



PERFECTLY FLAWED PARENTING

Using Emotional Intelligence to Honor Your Child's Path
(as well as your own)

Amy Steindler
InsightOut Life
www.insightoutlife.com
amy@insightoutlife.com
410.268.1240

Welcome to “Perfectly Flawed Parenting,” a resource for anyone who would like to begin the process of letting go of unattainable expectations



and of celebrating the moment-by-moment pleasures and pains, the delights and disappointments, and the achievements and failures that are part of the fabric of our lives.

As you work through the exercises, remember that this is an opportunity for you to be as honest with yourself as possible—you don’t have to share your responses with anyone, but if you choose to do so, make sure you share them with someone who is compassionate and non-judgmental, so you can articulate your feelings and fears in safety.

While the subject matter is serious, there is plenty of room for you to play with this content, and see where it leads you. Let go of any preconceived notions of “right” answers or specific outcomes, and you may open yourself up to new worlds of curiosity and wonder. Try to see things through “new eyes,” as you did when you were a child—as your child may be doing right now.

If you have any questions or comments, my contact information is below.

I wish you all the best in your life’s journey. Godspeed.

Amy Steindler

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amy@insightoutlife.com

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Perfection, Control, and Judgment

These worksheets will address three of the most stress-producing elements of parenting—well, of living, really, but we'll focus on parenting for now.

1. Our quest for perfection. Wanting to do it better than our parents did, or striving to be better than that awful couple from the private school who never seem to be late, and whose children are straight-A students and Olympic-level athletes, is the road to Hell (paved with perfect little heart-shaped cupcakes that the Stepfords deliver to their children's classes every Valentine's Day).
2. Our desire for control. Really, who are we kidding? Controlling our children is yet another road to Hell—one where we wander for 40 years having deluded ourselves into thinking that if they would just behave the way we wanted them to, and do what we tell them they should (because we, after all, know what's best for them), THEN we'd be able to relax.
3. Our tendency to judge ourselves, and our children, harshly. This is a big one for me personally, and it takes constant vigilance and repeated lessons for me to model the kind of self-compassion and acceptance practiced by the most wonderful and perfectly flawed people I know. Which, coincidentally, may be something you'd like to model for your children to save them the pain of comparing themselves to others, or to some ideal or set of expectations they'll never reach.

By letting go of perfection, control, and judgment, we can begin to let go of our desire to dictate the outcome of every situation, and allow our lives, and those of our children, to unfold as they will.

The questions and exercises in these worksheets can be the first step toward ending your addiction to the notions of perfection and control, and to the unconscious pattern of judging yourself, your children, and those annoyingly perfect heart-shaped Valentine cupcake-parents from the private school.

Asking yourself the tough questions posed in this workbook can open a passage toward making abundant positive changes in your life. Some of these questions will take courage and support to answer truthfully, but if you can give yourself the room to explore, you may surprise yourself with the answers.

Letting Go of Perfection

“The thing that is really hard, and really amazing, is giving up on being perfect and beginning the work of becoming yourself.” -Anna Quindlen

We all know that there is no such thing as the perfect parent, or the perfect child. So why do we feel so much shame when we judge ourselves to be lacking in the parental perfection department, or when our kids behave so erratically that we want to strangle them, bringing on a new cycle of parental shame? Why do we focus on who we think we *should* be, rather than on who we are?

I suppose we could spend hours digging into our self-imposed expectations and how they relate to the external or societal ideals that we see in the media. But that won't help you develop a practice for letting it go, so we'll assume that whatever issues around parenting perfection you've developed, you've come by them honestly.

Shame, the result of feeling inadequate, and its inevitable companion, Blame, can distort your ability to respond creatively to the situation at hand, so it's useful to practice recognizing and letting go of the idea that you should somehow be able to be the perfect wife, mother, husband, father, cook, laundry-doer, chauffeur, coach, cheerleader, cupcake-baker and caregiver, all while holding down a full-time job at which you are expected to be the perfect employee, and maintaining relationships for which you must be the perfect friend. Despite what you think you see out there, no one else can do it either. The exercises and questions below will help shake loose your tight grip on the idea of achieving that ideal.

If you're interested in knowing more about perfectionism, read Brené Brown's book [The Gifts of Imperfection](#).

Exercise: Re-imagining Your Perfect World

What if you let go of the impossible goal of parenting perfection and the associated shame of never reaching it? How would your life and your parenting be different? (You're welcome to hang on to that goal as long as you like, but for the purposes of this exercise, just imagine for a moment that perfection wasn't of any concern to you.)

I won't try to tell you this is easy, because it requires constant practice, but perhaps it will help to remember that you're not alone, no matter the source of your shame. You may be working hard to be a better parent than the ones you grew up with, or trying to measure up to their expectations (or even more destructive: your *idea* of what their expectations are). You might be feeling competitive with those annoying friends, acquaintances or siblings who seem to have it so irritatingly TOGETHER. Or you may be suffering from a deeply buried sense of smallness or inferiority. Hear me now, and believe me later, you are So. Very. Not. Alone.

None of these beliefs and nagging, critical voices in your head that tell you you're not as good as you should be are serving you, and fortunately, none of them are intrinsically true, either. I have learned that any thought that causes pain is simply not

true, once the thought is uncovered, articulated, and examined. Let's start by examining some thoughts—repetitive and unconscious thoughts that have become beliefs.

Make a list of the beliefs you hold about perfect parenting. What makes a parent perfect? What makes them merely amazing?

Now, list the traits, skills, capabilities and gifts from above that you already possess.

Next, imagine that the list you just made, the one that focuses on what you already possess, is enough. Imagine that you are enough, and that you are parenting in exactly the way you're supposed to—imperfectly, but willing to learn as you go. Set a timer for four minutes and visualize yourself feeling absolutely fine with your list for right now.



Were you able to sit for the entire four minutes and bask in the glory of your perfectly imperfect parenting? If the answer is no, you're not alone. When was the last time you practiced sitting quietly and envisioning a better life for yourself? You didn't fail the exercise—you're just out of practice. Notice this, congratulate yourself for noticing, and *move on*.

Once you've imagined yourself (even if it was just for a moment) perfectly ok with being imperfect, a 'perfectly flawed parent,' jot down the feeling-state it puts you in. Use adjectives that describe your emotional state, your energy level, and the physical feelings that come over you while you imagine yourself being Just Fine. There's no need to work harder to get better at it (I'll give you the secret to getting better at it in the next section, "Replacing Control With Curiosity.")

Now that you know exactly what it feels like to be a perfectly flawed parent, compare it to the feeling-state you're in when you feel you need to be perfect, or should be better at it, and make a conscious decision about how you'd like to proceed. Which would you rather spend your time feeling?

It may be surprising to you to realize that you have a choice about how you feel, and it stems from your thoughts and beliefs. If you believe you're doing well, you feel good, and have the energy to continue. If you believe that you are failing, you feel crappy, and your energy level is too low to be of use to anyone. No one else's judgment of your parenting skills matters to you—in the end, you decide what to believe, and your own judgments, thoughts and beliefs drive your feelings, behavior and results.

Exercise: Powering Through the "Have-to's"

You may also be surprised to learn that there is absolutely NOTHING in this world that you are compelled to do, with the possible exception of breathing, and the other autonomic functions we're blessed with. You don't have to create the perfect holiday atmosphere for your family, complete with homemade gingerbread village and professional-looking gift wrap. You don't have to kill yourself to please everyone, and you don't have to be President of the PTA, Secretary of the Junior League and Captain of the Neighborhood Watch just because someone asked you to.

No one else can be dictate your life or take responsible for you, your actions, your happiness, or your path in life. What you earn, who you love, how you raise your children, and what you do in your spare time, are all choices **you** make.

Let's play with this concept for a moment. Make a list of 5 things you **have to** do this week. If you know of more than five, just list the five most urgent or important ones and note that you've got a longer list.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

If you find yourself living with a long list of things you “have to” do, you may not recognize that everything you do is a choice. You don't “have to” cook dinner for your family—no one can force you to cook, and there are no laws that require it. You choose to cook so that you can provide nutritious and economical meals to your family. And there are other options for providing those meals, although they may not be as nutritionally or fiscally sound. Begin to see all of the “have-to's” as a choice and an expression of your own personal power, and see if your attitude changes.

Now, for everything you “have to” do, rewrite “I choose to _____, because_____.”

1. I choose to _____ because _____.
2. I choose to _____ because _____.
3. I choose to _____ because _____.
4. I choose to _____ because _____.
5. I choose to _____ because _____.

If the reason is to bring something positive into your life (even just the avoidance of negative consequences), you are most likely choosing what's right for you.

If the reason is more about what you think you should do, or you're expected to do, or you think you are supposed to do, question that activity. You may be living someone else's idea of what your life should be like. **You're giving your power away** to someone else, or to someone else's expectations of what you should do. Reclaim that power, and take responsibility for your own life, and you'll grow in ways that you never imagined. Teach your children to acknowledge their choices as well, and they'll understand their own accountability for their actions.

Replacing Control With Curiosity and Presence

“Let go of certainty. The opposite isn't uncertainty. It's openness, curiosity and a willingness to embrace paradox, rather than choose up sides. The ultimate challenge is to accept ourselves exactly as we are, but never stop trying to learn and grow.” —Tony Schwartz

What if you allowed your life, and your child's life, to unfold with curiosity instead of control, and lived with the questions instead of trying to provide answers?

I know a number of parents who tie themselves into knots trying to keep their children from making the same mistakes they made, which is technically impossible if you think about it. Other parents are obsessed with protecting their children from getting hurt. Still others make themselves and their children miserable by predicting with certainty outcomes they can't possibly know.

These practices are not only futile, but can destroy the joy of the moment, rob your child of the permanence of a lesson hard- and well-learned, and leave everyone feeling tense and distant. They keep you dwelling on the past or fearing the future, while the present goes unappreciated. There's a reason that John Lennon placed the lyric, “Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans” into a song to his child.

The best anyone can do is to remain firmly rooted in the present moment, existing, as my mentor Martha Beck says, “in perpetual creative response to whatever is present.” This requires you to let go of past trauma and anxiety about the future, and deal with the situation at hand in a way that is creative and open, without judgment or fear. Learning to trust yourself, stand in your truth, and lean into fear can only be accomplished if you stay present.

Being in this state of perpetual creative response will automatically make you a more effective parent and a more connected human being—without the need to work harder or do more. It is the difference between “being” and “doing”—another important life lesson that deserves its own workbook.

Exercise: Losing Control to Reclaim Your Power

Any stressful feeling you have, any suffering you feel, is not caused by circumstance, but rather by the thoughts you have about the circumstance. How do I know this? Because my husband and I can be in exactly the same circumstance—facing a steep, icy run on a mountain—and he will feel exhilaration, while I will be paralyzed with fear. He believes he can bounce down the icy Volkswagen-sized moguls like a snow-crazed Tigger, and I think only of the horror of being carried down the mountain via the Ski Patrol sled, in pieces.

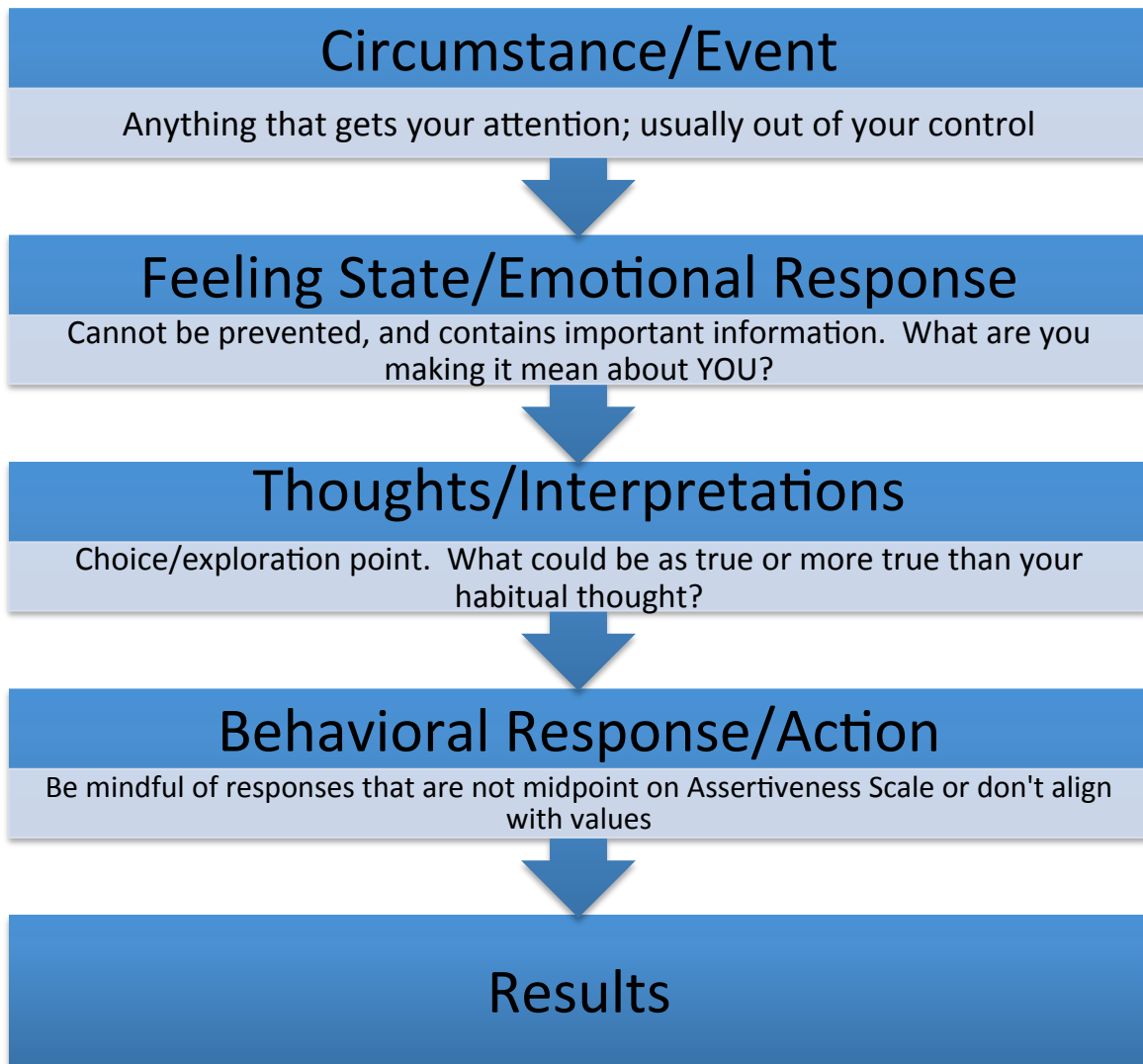
In a more extreme example, consider Viktor Frankl, Holocaust survivor. Even in the darkest days of starvation and hunger, Dr. Frankl never suffered, because he believed that the one thing his captors could not force him to do was to become a victim. He spent his years in the concentration camps focused on what made him human, seeking out every tiny patch of blue sky he could find, and noticing beauty wherever he could find it.

External circumstances cannot dictate your emotional state. Only your thinking about those circumstances, your perspective, has the power to do that.

Furthermore, any thought that causes such suffering is likely not true. If you work consciously with the thought—say it out loud or write it down, then question the evidence that makes it “true,” and consider the evidence for what might be more true, you can change your life in significant ways.

There are two wonderful methods for examining your thoughts, how they affect your feelings and actions, and the results you get. One comes from the author Byron Katie, and the other from a ground-breaking life coach named Brooke Castillo. (Both methods are represented in an adaptation of Brooke’s model I’ve created and show below. For more information on Brooke’s work, see www.brookecastillo.com.)

The model is a cognitive process for managing emotional intelligence, and is a tool for looking at your life that outlines a process for you to get the results you want, using personal power instead of force. It teaches you how to adjust to your existing circumstances in a way that just feels better, and to let go of the stories of “have to” or “should” that leave you powerless and resentful.



Here's how it works:

Think of an existing **circumstance**, like, "My kid got expelled from school for fighting." Then notice the **thought** that extends from the circumstance: "I'm a terrible mother, and I have to stop this from ever happening again." The **feelings** that follow on the heels of the thought might be inadequacy, sadness, anger or frustration. Your response to the feelings is expressed in your **actions**, which might be to cry, argue with the school authorities, or yell at your child. The **result** of lashing out is that your child responds defensively and might even think it safer to keep his distance from you, and the principal thinks you're a nut case. Not exactly what you were hoping for.

What if the circumstance remained the same, but your thoughts about the circumstance changed? What if you thought, "Huh. My child must be having trouble expressing himself/herself in relationships at school. I wonder what's behind that?" You might feel compassion and your actions might be to seek or provide help, with the result that his/her behavior changes, and you grow closer as a result of being fully present (without allowing your thinking to stand in the way) and overcoming this bit of adversity together.

Now, you. Think of a circumstance in your life that's causing you suffering and work through the model.

Circumstance that has led to suffering:

Feelings that are triggered by the thoughts:

Thoughts about that circumstance that are causing you pain:

Actions or behaviors that stem from the feelings:

Result:

Now, leaving the circumstance the same, replace the painful thought with one that could be as true, or truer, than the original thought, and doesn't cause pain. Follow it through the model to envision a different outcome.

Revised thoughts about the circumstance:

New feelings that are triggered by the thoughts:

Positive actions or behaviors that stem from the feelings:

Happier result:

You can use the model by starting with the feelings and working back to the thoughts and circumstances that trigger those feelings, or examine your actions first and work back to the feelings that drive that behavior, and the thoughts that drive the feelings, and so on.

For a more in-depth look at this model, read Brooke Castillo's [Self-Coaching 101](#), and Byron Katie's [Loving What Is](#), or visit her website at www.thework.com.

Please note: I am not suggesting that you deny your feelings, especially those that you judge to be “negative.” For example, anger, in its healthiest expression, is about setting boundaries and about fairness and justice. If you fully express the anger, it will subside and eventually resolve; if it remains unexpressed, it can cause even more pain. Repetitive cycles of anger, possessing the same intensity over and over, may be a signal that something’s amiss and an emotional wound exists that needs to be healed. Seek help from a licensed and qualified professional if your emotions feel out of control, or pour forth with repeated intensity.

Firing the Judge

“When we’re kind to ourselves, we create a reservoir of compassion that we can extend to others. Our children learn how to be self-compassionate by watching us, and the people around us feel free to be authentic and connected.”—Brené Brown

Who would you be if you stopped judging your mistakes, or your child’s, as good or bad? What if you refrained from judging yourself? Can you forgive yourself for your imperfections, and accept yourself as the unique soup of DNA, experience, memory, dream and thought that you are?

We all want our children to have a healthy measure of self-esteem, so is it possible for you to model the kind of self-love you wish for your child?

Accepting yourself and your child, flaws included, doesn’t mean you no longer want to grow, learn, or improve your skills at parenting and communicating. Accepting when things *go* wrong without making things *be* wrong doesn’t mean you don’t take reasonable precautions, make an effort to improve the circumstance or heal the disease.

But it does mean recognizing that your inner critic is so accustomed to being the first one you consult, she doesn’t even wait to be asked for her opinion anymore. She quietly insinuates herself into your life, controlling you like a puppet-master pulling a marionette’s strings. In order to diminish her effectiveness, you must become conscious of her constant attempts to sneak negative self-talk into your head.

Exercise: Giving Yourself an “A”

In their life-changing book, *The Art of Possibilities*,” Roz and Ben Zander tell the story of a technique they use with some of Ben’s music students, who were typically so filled with performance anxiety that they wouldn’t reach beyond their comfort zones for fear of making mistakes. Professor Zander, conductor of the Boston Philharmonic, figured out that if he just gave them all an “A” at the beginning of the semester, they’d be much more likely to allow themselves to try new things, and make the mistakes that would help them grow as musicians and performers. They might “speak truth to power,” and teach him a few things along the way.

His only requirement was that the students write him a letter telling him, in advance, what kinds of people they imagined they had become and what accomplishments they imagined they had made as a result of participating in the class as an “A” student. The results were stunning—the students saw themselves as successful and happy at whatever they were doing, and stretched themselves further than prior classes. Without the looming judgment inherent in the grading system, including the inevitable comparisons to the other students, each student blossomed in their own individual way.

Now, what if you just gave yourself an “A” in parenting on the day your child was born? What worries, anxieties and self-judgment would you not choose to experience?

What if it didn’t matter that you are a complete failure as a cook, don’t “know how” to raise an athlete or an artist or a musician or a lawyer or a dentist?

How much more open would you be to experiences you’d otherwise avoid? What would you risk if you knew you’d be judged favorably anyway? Would you let your child climb the backyard tree? Buy your kid a Happy Meal for dinner when you’ve worked all day and can’t imagine cooking? Divorce the spouse that you’re staying with because you don’t want to hurt your children? Do something else that’s on your list of things that no “A” parent would ever do?

How would your children’s lives be affected if you were to allow yourself to be imperfect, and to share that vulnerability in an honest way with them?



Write a letter to yourself, dated several years from now. Using the past tense, outline the kind of life you’ve had as a parent, and how you earned your “A.” Include the feeling-states you’ve experienced and the things you’ve learned, and your own accomplishments in personal growth. Who are you, now that you’ve successfully parented your children, and what was it that earned you that “A”?

Summary

-No matter what you do, or don’t do, as a parent, your children will follow the path in life that they’re meant to follow. As a wise boss once told me, “Don’t let ‘perfect’ get in the way of ‘good.’”

-How you respond to the circumstances you individually and collectively experience is completely within your control, even if the circumstances are not. You can’t control anyone else’s response, however, but you can be a positive model for emotional intelligence.

-Learning to change the repetitive patterns of thinking that lead to unhappiness, frustration, anger or resentment can improve the quality of your life. Healthy and honest expression of your feelings is an important indicator of areas of your life you’d like to change.

-Refraining from judgment, and maintaining a sense of curiosity about yourself, your children and your environment, can lead to a richer life, deeper relationships and more satisfying outcomes.

Resources

There are many websites, books and blogs that cover emotional intelligence, but the one that seems most comprehensive to me, including information on parenting with emotional intelligence, is at www.6seconds.org. Their simple model “Know Yourself; Choose Yourself; Give Yourself” is a useful paradigm for practicing emotional intelligence.

The best resource for parents of “differently wired” kids, who wish to celebrate “neurodiversity” rather than try to fix what’s not wrong, is Deborah Reber’s website and podcasts at www.tiltparenting.com. The parent of an exceptionally bright kid who struggled for years with emotional outbursts of nuclear proportion, Debbie has discovered how to manage her own expectations, accept and celebrate her son’s differences, face her shame and understand her emotional responses, which has led to positive breakthroughs of epic proportion for her son. I know Debbie personally, and recommend that you go to the website immediately, but only if you want your life, and your child’s life, to change in ways you never imagined possible.

About the Author

Amy Steindler is a certified EQ-i^{2.0} emotional intelligence practitioner and trainer, and a certified life coach, trained by best-selling author Dr. Martha Beck, “America’s best known life coach.”* She calls her practice “Insight Coaching,” because she believes that we all know what’s best for ourselves (and ONLY ourselves), but we sometimes need a little guidance to uncover our hidden wisdom and to begin the process of living our best lives. Her clients get skillful guidance for practicing emotional intelligence, which leads them to more connected relationships, deeper meaning, purpose and fulfillment, and more joy-filled lives.

For more information, visit her individual coaching website at www.insightoutlife.com, her corporate website at www.eq-insights.com, or her [LinkedIn profile](#).

