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6 Reasons why a bad childhood will make you a better parent

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A bad childhood doesn't mean you can't be a great parent

At first, I felt like my painful childhood growing up with a mentally ill parent would destine me to fail as a mom. As I've opened up and grown into my three years of parenting, I find the opposite to be true. A rough childhood can make you a more sensitive, empathetic and openhearted parent, if you let it.

When I became a parent, all of the clichés came true: I had never felt a love like this before. I was overwhelmed with the responsibility of caring for a tiny human being. I suddenly understood how precious and fragile life was and how it goes by way too fast.

But what no one else told me, what no other parent could possibly have prepared me for if they didn't have a dysfunctional childhood like I did, was how parenting would bring all of my [hidden issues to the surface](#).

Watching my son grow and experience the world, even at 6 months old, brought back extreme feelings of loneliness as I remembered how my parents didn't spend much time with me as a kid. Whenever I had to make a parenting decision with my husband, even one as minor as when I should stop breastfeeding, I felt racked with guilt: Which decision was going to screw him up irreparably, like my parents did to me? At what point would someone say to me, "Hey! We're on to you — you have no idea how to parent because nobody parented you"?

The [answer for me was therapy](#), and lots of it. As I have started to heal and talk to other parents, I've come to realize that plenty of us have had rough childhoods, and we're still doing it. We've figured out which method of coping and processing works best for us, and we are learning how to love our kids as we learn to love ourselves.

Don't kid yourself — this isn't easy. If you are overcoming a bad childhood while trying to parent, you deserve a huge pat on the back. You also deserve to know that your kids are really lucky to have you as a parent, specifically *you*, and here's why.

1. You're motivated

Nothing will light a fire under your ass like the pain of a bad childhood. Call it motivation, call it righteous indignation, but my childhood scars made me even more determined to be a good parent. This pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps mentality that may develop as a childhood survival instinct is what could set you apart as a parent, says Dr. Fran Walfish, [Beverly Hills relationship psychotherapist](#), author of *The Self-Aware Parent* and expert co-star of *Sex Box* on WE tv.

Dr. Fran explains, "Most people who endured a bad childhood and have not taken a painful, honest look within often repeat old, bad parenting patterns and become a negative statistic. Psychotherapy and high levels of motivation are required to change these generational patterns. On the other hand, there are a smaller percentage of people who suffered a very bad childhood and are determined to become a better parent. In fact, I have personally seen many of these folks succeed. I have seen children of narcissistic, schizophrenic, bipolar and even

sociopathic personalities turn things around and become competent, effective and loving parents. Change is possible. Much has been speculated and written about what is required in order to make change. One thing I know for sure: Motivation and determination are prerequisites, and pain is usually the greatest motivator for change."

2. You're sensitive

While it's certainly possible to cultivate empathy when growing up with two happy parents, I can say firsthand that the pain, neglect and loneliness I experienced throughout my younger years have made me much more compassionate to those around me and especially my children. Dr. [Carole Lieberman](#), renowned Beverly Hills psychiatrist and best-selling author, agrees: "People who have had painful childhoods often vow that they will never be as insensitive, unavailable or cruel as their parents. They can better understand the pain their own children could potentially go through."

But, as we parents recovering from a bad childhood know, it's not always that easy — the road to poor parenting can be paved with good intentions. Based on her years of experience treating children and families, Dr. Lieberman cautions, "But, oftentimes, these good intentions are hard to implement because the scars from their own painful childhood get in the way. If someone grew up in a home where one parent was alcoholic and unavailable, they could find themselves doing the same thing, even though they know how much it hurts the child. The answer is to get psychotherapy if you have had a painful childhood to help you overcome the scars of your past."

3. You're strong

A particularly painful childhood experience will undoubtedly have an impact, but it can also instill in you an unshakable inner strength at a young age. [Shameeca Funderburk](#), author and mother of two, says that this resilience was the biggest outcome of being placed in foster care at the age of 6. Funderburk tells SheKnows, "I was 4 years old when my mother started to leave us alone — she would tell me to take care of my sisters. This encounter helped me to be a better mother to my children because I know the pain of being neglected. That's a pain I never want my children to feel. The experience of my childhood matured me at a young age. This experience gave me the strength I need to become a good parent to my children."

4. You're wise

For many years, I had a hard time grasping that there could be any upside to the way I was treated as a child. But as I have begun to heal and create new patterns with my kids, I can see the forest for the trees. The fact that I saw

my parents make such devastating mistakes may have saved me from making them myself. Relationship expert April Masini of [Ask April](#) says, "Your relationship with your past plays a large part in how you conduct your own life — especially as a parent. In fact, your past experiences are less important than the relationship you have with them. In other words, you can have had a horrible childhood and use that experience to do things very differently. Many successful parents have relationship success because they've learned from what was painful in their childhoods and turned things around for their own kids."

5. You're present

This has been the toughest parenting takeaway for me growing up in a broken home. I spent all of my childhood trying to shut down and shut off so I wouldn't absorb the pain from my parents, and now I am supposed to embrace every moment with my kids? The not-so-easy solution for me came through a combination of therapy, mindfulness and meditation. Day by day, I'm working to release my anxiety and just stay in the moment. I'm finally at a place where I can say I appreciate the time I have with my kids after I put things in perspective: Even the toughest parts of parenting are short and sweet in the grand scheme of things.

"A painful childhood is not something we ever want to wish on anyone. We all know we cannot change the past, but we can change how we choose to live in the present and use our negative experiences to help us in the future. Watching your children grow and knowing you will be providing everything they need, both emotionally and physically, is extremely rewarding, knowing where you came from," says Ellie Hirsch, founder of [Mommy Masters](#) and mother of three boys.

6. You're a role model

It's so tempting to become a martyr when you become a parent on the heels of a bad childhood. My parents never paid attention to me, so why would I take this time to pay any attention to myself? It's all about my kids now. I'm supposed to lie down like a doormat and give of myself so that they know they are loved.

A few years ago, this attitude made perfect sense to me. Now, thanks to the clarity of therapy, I'm realizing what I believe to be one of the most important parenting truths of all: You can't give it if you don't have it. You can't expect your kids to have a healthy self-love if you don't love yourself. Dr. John McGrail, Los Angeles self-improvement expert and author of [The Synthesis Effect: Your Direct Path to Personal Power and Transformation](#), says, "Another way to say this is that once we re-parent ourselves — and it often takes professional help — we are in a position to

give our own children the love, nurture, support and stability that we didn't have. We can let them find their way with loving guidance and appropriate discipline and end the tradition or lineage of dysfunction. We are empowered to be the parents we didn't have!"

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