

WHAT TO SAY
WHEN

*She
Feels Like
a Failure
as a Mom*

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P U B L I S H I N G

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"Hold his hand. Show him where the steps are." I smiled as my son ran to catch up with his little buddy. As he took the toddler's hand and gently led him to the slide, I settled beside the toddler's mom on a nearby bench.

The two friends tumbled down the slide together.

"It's hard to imagine mine will ever be that big," my friend sighed, looking at my son. She soothed the fussing baby in her arms as she dug in her diaper bag for a bottle.

"They do grow up."

She smiled weakly at me. "I suppose."

I knew that look. Watching this tired young mom gave me instant flashbacks. I gave birth to five kids in seven years. Nothing about that stage had felt short. I remembered the fatigue. I remembered the self-doubt.

"The truth is," she continued, "I feel like I'm doing a terrible job at it."

"At what?"

"Life. Motherhood. Everything!" She nodded toward her son on the slide. "He's been testing boundaries like crazy. Nothing I do seems to work. The baby is going through a sleep regression, so I'm tired and grumpy all

the time. The house is a disaster. I'm out of patience and energy." She shifted her baby to her other arm and stared off into the distance as her eyes welled with tears. "I feel like . . . a failure."

So many moms desire nothing more than to be good moms. That's why it's so easy to feel like we're failing. The job is indescribably precious. The stakes are infinitely high.

But to be able to fail at something, we must have some way to "succeed." Take a moment and think about how you would answer the following question.

What does it take to be a "good mom"?

It's possible that you think a mom is doing pretty well if she can give her children a stable home environment, feed and dress them each day, and help them learn skills that will serve them in adulthood. For many reasons, accomplishing even these things can be a challenge.* But for many moms today, success means having a beautifully organized home, kids who are always clean and healthy, a daily schedule that always gets completed, discipline that is always effective but rarely needed, and happy attitudes all around, all the time. Success looks like perfection.

* This resource does not address issues of abuse, neglect, financial crisis, or mental illness. If you become aware of danger to a mother or her children, please seek counsel from your church leadership as well as from specialized resources or experts.

The Heart of the Struggle

Is your heart racing yet? The kinds of expectations that society puts on well-intentioned moms today are a recipe for stress and discouragement. As we'll see, they create burdens that these moms were not meant to carry.

If a struggling mom admits her sense of failure to you, you have a unique opportunity to “encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak” (1 Thess. 5:14). Whether or not you're a mom yourself, you can communicate hope and freedom to her. She may not be able to identify the pressures she is facing or where they are coming from, and so your outside perspective can also help shed light on why she feels these burdens and what she can do about them. You can come alongside her and lift her weary arms as Aaron and Hur did for Moses (Ex. 17:12).

The Heart of the Struggle

When I was a new mom, my heart was raw and vulnerable to any input that promised to improve my mothering. Advice and ideas would sink in and stay dormant until I was lying in bed at night and the house was quiet. Then I would think and rethink about everything that had happened during the day and all the things I could or should have been doing differently. I would think about the latest tidbit of mothering advice I had come across. It didn't matter if it was from a friend, a blog, or an ad on TV. I was susceptible to any input that offered to improve my motherhood. At times it was impossible

for me to be objective. That wasn't like me! I was an independent thinker. I was shrewd. But if it related to my baby, I took in all information equally.

I needed to decide what advice was actually worth dwelling on, but it took time for me to strengthen the discernment skills that had been weakened by my hormones—and I know I'm not alone. Moms are bombarded with advice all day, every day, as well as many different pressures and expectations. It's difficult for them to decide what information or ideas to act on and what to let pass by. This is often not a matter of separating the “good” from the “bad” but, more often, a matter of separating the necessary or worthwhile from the unnecessary or unhelpful.

What causes a mom to lie awake at night? What are her desires and fears? We can boil them down to two major categories: to protect her kids and to provide for them. These desires make her vulnerable to pressures on every side. As we look at the heart of a mom's struggle, we'll start by seeking to understand these pressures so that we can guide her through the minefield of her own emotions and into paths of peace.

Two Driving Desires

Moms want to protect their kids. When you see a mom holding her child's hand, feeling their forehead, or hovering at the bottom of the play equipment, know that she is

in a battle. Nothing triggers a mom's anxiety like a threat to her children's safety. She will do anything to protect her kids, and her subconscious is constantly weighing and considering a thousand things that could go wrong. God has equipped moms with a unique protection instinct that is almost superhuman. When it kicks in, watch out.

This protection instinct itself is good, but moms are pros at taking it too far. If a mom sees everything through the narrow lens of her ability to care for her children, her perspective on her role as protector can easily create spirals of anxiety. For example, a doctor might tell her, "Nurse your baby." But what she will hear is "If you don't (or can't) nurse your baby and must use formula instead, he will develop all kinds of physical and emotional issues that carry into adulthood, and it will be all your fault." It is difficult for moms to be objective about protection. Everything is personal.

The lens of protection can be especially powerful if a mom is going through a unique challenge. If she has a child with health issues or special needs, this lens is constantly identifying ways that her child could potentially get hurt. I am personally familiar with the twinge of dread that accompanies a scary blood sugar reading for my son's diabetes. "Did I miss something? How can I fix this? How can I make sure this never happens again?" These thoughts enable me to create strategic plans for preserving my son's health, but they also tempt me to depend on my own ability to protect him.

Moms today also have more reasons to be anxious about their kids' safety than ever before. This is not because kids are in more danger now than in the past; it's because moms have never before had so much access to "research" about how to keep kids safe. Moms can spend hours online every day reading about the latest trends in parenting and kids' health, as well as new dangers that are hiding in their own homes. Such increased knowledge heaps more responsibility onto their already full plates. Some of this research is helpful, but much of it is opinion-based, worldly, or misleading.

Moms want to provide for their kids. For much of history, a mother's time and resources were more limited than they are today. But in recent years, something changed. With the advent of social media, pressures on moms actually increased. Now, moms are expected to spend more time and resources on their children than ever before. Everything must be made from scratch. No expense is to be spared. The ideal childhood experience must be carefully crafted from an elaborate maze of pinboards, blogs, and reels.

Not only do moms need to provide necessities such as food and clothing for their children; now they are pressured to provide them with the perfect home environment. A woman's home is a daily measure of how well she is doing as a mom. Is her home clean? Is it organized? Does it have inspirational wall decals and a chalkboard-painted pantry door? Does it smell like essential

oils? Is there classical music playing? Since she has access to every possible cleaning and organizing idea online, she feels there is no excuse for falling short. There is always a better way she could arrange her furniture or clean her floors. There is always more she can do.

When you are encouraging a weary mom, it is important to understand that standards for “fun” are not what they used to be. With so much information at their fingertips, moms feel obligated to do their research to make their children’s every experience as magical as possible. Moms feel enormous pressure to make childhood “special” enough for their kids.

One aspect of this is that many moms feel pressured to rescue their kids from boredom. If the kids are bored, they must not be experiencing the magic of childhood—and it’s Mom’s fault. This leaves moms increasingly pressured to provide entertainment for their kids—in fact, to *be* entertainment for their kids. After all, the “good moms” on social media dress up, play pretend, get down on the ground, build castles, and have tea parties. And when their children lose interest, they quickly create more activities and more stimulation to rejuvenate the magic.

In short, online pressure has turned the modern mom into a cruise director. From the moment she wakes up, she is tasked with moving her kids from activity to activity, all day long, keeping them constantly entertained and stimulated. The more activities, the better. And in between each activity, she is expected to provide organic, unprocessed