

# What is Authentic Mothering?

## What is Authenticity?

The idea of living authentically has become very popular. You may have heard that being our 'true selves' is associated with greater wellbeing and feeling that our lives have more meaning, and research tells us that this is true. People who live more authentically are also, on the whole, happier<sup>1</sup>.

Being authentic is not always easy, though. It's an idea that can sound very simple on the surface but once we start to think about it a little more deeply and try to work out exactly what our authentic self is, it can feel very slippery.

In therapy, authenticity (sometimes also called congruence) is the idea that we are open to everything that is happening to us. However, a lot can get in our way as we try to find this openness. How many times a day are our thoughts and actions based on how other people might react to us? How much have we learned to do things to please (or annoy) other people? How often do we do things to try and convince ourselves that we're the person that we'd like to be, rather than the person who we actually are? These are the things that can stop us living and acting in ways that is truly our own way of leading our life.

## Authenticity and Mothering: An Even Bigger Challenge

If living authentically is challenging, then living an authentic life once we become mothers can be even harder. If you are a mum, you have probably noticed how much pressure there is to act a particular way and to care for your child according to the advice of family, friends and the experts who write about parenting. Everybody has an opinion on how best to raise your children, even those who've never done it themselves. Everybody loves to 'help out' new parents by giving them advice, tips and stories from their own perspectives. They mean well, but it can be overwhelming and disorienting.

I should clarify here, though, that I'm not talking here about medical evidence like safer sleeping guidelines. I would describe that as information that parents can then use to make their own

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<sup>1</sup> You can read more about this in 'Authentic' by Professor Stephen Joseph or in his Psychology Today article about authenticity here: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/what-doesnt-kill-us/202309/what-is-authenticity>

decisions based on their own circumstances. I'm talking instead about opinions and advice that isn't backed up with any evidence, although it's also not uncommon to also hear strong personal opinions about the latest medical guidelines written to keep our children safe and healthy.

It's a minefield, and in the middle of all this, there we are, trying to work out what is important to us as mothers and trying to find the best way to care for our children. It's easy to see how we can lose touch with our authentic selves when we become mums.

And we're also not just mothers, we are individual people too. Even if everyone around us is totally accepting of how we're parenting and they support us wholeheartedly, most new mothers would agree that they've struggled to adjust to their new identity and an entirely new way of living. It's one of the biggest transitions we can go through in our lives. Suddenly, we need to care for another, extremely vulnerable person who is very important to us. We no longer have the time to shower, sleep and eat, let alone reflect on how differently we might now feel about who we are.

## Two Challenges

There can be two big challenges to staying tuned into ourselves when we're caring for children. Firstly, caring so closely for someone else can mean that we're constantly switching our attention between our children's needs and our own. It's hard to know where you are when you're trying to meet the needs of multiple people whose needs are all important but are also incompatible at times.

Secondly, things can feel unbalanced. In the intense early years of raising a family, it can feel like all the focus is on our children and we have no time for ourselves. Many mums describe the sacrifice and lack of time to meet their own physical needs of sleep, food and rest, let alone time to reflect on this change in their lives.

This can then be followed by periods away from our children, for example, when we return to paid work, they start needing us less, or they leave home, when many women describe feeling separated from the part of themselves that is deeply connected to their children. This is another time of change when we can feel the rug pulled from beneath our feet and wonder again who we are.

## Authentic Mothering




So, how can we care for our children and still feel that we're living true to our own values? Here are some ideas:

1. Try accepting all your feelings. Being a mum isn't all love and cherishing. It's also hard. Try to accept the melting pot of emotions that it brings, even if they're not what the Mother's Day cards show. You're not the only one feeling these things.
2. Notice the messages that you're hearing about how you 'should' be caring for your children, and take a moment to think about whether they feel right for you. Let the others go. They might work for other people, but we're all different.
3. Look for others you can talk to about the realities of motherhood. Other mums, friends, family, or, if you need some more therapeutic space, a therapist, can all be great at giving you some time to explore what motherhood means to you.
4. Only embrace what feels right for you. There is an almost infinite variety of information about motherhood out there. Find your tribe, or ignore it all and find yourself. It's your choice (just be mindful of the medical advice!)

## What Next?

Moving towards living more authentically can mean a life that feels more meaningful and happy for many people. Being a mum is a very demanding job, and it can be hard to find ourselves in the middle of all the caring for other people. Finding even just a little space to work out what your life means to you and what's important can really help you find greater happiness and wellbeing amongst the chaos.

Finally, when I created this website, I wanted it to be a place free of pressure, guidelines and expectations. Every person is unique, and so is every mother. What's right for one of us isn't right for all of us. I have written this post as an introduction to the idea of authentic mothering, but I'm not the expert on what's right for you – you are, so where it goes from here is in your hands.

Feel free to agree with, disagree with or ignore all of the above, or ignore this entire website if it doesn't strike a chord for you. Or  comment or contact me if you would like to share your thoughts. I wish you luck with  finding what's right for you. I hope it's an interesting journey and you discover  where you would like to be.

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