



From a Parent's Perspective

by Roslyn Duffy

Reframing Your Expectations

– Situation –

My problem is not about my child but about me. I used to pride myself on the way I kept my house; things were tidy and I would never leave even one unwashed dish in the sink overnight.

Then our son was born. He is almost two, and I cringe when someone stops by for a visit. Yesterday, I was mortified when my neighbor sat down and the sofa squeaked! I tried to laugh and say, "Oh, that's where rubber ducky was hiding!" What I wanted to do was hide instead.

I can't keep up with the mess. I love my little boy, but I don't feel so great about myself anymore.

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– Solution –

Maybe before children your house had the elegance of a still life. Now you are learning to live in a shifting mobile. Have your rooms taken on a fractured look as though Picasso put them together? It may be time to redefine your vision of the art of housekeeping.

The changing roles of women and men have made defining who we are difficult. When a child is born we switch from being a couple, a single person, or a family of three or more to something new and unknown. The obvious shifts of time management, responsibility, and more complex relationships are things for which we try to prepare. The less obvious shift of what we expect of others and ourselves emerges gradually.

Think of your own childhood. What did Mom do? What was Dad's role? What was expected of you and any siblings? Whether you choose to follow those roles or do the exact opposite, your own life experiences affect your expectations.

One mom was devastated when her children turned up their noses at an elaborate strudel she prepared. Why did she react so strongly? Images of her Grandma and a warm kitchen full of spicy smells drifted through her senses. This was the strudel her Grandma taught her to make. It evoked memories of the wonderful years when she and her mother had lived with her grandparents. When her own children failed to delight in the baking project, she felt a sense of mourning that she could not pass her treasured childhood memories on to her own children.

*What problems do you experience? Send a description, a short word "snapshot" of the situation, to **From a Parent's Perspective**. Each month, we will address your real-life issues. To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear. Elements of several problems may be combined for this column. Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.*

Realizing that the strudel represented a special memory helped her to put her children's reactions into perspective.

Such moments happen often. Tying self-worth to how well we live up to our own images of what we *should* be, how we *should* act, or what family life *ought* to be makes disappointment almost a certainty. Let your house become a canvas for the life of your family. Hotel-room spotless might no longer fit the masterpieces now living under your roof.

Take a good look at what you believe you *should* be doing as a parent, wife, or husband. Then ask yourself *why* you think that way. What experiences led to that script in your head?

Now take a look at your life today. Are your expectations still reasonable given your current lifestyle? If the old script doesn't work for you or your family, it is time to rewrite it.

Redefining me, we, and us takes up much of our time as families. There was never a reason to discuss whether the cap being off the toothpaste was a problem for you before you shared a tube of toothpaste with a significant other. Before baby arrived, you can't remember a single conversation with your partner about the etiquette of nursing in public (or about the color and consistency of baby poop, for that matter). When you lived alone, you rarely thought about the way you preferred to soak the silverware before washing it. Now it is hard not to cringe as your wife tosses gravy-coated utensils into the dishwasher.

The process of redefining who you are as you become part of a different family unit involves endless minutiae. How will all this reminiscing, soul-searching, and anguish make rubber duckies in the drawing room any easier to take? That is up to you. What do you expect of

yourself, your partner, and your child? What do they expect of you? You cherish the look of crisply folded linens, and yet this morning you shoved them into the drawer. You were in too big a rush to take the time to line up each corner and seam because this morning was your son's day to have his family at sharing circle. Probably no one will notice the rumpled pillowcases; they are far more likely to notice how much you smiled today.

As to how your house looks, use your creativity to scale your expectations to a size that fits today's drawing room. If the soft misty look of a Monet brings you tranquillity, create a corner in your bedroom as your personal sanctuary and become more tolerant of creative clutter in the rest of the house. The polished look that you cultivated in your days as a single career person may keep your family at arm's length. If your arms start to feel too lonely, it may be time to dust the gleaming countertops with a bit of flour and hug your little one as she mangles bread dough with enthusiasm. A kitchen vibrating with bold Van Gogh colors might entice the creation of rich sauces that dribble down chins and onto collars. Offer thanks for stain remover and savor these wonderful memories that are being etched into your hearts.

Constant self-disapproval bleeds into the atmosphere. It is easy for children to feel inadequate when surrounded by the muddy colors of a parent's dissatisfaction. It is equally easy to condemn a spouse who does not live up to your vision of what *should*, *could*, or *ought to be*. Disapproval and blame do not paint pretty pictures.

Perhaps next time, the smile on your face will be genuine when you retrieve that rubber ducky, eyes sparkling as you focus on the inner image of your splashing toddler. My guess is that the

neighbor will share in your delight, maybe adding a few rubber ducky stories of her own.

Roslyn Duffy is the co-author with Jane Nelsen and Cheryl Erwin of *Positive Discipline for Preschoolers* and *Positive Discipline: The First Three Years* (Prima Press) and co-author with Elizabeth Crary of *The Parent's Report Card* (Parenting Press). Roslyn is a 17-year veteran director of a child care program in Seattle, Washington, lectures and teaches classes for both parents and teachers, and is a counselor in private practice. She has four children of her own.