

12 Simple Secrets Real Moms Know

GETTING BACK TO BASICS
AND RAISING HAPPY KIDS

Michele Borba, Ed.D.

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MORE PRAISE FOR
Michele Borba

"*12 Simple Secrets Real Moms Know* is a godsend for all the anxious, stressed-out mothers who worry that they're not 'doing enough' (and that's pretty much everyone!)."

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Service, Harvard University Health Services

12 Simple Secrets Real Moms Know

THE 12 SIMPLE SECRETS OF REAL MOTHERING

1. A mother who loves teaches worth.
2. A mother who is firm and fair gives her children a moral code to live by.
3. A mother who listens shows her children they matter.
4. A mother who is a good role model gives her children an example worth copying.
5. A mother who teaches values inspires character.
6. A mother who supports her children's strengths builds their confidence.
7. A mother who encourages independence cultivates self-reliance.
8. A mother who applauds effort nurtures perseverance.
9. A mother who accepts her children's shortcomings nurtures resilience.
10. A mother who takes time for her children helps them build strong relationships.
11. A mother who laughs teaches joy.
12. A mother who takes care of herself holds together her happy family.

—Michele Borba

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*With love to the most extraordinary example of
real mothering: My mother, Treva Ungaro*

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Michele Borba
Palm Springs, California

note to the reader

All stories in this book are about children and their mothers whom I have interviewed, known, or worked with over the last twenty years. A few stories are composite cases of children I have treated. Actual children's and mothers' names are included, except in those instances where a parent asked that her name be changed to protect her privacy. The exceptions are mothers interviewed for newspapers or written about in books, and those are noted in the References.

Unless otherwise noted in the References, stories and tips are based on interviews I conducted face-to-face, by phone, or through email exchanges with 150 mothers while writing this book. I also surveyed over five thousand additional parents in my workshops about what they felt mattered most in real mothering. Many of their responses are included in boxed tips. A sample of the U.S. cities where these interviews took place includes Albany, Aspen, Atherton, Berkeley, Chattanooga, Chicago, Coco Beach, Dallas, Diamond Bar, Essex Falls, Hays, Kalispel, Las Vegas, Little Rock, Los Angeles, Memphis, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Nashville, New York City, Oakland, Oklahoma City, Orlando, Palm Springs, Reno, Sacramento, Salt Lake City, San Diego, San Jose, Santa Clarita, Seattle, Tulsa, and Palm Springs. Canadian cities include Bonnyville, Brandon, Calgary, Cold Lake, Edmonton, Kelowna, Lac la Biche, Ottawa, Saskatoon, Simcoe County, Toronto, Vancouver, Westminster, and Winnipeg.

What Is a Real Mom?

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day. . . .

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse.

"It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with but REALLY loves you, then you become Real. . . . It doesn't happen all at once . . . , but once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."

—Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*

Hey, Mom: Are you real? Is what you're doing as a mother going to "last for always"?

Sure, that may sound like a silly question, but the answer is going to tell you a lot about just how effective you are as a mother, how influential you will be on your children's lives, and whether they will grow up to be happy adults with character and confidence. It will also make a big difference in just how happy your family is now, today, every day.

But you may ask, "Isn't everyone real? Isn't whatever I do as a mother automatically real?"

Well . . . no. Not necessarily. A lot of us moms are wondering these days if all the incredible amount of "stuff" we're

doing for our kids really matters in the long run and if what we're doing is really the best thing for our families. Of course we love our kids to pieces and would do anything in the world for them. That's never been in doubt. But many of us feel torn, pushed, and pulled in different directions. Whether we work full time or part time or are stay-at-home moms seems to make no difference. Most mothers are feeling the same. There are so many parenting choices and opportunities these days, so many new mothering options and strategies, so many new products that are supposed to make our kids brilliant and successful. And all that new research keeps hitting us in the face with what we must do pronto or else. And then there's the pressure of trying to keep up with all the other moms and all that they do for their kids that could give them the edge over ours.

So we're running around making all these appointments—the test prep classes, the soccer practices, the recitals, the Chinese lessons, the gymnastic meets, the camps, the Suzuki drills, the tutors and coaches. And we're trying to play all these different roles: we're the limo driver, the party planner, the wardrobe mistress, the volunteer car washer, the super-organized woman with the longest to-do list on the block. The more we do, the more there is to do. The more we try to keep up with the latest parenting trends and competition for status and achievement, the more pressure and anxiety we experience. The more we wish we could keep it simple, the more complicated and difficult it seems to become.

Is it any wonder that we moms have major doubts about what our role should be? Are you at all concerned that the complicated and demanding roles we're playing, however unintentionally, are being dictated to us from somewhere else, by some expert or guru or lady down the block? Do other feelings bubble up? Is there a little voice in the back of your head that's asking, "What are you doing? Do you really think this is right? So what if everyone else is doing it—why are you doing it too?"

Does mothering have to be so difficult?" Do these "mothering" roles and frantic activities represent our authentic selves, our core beliefs, our basic maternal instincts and intuition, what we know is right for our unique and special kids? Are these roles real?

"I Stopped Trying to Be Perfect"

 REAL MOM TALK

I'm often guilty of trying to be all things to my child, only to find myself living in a manic world of to-do lists, high-intensity parenting, and guilt. So I've been working on a new strategy. *Instead of being a perfect mom, I'm giving myself permission to be a "good-enough" mom.* This winter, one of the volunteer leaders of an extracurricular activity my son enjoys had stepped down, and they needed another parent to take his place. My son was eager for me to volunteer. I was tempted. Of course, the perfect mom would have made time and relegated her needs to the bottom of the list. But after giving it some thought, I decided I needed to say no. My son was a bit disappointed initially, but my absence hasn't diminished his enjoyment of the program, and it means he sees his mother in a calmer state. I think that's a fair trade-off. I'm not the perfect mom, but I'm beginning to feel okay about that, and I am learning that good-enough works too.

—Jane Schneider, editor of
Memphis Parent magazine,
single mom of a ten-year-old son

Okay, have I got your attention? Do you agree that all the stresses and pressures of being a mother today can wrench us away from being real and sticking to our intuition of what's best for our kids? So how do we get back in touch with what really matters to our kids? How do we know what is real?

I'll tell you.

Defining Real

Real is one of those words that everybody uses but whose meaning nobody really knows. So here's what I believe.

- Real comes from deep inside.
- Real is instinctive and intuitive.
- Real is authentic and genuine. There's just no faking it.
- Real is never borrowed. It's staying true to you.
- Real has no pretense, fabrication, phoniness.
- Real is simple. It's not complicated or difficult.
- Real comes naturally.

So what does a real mom look like?

- A real mom doesn't worry about what other moms are doing or saying.
- A real mom knows her children so well that she makes her parenting decisions based on their unique needs.
- A real mom is clear about her personal values and code of behavior, and sticks to them.
- A real mom knows what's important for her family and keeps those priorities straight.
- A real mom has confidence in her maternal instinct and isn't pushed around by the latest pressures and trends.
- A real mom knows that what matters most is a close connection with her children so that her influence lasts for always.

And what does a real mom do? Above all, she stays true to herself and connected to her kids, and she doesn't deviate from what she knows is best for her family.

- Real moms have a life of their own.
- Real moms break the rules for their family.

- Real moms let their kids wear the same clothes two days in a row.
- Real moms go on a date with their husbands and aren't afraid to miss the PTA meeting.
- Real moms give their kids pots and pans to play with.
- Real moms leave their food on the tray and head for the parking lot when their kid has a meltdown at McDonalds.
- Real moms make their kids do their own homework.
- Real moms aren't afraid to say no.
- Real moms give themselves time-outs.
- Real moms tell their kids they don't have to play Beethoven's "Für Elise" at the family reunion.
- Real moms know it's not personal when their kids say, "You're the meanest mother in the whole world."
- Real moms say "Good job" when their kids get an A but hold off on the brand-new Lexus.
- Real moms make their sixteen-year-olds set their own alarm clocks.
- Real moms tell their kids to pay their own library fines.
- Real moms ask Uncle Harry to put on the lampshade and do his juggling act on the kitchen table as the birthday party clown.
- Real moms let their kids be bored.
- Real moms say, "Not in our family" when their kids complain that "But everyone else does."
- Real moms say, "I'm not an ATM machine" and tell their kids to save money.
- Real moms admit they're wrong.
- Real moms know they're not perfect.
- Real moms leave the dust when the playgroup comes over.
- Real moms admit when they're grouchy.

- Real moms send their kid to canoe paddling camp when the other mothers enroll theirs in intensive Chinese language immersion.

Getting Back to Real Mothering

Does this sound like you? Do you recognize or identify with the traits of a real mom I've listed here? Of course we all want to be real, to stay true to ourselves and be a positive influence on our kids. But we're living in a high-pressure, fast-paced, competitive world. It's not hard to get swept away and lose sight of reality, of what we know in our hearts to be true.

Mothering is probably the most important job we'll ever have in our lives. Nothing, absolutely nothing, has as much influence and power over our families and future generations in years to come. Yet there's general agreement among all the hundreds of mothers I've spoken to that something isn't working: our kids aren't thriving as well as we'd hoped, and we are too often suffering from guilt, anxiety, and exhaustion. That's why there's been so much national talk lately and so many books written about the epidemic of Motherhood Mania. Far too many of us are responding to the pressure of this modern myth of mothering as a 24/7 sprint to the finish line. Instead of reconsidering what works and what doesn't, we're trying harder to be perfect. And that isn't working either.

The only solution is to be real, to be simple, to get back to the natural and authentic kind of mothering that isn't based on the latest TV show, educational video game, or hot new parenting product. The good news is, you don't have to go back to school, get a license or academic credential, or drive yourself nuts working hard on it every day. Remember: if it's real, it's simple. It's not complicated or difficult. It's easy to do, and you already have the skills.

Not only that, the benefits of real mothering are enormous.

When I Stopped Trying to Be the Ideal Mom

 REAL MOM TALK

I was twenty-six years old when I married, and instantly became a mom to five stepchildren: four boys and a girl, ages three to eleven. I wanted desperately to be a good mom, but frankly I was overwhelmed. This job didn't come with a set of rules. I read every available parenting book and tried every technique. I even took parenting classes at night. I was stressed and really feeling uncomfortable in my new role as stepmother. I even tried to dress differently to present the ideal image of a more traditional-looking mom, but nothing was working.

One day I went for a long walk to think things through. "You're smart," I kept telling myself. "This should be easier." I asked myself, "Is something wrong with me, or is it how I'm parenting the kids?" Then it suddenly dawned on me what was wrong: I was trying to be someone who wasn't me. I was trying to be this image of what I thought a perfect mother should be, and the kids saw right through it. That was my "ah-ha" moment: I knew I had to be true to myself.

From then on things started to get better in my interactions with the children, because they perceived my relationship with them to be genuine. I didn't have to be perfect with my kids or try so hard to be someone I wasn't naturally—the ideal model depicted of mothering. I didn't have to put on some "ideal role of motherhood" to be accepted by them. I can't tell you what a difference it made in gaining their respect. The gift that my children gave to me was my newfound self-confidence that I could be myself and also their mother.

—Bernadette DeFontes, stepmom of five,
Gaithersburg, Maryland

The Benefits of Being a Real Mother

Some of the long-term dividends of being a real mother are obvious and easy to appreciate; others are more subtle, yet no less important. Here is my list of seven reasons we need to get real:

1. Real moms can help their kids buck peer pressure because the certainty and firmness of their conviction strengthens their influence on their kids.
2. Real moms' children are more likely to adopt their mother's values because their mother hasn't watered down her beliefs with the latest trends or moral compromises.
3. Real moms are likely to be better models of patience and self-control because they're being themselves and are at peace with who they are.
4. Real moms are happier and have more joy in their families because there is so much less pretense and putting on to keep up.
5. Real moms are less guilty and anxious because they're not trying to be perfect by other people's standards.
6. Real moms are more appreciated because their kids have had a chance to know their interests and passions.
7. Real moms have more energy for their families because they don't waste time doing things that don't match their priorities and beliefs.

The result of all these wonderful benefits is that real moms enjoy a powerful connection with their children that lasts for always. If your kids are two, three, twenty, or older, the bond remains as strong and important as ever. You could even say that your model and the lessons you've learned are carried with them in their own lives and families. It's the most important legacy that you can ever provide.

I think the most important gift a mother can give her children is being authentic: knowing who you are intimately, liking who you are and respecting yourself. You want your children to have self-esteem, integrity, and strong character. How better to ensure that they have those qualities than by modeling them? So you have to be real—you have to have your own self-esteem and integrity. How can you get that when you don't know yourself? And how can you possibly model it if you don't have it yourself?

—Debbie Gibson, mother of six,
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Like a Hamster on a Wheel

Just this week I asked a mom how her family life was going. “Exhausting,” was the first word out of her mouth. Then she added, “I’m starting to feel like a hamster on one of those wheels—going around and around and never getting off.”

Is that what modern mothering has come to: being a hamster on a wheel? It’s that crazed feeling that Judith Warner describes in her best-selling book *Perfect Madness*. But it’s that same notion (the “continual busyness” or “always doing”) that seems symptomatic of mothering these days. It was the same underlying theme of so many of the moms I interviewed.

I’ve come to realize that real mothering, the stuff that makes up the true natural essence of being a mother, hasn’t changed and never will. Most every woman I spoke to still had that basic instinct; that unconditional love, tenderness, empathy, patience, perseverance; the willingness to listen, to devote themselves, to take joy and pleasure in their children. But the society we’re living in here in the good old twenty-first-century United States does have a new and different expectation of what it is to be a good, responsible, conscientious mother.

These days the central expectation of a good mom is for her to be a “doer” (volunteer, home tutor, home coach, carpool driver, PTA enthusiast, social secretary, hostess, and on and on—very complicated).

A decade ago, the main expectation was that she be a “nurturer” (supporter, listener, guider—simpler, and real). And that little switch has had a dramatic impact on our lives as well as on the lives of our children. It’s also weakened our influence with our children, zapped our energy, and boosted our guilt. As so many mothers told me, to be a good mom these days you have to “keep up” and “keep doing”; if not, you feel you’re cheating your children and flunking motherhood. Bear with me a minute. Read on, and see if you don’t agree.

Ask a woman to describe a good mother, and you get a résumé: “A room mother.” “The play group coordinator.” “A soccer coach.” “A scout leader.” “The PTA president.” “A booster club officer.” “An after-school volunteer.” The list of roles goes on and on and on. Mothering is a to-do list. And we’re exhausted just trying to keep up and keep our family’s schedule straight. The more a mom does, the better her chances of making the “Mommy Hall of Fame” (at least in the eyes of the other moms).

Interestingly enough, the kids describe their moms as “always involved” and “busy”—though teens would more likely say that their moms don’t have a life. The same kids also describe their moms as “usually tired” and “impatient,” and they “wish their moms could spend more time with them.” But how could they, when their schedules are so filled?

Fond Memories of Real Moms

Now ask someone to describe what they remember most about their own mothers, the “real moms” they grew up with, and you hear quite a different list of traits: “My mother was such a great listener.” “She was always there.” “My mom was so patient!” “All

my friends used to tell me how nice my mother was." "Mom was so funny, we just laughed and laughed."

I realized from these interviews and surveys that what we all remembered was not what our moms *did*, but who they *were* and how strong (or not) was the connection between mother and child. We remembered the woman herself, or simply "my mother."

These women influenced us by being real: with their own lives, their personal example, and their genuine selves—not with all the things they did for us. They knew instinctively how to connect with us and form a lasting attachment. These moms didn't rely on parenting gurus, use flash cards, learn the latest discipline gimmicks, and read child development charts. They used their natural-born instincts to mother their children, and because they did, their mothering was more authentic, far simpler, and more effective in influencing their kids' lives for the better, because they set their children a terrific example. They were really real.

Six Core Principles of Real Mothering

Having traveled around a lot talking, interviewing, and surveying mothers across the United States and throughout the world these past few years, I can tell you with confidence that being a real mother is founded on just six core principles that these women knew all along. A responsible, caring woman

1. Loves her children deeply and is committed to raising them to the best of her ability
2. Knows the essential and proven parenting principles
3. Maintains a strong belief that no one understands or knows better what's best for her child than herself
4. Recognizes her child's and her own unique strengths and temperament, and customizes her parenting to fit
5. Has the confidence to act on these beliefs

6. Knows, above all else, that it's the connection with her child that matters most

The true essence of real mothering lies in who you really are and how you connect with your child—and that's what we've so often forgotten.

We need to get back to real mothering. The benefits of doing so are profound for you, your child, and your family—they last for always. And the sooner we return to basic, instinctive, natural, authentic mothering, the stronger our families will be.

What About Fathers?

Of course dads make a huge difference in their kids' lives. Yes, their role in how kids turn out is immensely significant. And sure, they're very important; after all, they are half of the "nurture" factor in your kids' development. So you may wonder why they're not part of this book. The truth is, it's more moms than dads who are caught up in this frenzy of hyperactive parenting. Research has shown that in general moms spend more time with their kids and usually have more responsibility for the dropping off, shuttling, arranging, and just being with kids all day.

The catalyst for writing this book has been moms who have come up to me at my workshops and written emails to tell me about their anguish and struggle in raising happy kids. I know that fathers have the same concerns, but my primary experience has been as a mother with other mothers. I believe that ideally every mother has a caring and committed partner to help her raise children. But this book is written heart to heart, mother to mother.

How Do You Want to Be Remembered?

So I have a question. Imagine that your children are grown and now have families of their own. Your children are describing you to their children—your grandchildren. How do you want

to be described or even remembered by your children? I would be willing to bet it would be as the type of woman who influenced your life: "A mother who loved and taught me worth." "A mother who listened and showed me I mattered." "A mother who laughed and taught me joy."

If that's the kind of mother you want to become for your children, read on. It will be the woman your children describe years from now if you follow the plan in this book. The core reason I wrote *12 Simple Secrets Real Moms Know* is as a call for all of us to get back to what really matters most in raising happy children who have confidence, resilience, and character. A call to redefine a real mother in terms of who she is to her children, not just all that she does. A mother's connection with her child is what matters most. It's time we get back to basic, real mothering.

Your children really do grow up all too quickly, but your connection to them will last an eternity if you learn to use the twelve secrets in this book, follow your instincts, and keep true to yourself. Enjoy! The journey of love is worth every step.

How to Use This Book

The goal of this book is to learn the 12 Simple Secrets of Real Mothering and achieve the critical qualities your child needs for a life that's happy ever after. Part One will give you an understanding of why becoming a real mom is important and why continuing on this fast-paced track of overextended parenting and the quest for Supermom status will get neither us nor our kids anywhere.

Part Two presents twelve true stories about real moms and their children. Each of them introduces one of the twelve simple secrets of being a real mom and how to use the secret yourself. I've used these stories with parents and teachers in hundreds of presentations, keynote talks, and workshops on four continents. Time and time again, I've seen the audience

laugh and cry as I told them. They seem to strike a chord. Over the years I've realized that each of them depicts an essential secret of real mothering. In addition, these stories seem to inspire people to use the central message and insights with their own families. They've become tools for teaching, core lessons that motivate parents to make changes and do better with their kids. And years later, people tell me how much these stories have influenced their lives.

In addition to these twelve stories, I've included specific steps, tips, techniques, and guidelines to help you apply the core secret of real mothering in a way that leads to specific success with your kid. For example, how does being firm and fair and setting consistent limits and standards of behavior lead to a young adult who is more secure, confident, and willing to form lasting attachments? How does applauding your child's every effort and not just going for the trophy instill a stronger work ethic and nurture internal motivation?

This is not a simplistic, 1-2-3 method of parenting. This is about creating a life mission. This is about creating A Mother's Promise that you will use forever. Your Mother's Promise will be your personal lesson plan, and, as you would any good lesson plan, you'll need to adapt, modify, and change it as the years go by. After all, real mothering never ends, even when your own kids become parents.

How to Get the Most Out of This Book

There are a few techniques I strongly recommend to get the most out of this book:

- **Create your own Mother's Promise.** A special form is provided for you on pages 54–57 to use after you read each real mom's secret in this book. I explain how to use this form on page 53, but for now, please know that I strongly suggest you complete these pages. Doing so