Not Everything Has to Be Perfect

We push our kids to do better because we love them. But what if they hear something else entirely.

I recently had an uncomfortable argument with my mum. I had done something - and I'd done it quite well. Perhaps even brilliantly. Despite that, Mum decided to nitpick, pointing out where I could have done better.

I'm in my fifties. I have a PhD in psychology. I've written eleven books about raising children. And that gentle suggestion from my mother was enough to make me feel like I'd failed a test I didn't know I was sitting. Her motives were good. She wanted me to do it the best I could. But that's not what I felt. Instead, I reverted to a sulky 12-year old and I fired back:

"Not everything has to be perfect you know? Not everything has to be optimal."

Here's the most baffling part of all of this: I don't even remember what it was that Mum was trying to offer her insights about. But it got me thinking about our kids.

Optimisation, maximisation, and fulfilling potential - a "that could be better" mindset - is the water our children swim in.

- The bed is made, but not neatly.
- The drawing is lovely, and have you thought about the sky?
- The report card has five A's, and what happened in maths?
- You played great, but we've got to work on your defence.

Every one of those corrections comes from love. And every one of them teaches the same lesson: what you did wasn't quite enough.

Barry Schwartz and his colleagues studied the difference between people who always chase the best possible option (whom he called 'maximisers') and people who settle happily for good enough (named 'satisficers'). The maximisers did worse. In spite of their best efforts, they felt more regret, experienced more second-guessing, and enjoyed lower satisfaction with their choices and outcomes. Chasing the best is expensive, and children are paying that bill earlier than we think.

There's value in settling - and it's not about accepting mediocrity. It's about knowing what "done" looks like, meeting it, and then stopping. Satisficers aren't lazy. They have a standard, and when they reach it they go and do something else with their evening. And they know that not everything has to be perfectly optimised. (They can, however, still optimise the things they genuinely care about.)

Here's how to let good enough be good enough.

1 Ask whether it will matter in a week

Most of what we correct is invisible within days (or even minutes). The lopsided bed, the uneven lawn edge, the sandwich cut the wrong way. If it won't matter next Tuesday, say nothing.

2 Let done be done

When your child finishes a job to an acceptable standard, the job is finished. Adding “one little thing” turns their completion into your correction. They'll notice, and they'll stop volunteering. They’ll feel a little less competent - and in turn, a little less motivated to keep trying.

3 Ask before you offer feedback

Try: “I have a couple of ideas. Are you open to hearing them or are you fine with how things are?” Sometimes they want coaching. Often they want to be allowed to live their lives their way. So long as it’s not offending your values, gain consent before launching into an eight-minute lecture on how to do things better.

4 Invite *their* reflection

Rather than telling your children what you’re seeing that they can improve, ask them how they felt about the game, the score, the marks, or the tidy-up. Their input will help you see what they’re seeing, and can guide your next moves.

5 Model mediocrity cheerfully

This one is the hardest for me. I inherited the optimising gene from a woman who has nitpicked my work all my life (including editing one of my books after it was published and telling me to rewrite it!), and my kids have watched me redo jobs that were already finished. So I've started narrating the opposite out loud. “That’ll do.” “It's not perfect and I’m leaving it.” My daughters find it funny. But they get the message.

My mum wanted it done better because she has always wanted the best for me. That’s great, but it’s also the trap. Every time I was told how it could be better, I internalised that “it’s not enough”, which led to “you’re not enough” in my mind.

Some things need to be excellent. But we need to separate the standard we hold for the work from the worth we see in the child doing it. One can be high. The other should be never in question.



Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine’s Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia’s #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. He has written 9 books about families and parenting. For further details visit happyfamilies.com.au.