchy.
- Real moms send their kid to canoe paddling camp when the other mothers enroll theirs in intensive Chinese language immersion.

Getting Back to Real Mothering

Does this sound like you? Do you recognize or identify with the traits of a real mom I’ve listed here? Of course we all want to be real, to stay true to ourselves and be a positive influence on our kids. But we’re living in a high-pressure, fast-paced, competitive world. It’s not hard to get swept away and lose sight of reality, of what we know in our hearts to be true.

Mothering is probably the most important job we’ll ever have in our lives. Nothing, absolutely nothing, has as much influence and power over our families and future generations in years to come. Yet there’s general agreement among all the hundreds of mothers I’ve spoken to that something isn’t working: our kids aren’t thriving as well as we’d hoped, and we are too often suffering from guilt, anxiety, and exhaustion. That’s why there’s been so much national talk lately and so many books written about the epidemic of Motherhood Mania. Far too many of us are responding to the pressure of this modern myth of mothering as a 24/7 sprint to the finish line. Instead of reconsidering what works and what doesn’t, we’re trying harder to be perfect. And that isn’t working either.

The only solution is to be real, to be simple, to get back to the natural and authentic kind of mothering that isn't based on the latest TV show, educational video game, or hot new parenting product. The good news is, you don't have to go back to school, get a license or academic credential, or drive yourself nuts working hard on it every day. Remember: if it's real, it's simple. It's not complicated or difficult. It's easy to do, and you already have the skills.

Not only that, the benefits of real mothering are enormous.

REAL MOM TALK

When I Stopped Trying to Be the Ideal Mom

I was twenty-six years old when I married, and instantly became a mom to five stepchildren: four boys and a girl, ages three to eleven. I wanted desperately to be a good mom, but frankly I was overwhelmed. This job didn't come with a set of rules. I read every available parenting book and tried every technique. I even took parenting classes at night. I was stressed and really feeling uncomfortable in my new role as stepmother. I even tried to dress differently to present the ideal image of a more traditional-looking mom, but nothing was working.

One day I went for a long walk to think things through. "You're smart," I kept telling myself. "This should be easier." I asked myself, "Is something wrong with me, or is it how I'm parenting the kids?" Then it suddenly dawned on me what was wrong: I

was trying to be someone who wasn't me. I was trying to be this image of what I thought a perfect mother should be, and the kids saw right through it. That was my "ah-ha" moment: I knew I had to be true to myself.

From then on things started to get better in my interactions with the children, because they perceived my relationship with them to be genuine. I didn't have to be perfect with my kids or try so hard to be someone I wasn't naturally—the ideal model depicted of mothering. I didn't have to put on some "ideal role of motherhood" to be accepted by them. I can't tell you what a difference it made in gaining their respect. The gift that my children gave to me was my newfound self-confidence that I could be myself and also their mother.

—Bernadette DeFontes, stepmom of five,
Gaithersburg, Maryland

The Benefits of Being a Real Mother

Some of the long-term dividends of being a real mother are obvious and easy to appreciate; others are more subtle, yet no less important. Here is my list of seven reasons we need to get real:

1. Real moms can help their kids buck peer pressure because the certainty and firmness of their conviction strengthens their influence on their kids.
2. Real moms' children are more likely to adopt their mother's values because their mother hasn't watered down her beliefs with the latest trends or moral compromises.

3. Real moms are likely to be better models of patience and self-control because they're being themselves and are at peace with who they are.
4. Real moms are happier and have more joy in their families because there is so much less pretense and putting on to keep up.
5. Real moms are less guilty and anxious because they're not trying to be perfect by other people's standards.
6. Real moms are more appreciated because their kids have had a chance to know their interests and passions.
7. Real moms have more energy for their families because they don't waste time doing things that don't match their priorities and beliefs.

The result of all these wonderful benefits is that real moms enjoy a powerful connection with their children that lasts for always. If your kids are two, three, twenty, or older, the bond remains as strong and important as ever. You could even say that your model and the lessons you've learned are carried with them in their own lives and families. It's the most important legacy that you can ever provide.

REAL MOM TALK

A Mother's Most Important Gift

I think the most important gift a mother can give her children is being authentic: knowing who you are intimately, liking who you are and respecting yourself. You want your children to have self-esteem, integrity, and strong character. How better

to ensure that they have those qualities than by modeling them? So you have to be real—you have to have your own self-esteem and integrity. How can you get that when you don't know yourself? And how can you possibly model it if you don't have it yourself?

—Debbie Gibson, mother of six,
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Like a Hamster on a Wheel

Just this week I asked a mom how her family life was going. “Exhausting,” was the first word out of her mouth. Then she added, “I’m starting to feel like a hamster on one of those wheels—going around and around and never getting off.”

Is that what modern mothering has come to: being a hamster on a wheel? It’s that crazed feeling that Judith Warner describes in her best-selling book *Perfect Madness*. But it’s that same notion (the “continual busyness” or “always doing”) that seems symptomatic of mothering these days. It was the same underlying theme of so many of the moms I interviewed.

I’ve come to realize that real mothering, the stuff that makes up the true natural essence of being a mother, hasn’t changed and never will. Most every woman I spoke to still had that basic instinct; that unconditional love, tenderness, empathy, patience, perseverance; the willingness to listen, to devote themselves, to take joy and pleasure in their children. But the society we’re living in here in the good old twenty-first-century United States does have a new and different expectation of what it is to be a good, responsible, conscientious mother.

These days the central expectation of a good mom is for her to be a “doer” (volunteer, home tutor, home coach, carpool driver, PTA enthusiast, social secretary, hostess, and on and on—very complicated).

A decade ago, the main expectation was that she be a “nurturer” (supporter, listener, guider—simpler, and real). And that little switch has had a dramatic impact on our lives as well as on the lives of our children. It’s also weakened our influence with our children, zapped our energy, and boosted our guilt. As so many mothers told me, to be a good mom these days you have to “keep up” and “keep doing”; if not, you feel you’re cheating your children and flunking motherhood. Bear with me a minute. Read on, and see if you don’t agree.

Ask a woman to describe a good mother, and you get a résumé: “A room mother.” “The play group coordinator.” “A soccer coach.” “A scout leader.” “The PTA president.” “A booster club officer.” “An after-school volunteer.” The list of roles goes on and on and on. Mothering is a to-do list. And we’re exhausted just trying to keep up and keep our family’s schedule straight. The more a mom does, the better her chances of making the “Mommy Hall of Fame” (at least in the eyes of the other moms).

Interestingly enough, the kids describe their moms as “always involved” and “busy”—though teens would more likely say that their moms don’t have a life. The same kids also describe their moms as “usually tired” and “impatient,” and they “wish their moms could spend more time with them.” But how could they, when their schedules are so filled?

Fond Memories of Real Moms