It's time to give up perfectionist parenting — forever. Here's how

With the pandemic upending ingrained routines, perfectionists have an opportunity to reset their ways and build a healthier parent-child relationship.

(CNN) — Before the pandemic, many of us found ourselves doing a little more parenting than we knew we ought to be doing.

Maybe we weren't full-on "helicopters" or "snow plows," and, no, we would never have done something illegal to try to ensure our kids' success.

Still, many of our parenting decisions — especially those of

us privileged enough to be making lots of choices about our children's lives — were informed by more "shoulds" than "coulds."

The diagnosis? Never-enough-itis. The symptoms? Busyness, guilt and deluding ourselves into thinking we could pull this off.

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Our kids, the magical thinking went, would be wildly successful, self-motivated and down-to-earth, and we parents would remain balanced and happy. Rising income inequality, a lack of community and the increasingly winner-takes-all atmosphere in which we live didn't help.

But now, the chaos and suffering brought on by Covid-19 have laid bare just how impossible our parenting standards are.

It has never been clearer how much is expected of parents, mostly moms, with little support from our workplaces and public institutions. Contrary to popular belief, moms are also subject to the time constraints created by the rotation of the planet. We too, only have 24 hours in a day.

Then there is the impact on our kids, our poor kids, who saw what little agency they had over their time and life choices go down the drain. Our children don't need us pushing them to be shinier, more brag-worthy versions of themselves in this moment.

Two new books consider what perfectionist parenting does to the human brain, and what a relaxed, more compassionate parenting can look like for parents and kids. While both titles were written pre-Covid, their messages about privileging connection over perfection are more urgent than ever.

It's hard to avoid perfectionism

Judith Warner, author of the recently published "And Then They Stopped Talking to Me: Making Sense of Middle School" had never intended to be a parent that pushed her kids too far.

"It was always my very conscious intent — my most precious hope as a parent, in fact — that my daughters

would feel loved and valued for who they were and not what they accomplished," Warner said of her daughters, now 20 and 23.

But even with the best of intentions, her kids got the wrong message anyway. This was partly from the world around them, which defined success in somewhat narrow terms: good grades, fancy college degree, followed by professional success. It was also because no matter how hard we try to say the right things, our children tend to be keen observers of our true, sometimes even unconcious, desires.

"As so much social science research has shown, children learn far more from the way that we live and the things that we do than they do from what we say, and, particularly once they hit middle school age," said Warner, also the author of the bestselling 2006 book "Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety."

Tweens and young teens are "super-sensitive to the gap between what we say and what we do," she said.

These actions that speak louder than words can help our

children feel like a product; something we shape, mold and nurture, with an intended outcome in mind.

In "Parenting Outside the Lines: Forget the Rules, Tap into Your Wisdom, and Connect with Your Child," writer and parenting coach Meghan Leahy noted how, in the past, parents were more inclined to stand back and watch kids become who they are. That's how most older millennial adults I know were raised.

Before the pandemic, many parents operated with the logic that everything they do matters, so they should be doing everything, completely right and very often. This turned what should be a relational relationship into a transactional one, and it had a strange and unhealthy impact on the power balance between parent and child.

No wonder everyone was already exhausted when the pandemic and protests hit.

Now *everything* is off the table, and we have a chance to change our ways. The answer isn't necessarily to go back to benign neglect of previous decades, Leahy said, but to find the balance that works for your child.

Our kids don't need any more pressure

When our lives are too kid-oriented, it gives kids too much power, explained Leahy.

"It has been such a disservice to their little souls to be made to feel so important in ways that aren't authentic," she said.

This pressure to become rather than be can cause kids stress and is likely a factor in the rise in anxiety and depression among children.

For those of us sheltering in place, or limiting social engagements, the parent-child dynamic is likely occupying more real estate in the emotional lives of our children than it did before. We need to step back.

Children, though especially tweens and teens, "need psychological, emotional and physical space. Without that space, they can't do the work they need to do on becoming who they are," Warner said. "They also can't develop the skills they need in order to be successful — at whatever they do."

As children get older, they need less and less scaffolding from parents, Warner explained, in terms of how they

should organize their lives and what their goals should be. However, like children of all ages, they still need parents who are there for them emotionally.

Try to treat them more like your friend, and less like your intern or mentee.

How to say goodbye to perfectionism

Unfortunately, scaling back is not that easy. Even during a pandemic. The culture of intensive, perfectionist parenting runs deep.

As a first step, Leahy encouraged parents to remember to make sure they are taking care of themselves. This is always the case, but it's especially true now with the world putting more demands on parents than ever.

"Every single day, a hundred times a day, parents ask me, 'how do we do the fall?'" Leahy said, referring to the return to distance learning. "I tell them: The first thing you need to do is to figure out your schedule and your needs. People can't believe it."

When parents consider their own needs first, the benefits are twofold. One, kids feel less pressure, even if they aren't conscious of it, as less of the family life is oriented around them.

Two, parents are in a better mood and therefore more able to deal with the inevitable emotional upheavals that come with family life during a pandemic. Once we achieve that bandwidth, Leahy said, we will be less likely to take "our kids' shenanigans personally."

When we don't take them personally, we feel less like a failure as parents, and our kids feel less like failures too, as they haven't disappointed us as much. Just like that, the internal pressure to be perfect diminishes on both sides.

Another step in toning down perfectionist parenting is to untangle the parental ego from the performance of the child. Parents can do this by making it clear to their kids that they matter, no matter what, and then extend this attitude to the wider community.

Doing this requires telling and showing, Warner said.

"Parents say 'Be nice!' and then they contribute to the exclusion of low-status, 'unpopular/weird' kids in the way they form car pools; allow parties to come together; witness exclusion and do nothing about it; or even join in mean

behavior by gossiping along with their kids," she said in an email.

These kinds of social hierarchies might be playing out differently today. Who are your kids distance hanging with? Chatting with on their phones? If they suddenly stop talking about their BFF's TikToks, ask them why.

Our children learn a lot about the way we view them through the way we talk about and treat other children. Kids also see how we treat ourselves, especially in high-pressure moments like the one we are living in.

Over the years as a parenting coach, Leahy saw many families realize their breaking point — the moment parents realized their expectations were too high and their "lives were living them." It was a moment of reappraisal of their values and lifestyles, and it would often lead to positive change.

The pandemic, Leahy said, could function as a breaking point for many families without, hopefully, all the breaking.

"This is a beautiful time to ask our kids what they like.

Notice what they are doing during the pandemic, and what they are missing and what they aren't," Leahy said.

"I've seen kids whisper to their parents, 'I don't miss travel soccer. I don't miss soccer at all.' And then there are the kids that are crying because they so miss an activity, because it is so in their heart," Leahy said.

"We have been gifted an opportunity to really see what lights our kids up."

We've also, I'd add, been gifted an opportunity to see what lights us up as parents in our relationships with our children. What do we want our time together to look and feel like? If you watch and listen, to your children *and* yourself, you might find out.

Perfectionism is not an easy habit to quit. Still, a moment like this, with all the upheaval, stress and uncertainty, is as good a time as any to give it a try.

Elissa Strauss is a regular contributor to CNN, where she writes about the politics and culture of parenthood.