

MOTHERHOOD

We know what it's supposed to be.

Let's talk about what it's really like . . .

By Sherri Muroff Kalt

Women are constantly bombarded with messages dictating how they're supposed to raise their children — and how they're supposed to feel about it. Whether it's a family member, friend or the media, everyone seems to have a "formula" for every aspect of parenting. But what if your experience as a mother doesn't look like what everyone else describes?

Lisa Z., a White Plains mother of two young children, confides, "I feel like there's something wrong with me because I don't 'love' being a mother the way other mothers say they do. There's a lot about parenting I just don't like." And a Hastings-on-Hudson mother observes, "Nobody talks about what they're really feeling about being a mother. Maybe they can't even admit to themselves they feel anything 'negative'."

It's easy to get caught up in the whirlwind of performance and achievement in our status-obsessed society, and wind up raising our kids to do the same. According to a Scarsdale mom, "There's so much pressure — even if it's subtle — to make sure your child is 'the best' in as many areas as possible. If I don't take advantage of every opportunity to enrich my children, I worry that they'll fall behind the other kids. Everyone is so competitive." Amanda, a Briarcliff mother of three, admits she is constantly on edge. "The demands on me are endless. I feel like I have to do everything perfectly. Everyone else seems like they have it so together, but I'm just exhausted."

How many women find themselves feeling that they're not good enough? How often do they doubt themselves? Why do they feel so anxious and unfulfilled?

A variety of societal dynamics contribute to these uncomfortable feelings. It is still largely taboo to express any "negative" feelings — such as ambivalence, disappointment, and anger — connected with the experience of motherhood. Mothers feel enormous pressure to place the needs of their children first, often negating themselves in the process. Pervasive obsession with status in every sphere of life fuels a single-minded focus on performance and achievement. And the pressure to conform to external dictates and adopt cultural values is intense.

Buffeted by these powerful forces, women can easily lose, or have difficulty developing, a grounded sense of self. Many feel caught up in a vortex of cultural "requirements" from which they find it hard to extricate themselves. This is the "backdrop"



against which they are raising their children and this atmosphere strongly influences their perceptions of their children, the ways they approach parenting, and their internal experience of motherhood.

So many women become convinced that they must pursue every enrichment opportunity to ensure that their children are well-positioned for maximum achievement. Their children must attend the "best" schools, participate in the "best" music/art/athletic programs, have the "best" socialization experiences — so that they have the best possible chance to be accepted by the "best" universities, be hired by the "best" organizations, have the "best" careers, material possessions, social status, etc. It is no wonder, then, that children are overscheduled, mothers micromanage their children's lives, and both parents and children operate in a hypercompetitive, hyperkinetic, high-pressure atmosphere. These dynamics, coupled with the constant demands of child-rearing and fueled by the expectation that the children should always "come first", tend to draw women further and further away from their core selves. Ours is a culture that tacitly discourages women from identifying and forging their own true path if it deviates from the "norm".

Consequently, many women begin to feel self-doubt, experience self-blame, feel dissatisfied and unfulfilled, and live lives that are out of sync with their true needs and beliefs.

So, how can you begin to live a life that's truly right for you? The process begins with developing an understanding of who you are: identifying your core needs and values. This is really a journey of self-exploration and one that continues over the course of a lifetime. It is difficult to separate out the

"overlay" of external expectations and messages that can profoundly shape our self-concept and choices; indeed, they will always be linked to a certain extent. But this self-examination is crucial to determining what will "feed" you emotionally. Having a clearer sense of your needs helps you make better decisions about how to satisfy them. Gradually, your choices for yourself and your family become more internally driven.

Knowing what you need is one thing; acting in accordance with those needs is quite another. It can be very challenging to carve your own path if it deviates from the dictates of your environment. While you may want to live a more "authentic" life, you may wonder: Who's in my corner? Who understands? Who will support me?

I believe it is other mothers with whom you'll find the most resonance. It's time to get together to speak openly and honestly about your *true* experience of motherhood. Mothers' groups that meet regularly are an ideal venue for expressing these feelings. Women need a safe place to explore the family issues and cultural pressures that can make parenting so stressful. The support of other mothers dealing with the same issues can help you feel empowered to live more "authentically". And doing so will enable you to be role models for your children, teaching them by example the importance of being true to yourself.

Remember: *You* can decide how you want to live. *You* can follow your own path.

Rye Brook psychotherapist **SHERRI MUROFF KALT** leads *The Authentic Mom self-exploration groups* at the Rye YMCA. For more information, call Kelly Kressler at the Rye YMCA (914) 967-6363 x 115.