

The Perfect Parent Trap

Sharona Stone, MEd, LCSW, DCH

Are you a parent, feeling vulnerable, confused, stressed, or overwhelmed? Being a parent is one of the most challenging jobs you may ever have, simply because you are continuously “on call.” There are so many promises as well as myths you may have heard or been told, particularly about “It will get easier when . . .”

Did anyone ever warn you about the “web” of the “Perfect Parent Trap?” Let’s remember, first, you were a human being, before you became someone’s partner, and then became a parent. Were you “perfect” at work or in school, always prepared in advance of due dates or deadlines?

In the past, how did you do finding time for work-life balance, and self-care? Those were the days, if you can recall, when it was just you, or the “two of us.” Were you a professional project manager, always patient, kind, and understanding even when others let you down?

Being a parent demands a new level of expertise, mastering the juggling act of multi-tasking, and having the flexibility to respond to the unexpected. When in doubt or simply curious, there are infinite sites, blogs, and social media postings all luring you in. Information overload, contrary opinions, and one-size-fits-all solutions, can do a job on a parent’s confidence.

How can you tell if you have fallen prey, or joined the ranks of unknowingly subscribing to the “Perfect Parent Trap?” First, know this can happen at any stage in your parenting career; seeking answers to school related issues, behavioral problems, or raising intelligent, emotionally sensitive or resilient children. If you are in pursuit of “the answer,” you are likely missing the most important part - “perfect” is an impossible pursuit.

Many parents are unaware of the risks inherent in the “Perfect Parent Trap.” When you are overly invested in anything, “ego” is usually at stake. Approval ratings and expressions of gratitude are often needed, and when these are not forthcoming a parent’s ego is in jeopardy.

Children are backed into a corner, needing to please the “perfect parent” instead of discovering their personal likes and dislikes.

The “perfect parent” is often busy planning the next entertainment in an upbeat mood, ready to post in advance on social media for all to see her fabulous agenda. Is it a first or second thought to ask the children or the other parent, what do you think? Can the “perfect parent” re-evaluate, and learn from the experience, not to take off until everyone is onboard? Or, deflated, charge ahead and force the plans - “I know you will have fun!”

Life is easier, maybe, if both parents are onboard, driving down the “perfect parent” road. There is likely excitement at first, and possibly for the duration of the ride. Now, you have arrived at your destination, and is everyone ready to go, and start the fun? Rarely in families is the excitement sustained and maintained at the same level by everyone. What happens when a child or parent is no longer on board? Do you keep pushing on, to get those pictures to post, reporting back in on a wonderful day?

Do you know when is “enough is enough?” How loud do the protests need to become before parents can get on the same page, or does it take an inevitable big crash of children and adults melting down? At this stage children are likely to be focused on themselves, feeling bad, tired and overwhelmed, unable to hold it together any longer. While parents, having tried so hard to give their children a wonderful day, may feel used up and unappreciated. Sadly, for all, any of the fun had earlier in the day has become a distant memory. Back at home, will parents reflect and consider ways this could have been different?

- Give yourself permission to be a “perfectly human parent”
- Elicit input in planning “fun” activities
- Be open, to changing plans, set realistic and modifiable agendas
- Observe and check in, recognize approaching limits before anyone is overwhelmed