Mirror Mirror on the Wall: Who’s the Best Mom of Them All?

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Just in time for Mother's Day, **Christine Carter** offers her top ten tips for being the best mom you can be.

Last year, Tiger Mothers were superior. This year, French mommy-hood has been deemed a cut above. Are other mothers generally better than us at producing high-functioning and high-achieving kids? And do *they* enjoy parenting more than we do?

Maybe. Tiger mothers, soccer mothers, French mamas, working mothers, stay-at-home-mothers: We each have our strengths. We don’t have a lot of empirical evidence about what brand of mommy is “best,” but we do have a lot of data about what makes for good parenting. I’ve spent the last 10+ years deep in that research. In honor of Mother’s Day, here are my Top 10 qualities of a “good” mother. (Two notes about this: 1. These are also qualities of good *fathers*, of course, without exception. 2. We don’t need to embody all of these things all at once to be good parents—see #10.)

**1. She’s** [**happy**](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/raising_happiness/post/the_trouble_with_motherhood)**.** There are [scores of reasons](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/raising_happiness/post/tuesday_tip_parentalhappiness) that a parent’s happiness matters for their children’s well-being (and achievement) across the board. Happiness helps us **all** fulfill our potential. When we mothers are happy, we are better mothers.\*

**2. She’s not stressed out or over-busy.** The ability to be present—and patient—with our children is one of the greatest gifts that we can give them. It is hard to be a skillful parent when we’re freaking out about, oh, all the things we generally freak out about. The best mothers both [plan stress out of their lives](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/raising_happiness/post/managing_stress), and cope with stress actively, using techniques like meditation, [mindfulness](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_mindfulness_matters), and yoga.

**3. She’s in a** [**happy romantic relationship**](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/raising_happiness/post/february_newsletter_why_focus_on_romance)**.** Little is more important for our happiness than our love lives. When we are in a low-conflict and fulfilling relationship, our children learn have a healthy example for their own relationships. Great mamas model passionate, long-lasting, and joyful romance.

**4. She’s unconditionally warm and affectionate.** This means that when her children aren’t behaving well, she doesn’t withdraw her love and comfort—she has other disciplinary tools in her belt. My grandmother was the ultimate in this department: She once told me that she’d still love me, even if I turned out to be “an axe murderer.” She’d put me in jail where I belonged, but she’d still love me.

**5. She sets firm boundaries.** Kids need their mom to be their parent, not their best friend. This means saying no, even when it is excruciatingly difficult. Good mothers set rules, and they enforce those rules, consistently and with warmth.

**6. She** [**embraces mistake-making**](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/raising_happiness/post/kids_struggling_in_school)**.** Though it is natural for us to want to protect our children from making mistakes, we handicap them when we compensate for them or prevent them from falling down.

**7. She’s supportive without being a helicopter parent.** She promotes her kids’ [independence](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/raising_happiness/post/stuck_at_home_generation). She lets them hear their own voice, so that they might know better who they are and what they want in life—rather than who their mother is, and what their mother wants for them.

**8. She creates** [**good family habits**](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/raising_happiness/post/habits1) that routinely evoke positive emotions like appreciation, confidence, and compassion rather than entitlement or obstinence. Some examples: a dinnertime [gratitude practice](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/gg_live/parenting_videos/video/teaching_gratitude/), a morning routine that doesn’t rely on [yelling](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/raising_happiness/post/podcast_yelling) or [bribery](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/raising_happiness/post/video_Bribe_Kids_), a bedtime routine that leads to connection, and an after-school routine that allows for the [unstructured play](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/lessons_in_creativity_from_caines_arcade) that children need to develop skills for happiness and empathy.

**9. She’s a proponent of hard work** in the pursuit of mastery, even when it is boring or uncomfortable. And she uses a [growth-mindset](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/gg_live/parenting_videos/video/fostering_growth_mindsets/) to praise effort rather than innate talent.

**10. She’s not perfect**, in any realm, and she doesn’t expect perfection from her children, either. [Perfectionism](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/raising_happiness/post/Living_life_fully_2/) is a particular form of unhappiness; it is a life driven by the fear of not being enough. The best parents give their children the room they need to be messy, mistake-making children. AND they allow *themselves*, perhaps with some humor, to be messy, mistake-making mothers who love life and their children with an open heart.

*Are you a great mama? Do you have a great mom? Are you married to one? At the very least, I know you know a great mother. Which of these qualities are your—or her—particular strength? Which are you still working on? What other important qualities do you think should be on this list?*

**Often I think that what we want most for Mother’s Day is to know that we are good-enough mothers. Or even that we are GREAT mothers.** This week, express your gratitude to the mothers in your life: Which of the things on this list do they do best? Forward this email, post it on a mom’s Facebook wall, or leave a comment [here](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/raising_happiness/post/bestmom).

\* This doesn’t mean that you aren’t a good mom if you’ve struggled with depression, as many moms do, or that your children are going to be scarred forever. It does mean that it is important—and not selfish—to take care of yourself, and your own happiness.

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* I'd like to add one more thing to this list, which is SO important that I'm amazed I forgot it in the first place. This is from a Psychology Today reader:   
  "I would add one more thing to the list. In addition to having a loving, passionate, relationship with one's spouse or partner, I think it is important for moms to model healthy and compassionate friendships with other women. Especially for moms who have daughters, I feel moms play a large role in teaching girls to rise above catty relational aggression that unfortunately seems to rear its ugly head around the middle school years. Seeing my mom treat her girlfriends with respect and her teaching me to forgive friends who had hurt me rather than resulting to passive aggressive tactics (the go to response of many teens) taught me the value of friendships and how these were just as important as romanticrelationships. This view continues to serve me well as an adult. I am happy and in love with my husband but I don't rely on him to meet all of my emotional needs. Letting our kids know that they have the ability to connect with multiple people and that few conflicts are worth throwing away a friendship for is truly a gift in that they are more likely to be surrounded by a wealth of emotional support from peers when they inevitably face painfullife experiences (some their mates and even we their mothers can't help them through:)."

I couldn't have said it better.