

GETTING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

When we're really struggling to parent

Connection and belonging

This fact sheet was created by parents for parents who might be struggling to look after their children. If you think this might be you – you're not alone, we've been there too. Challenges like ours are more common than you could imagine.

When we're surviving: when the odds are stacked against us, or we've found ourselves parenting in ways that expose our children to harm, how do we find our way towards 'good enough parenting'?

What is 'good enough parenting'?

We don't need to be great parents, we just need to be good enough.

'Good enough parenting' means that we are doing a pretty good job taking care of our children. We might not be perfect and it's OK to make mistakes, as long as we are doing our best and keeping our children safe and healthy.

Definition of 'parent'

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

What can get in the way of good enough parenting?

No one gives us a manual when our children are born or come into our care – we're all figuring it out along the way and inevitably making mistakes. Some of us are lucky enough to have had role models in our lives of good or great parenting. Some of us have supportive partners or co-parents who are on the team with us, figuring out what works best when it comes to our children.

And some of us are up against it and trying our hardest to parent while living with:

- poverty
- not having had access to education
- disability
- housing insecurity
- homelessness
- family violence
- all kinds of abuse
- addiction
- distress
- grief and loss
- mental illness
- intergenerational trauma.

Quick tips

If you are parenting with exhaustion, overwhelm, despair or worthlessness, you're not alone – we've been there too and hope these quick tips help.

Keep learning

We parent as best as we can with what we know at the time, but that doesn't mean we can't learn more. There is help available – start by searching online. Ask people questions – there's no such thing as a silly question.

Ask yourself some tough questions ... and answer as honestly as possible

- Are you OK with the way you're living and how you're parenting?
- Deep down, who you can trust? And if you can't trust anyone, where will that leave you?
- Are you gonna change and deal with the pain or are you just going to continue on and the end result's probably going to be pain anyways?

Our stories

We are Rachael, Fiona and Flick. These are our experiences of discovering good enough parenting in tough times. We want to share with you:

- what good enough parenting means to us
- what got in the way of good enough parenting for us
- what supported us to make changes to the way we parented; and
- some things we think might be helpful for other families to know.

Content warning

Our stories include references to drug addiction, domestic violence and Child Protection Services' removal of children. If reading about these things brings up any difficult feelings for you, please seek help from your networks, or reach out to these [crisis or support services](#).

What good enough parenting means to us

How do we figure out what kind of parent we want to be?

Rachael's experience

'We might not know much about kids, or we might have come from backgrounds that weren't so great ourselves growing up. But I think we do what we can ... the best that we can with what we have at the time. It's not until we actually learn new stuff that we start doing better. You can't do what you don't know. No question's a dumb question when it comes to parenting. It's like Goldilocks; it's like a zone. You're not under-parenting, you're not over-parenting; you're sort of in the middle. I think we needed outside help to learn that we were under-parenting.

'I always thought love was enough, but learnt that that's not really the case. I thought, "No, I love my kids. I do everything with them." And I thought that was enough. I needed to learn that that wasn't really enough. I wasn't really "there" because of my drug addiction. I used to think that the drugs was only affecting me, I didn't actually see it as affecting anyone else around me.

It just changed, me learning how much it was affecting them. And I learnt there's a lot of other things that go with just loving your kids to help 'em grow, to give them that sort of security where they're confident enough to go away and learn stuff and then come back. Circle of Security gave me a big understanding about what the kids needed more than what I was giving them at the time.'

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We parent as best as we can with what we know at the time, but that doesn't mean we can't learn more. We're always learning.

RACHEL, PARENT

Fiona's experience

'To me it's to be a teacher, a guide. Always direct them in the right direction. Nurture them, love 'em. That's what parenting is to me. Just help them to grow to be good adults.'

'I've been a s*** parent sometimes. Not by my choice. I wanted to be an awesome parent, like my parents. But my life circumstances didn't let me. My kids would've been taken off me if I had've been honest to the people that I needed help from. But I lied my way through heaps of my life. Whether it was to doctors, whether it was the police. So was I being good enough? No, I actually put my kids through hell by keeping them in there when I thought I was keeping us together for the family's sake.'

'I saw this presentation about trauma and what it actually does. I was blown away. My daughter's got diabetes, mental illnesses, my boys have got mental illnesses ... so many things that I didn't realise, I take responsibility myself, but I didn't know any better. I was still always trying to be a good enough parent, but I could have been better. You didn't get an instruction book when your baby was born, did you? We all just struggle along.'

Flick's experience

'The values I hold now is all about being available for my children to be heard. I look at it now, if someone would've just heard me from the age of 16, pregnant ... someone could have picked up

that I don't know this stuff and they could have helped guide me and educated me.

'[Since my children were removed] I've learned different ways now, I can reflect – there's a better way of doing things. There's not one way. My son that's nine now with autism, today something might work really well for him and then tomorrow it might not. You've gotta find something different.'

'I always felt like my family was different and "less than" because of my own self-worth. Because my children weren't behaving the same way as other children. Some of the stuff that I've seen other people do parenting, none of that worked with my family, you know? So, I had to work out what was going to be safe for my children in their moments. What can I live with? What can't I live without? What would be best for them? And how do we make our home the happiest? Sometimes that looks like less than or poor judgement to other people. But in the end, it worked for my family.'

'Throughout [my experience of parenting and my kids being removed], no matter what was going on, at no point did I not love my children. People can see my parenting skills and question if I love my children. No matter what scenario was going on, not once did I not love them.'

What got in the way of good enough parenting for us

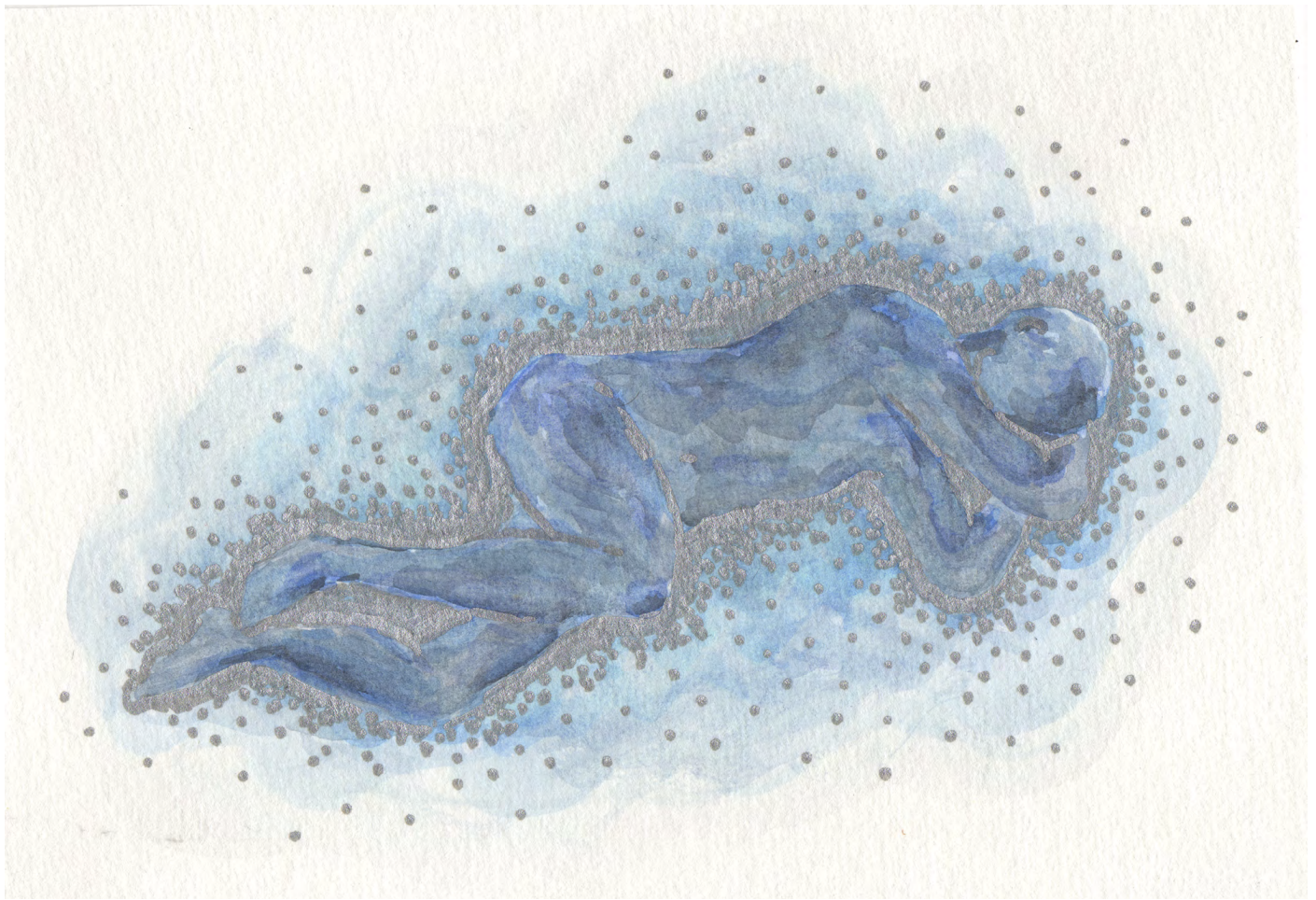
The challenges we faced

Rachael's experience

'In my relationship, everything was left up to me. He worked and I had to do everything to do with the kids and I mean everything. He did nothing. And that's not how I wanted it to be. I wanted two parents helping doing stuff, but it just wasn't like that.'

'And I had problems with domestic violence. When your kids see what happens: drugs, the sort of people that would come in and out of our lives ... that's the sort of that got in the way of me being the sort of parent I wanted to be.'

'I didn't plan to have a family and then I had a family, and I never really stopped and thought about what sort of parent I actually wanted to be. I've only really thought about that in hindsight.'



LUCY, 12 YEARS OLD

Fiona's experience

'With the DV [domestic violence] I was undermined always: "Don't listen to your mother!" My kids were taught by him: just demand, demand. The drugs were in the way I see in hindsight, but at the time I didn't because I'd done that since I was 14, way before I was a mum. The other thing that made my parenting difficult was my mental health. I didn't get diagnosed with bipolar until I was 32, but I can see signs since way back when I was 14. So it'd been a lot like a rollercoaster of a life.'

Flick's experience

'Drug addiction, alcoholism ... no matter that stuff, I wasn't going to be able to parent anyways because I actually didn't know how to parent. At the end of the day, it was just never going to work because I was uneducated. I wasn't shown it, I was a child of the system. My mother was a child of the system. There's three generations. So we just lived a life of parenting the way we thought was right.'

'There was no opportunity for change before the removal. It's not like, "We'll take your children until you learn this and then you get your children back." You know, it was five years later my children came home. If a doctor would've said something was wrong – the school, Child Protection themselves – if anybody would've sat down and said, "You know, I think there's a problem", I may have looked at it or I may not have looked at it, but at least I would've had that chance.'

'I say this a lot: I am grateful Child Protection took my children. I was in a very bad place and my children weren't in the best family home. I wasn't aware of that obviously. But I'm not OK with the way they've done it. I'm not OK with the way they kept our family disconnected. It was not kind, caring or loving for me or my children, you know? These children now have trauma, not only from me but from a child protection system that was meant to protect them. No one's prepared me for that.'

What supported us to make changes to the way we parented

Who or what helped us

Rachael's experience

'My daughter taught me. She's the one that doxed me into DCP [Department for Child Protection] and got my kids removed. She was like, "I'm not going home 'til my parents get off drugs." She was just so scared of me dying. Or my husband dying. And she thought it was gonna take, you know, a couple of days. It took me eight months to get them back. But it was just how brave she was to stand up and do that.

'That was pretty gutsy of her to say, "I've had enough. I'm not going home until they get their s*** together", you know? And she was really worried about her little brother and sister. So she taught me a lot in that respect about just standing up for what you know is right. She put the boundaries down that I should have been putting down, you know; that was a wake-up call.

'I already had positive attachments with all three of my kids. I deeply loved all three of them. But I just was not in a good place in my own head. I'd lost all my family. So, it was the people that I worked with, the social workers. The reunification worker that came in and worked with me, my kid's advocate, those people made such a big impact on me. I'm still friends with them 20 years later. The person that took my children, I struggled with her in the beginning. I hated her. I blamed her for everything. And it took me a while to realise it wasn't her fault at all. She was doing the best thing for my children. And then once I sort of realised that we got a better relationship and started working really well together. Now I'm looking back, I'm so glad she was as tough on me as she was. Because if she wasn't, I just would've walked all over her. She made me accountable and held me to account. And I needed someone like that.'

Fiona's experience

'I had to escape the DV [domestic violence]. I had done it before, and gone back and gone back and gone back, and then had two more kids with him. I ran away and from him and had to leave the two oldest ones behind because they were adults by that time, and they would've told him in a heartbeat where we were. The younger

ones were nine and 10 at the time. When I finally escaped, the women's shelter was unbelievable for me. There was counselling through there and they helped me with the kids, putting in some rules and routine. I'm so grateful that there's been lots of supportive people through my life. I didn't actually realise how many people helped us through ... until I look back in hindsight.

'I just lived five minutes at a time. Instead of thinking, "Where are we gonna live?" I just lived five minutes. Because I'd gone back so many times as well. But my kids, they were just awesome. They were nine and 10 and they were like, "Mum, don't listen to him. He's just saying that." My older one, as soon as he heard something, he was standing there around the corner, you know, as if he was gonna protect me. When I got away I didn't need protecting. I could be there to protect him.

'I started becoming more like my own parents were. I always strived to be like my mum, she would come to my house on a Tuesday and I'd have this pile of washing on the couch and all these dishes. And by 10.30 she'd have it all done and sit down for coffee.

Flick's experience

'My children, my little people were probably the only thing I had in life to value really. I didn't have this grand relationship with my father and my mother, and all these grand friendships. I only had these little babies. They meant so much to me, I just decided I'll do whatever needed to be done. But in saying that, I didn't realise how much of a big fight ahead of me there was too. I entered into it very blindly not knowing how hard it was going to be physically and emotionally and mentally.

'There are two defining moments for me. One was being in a parenting group and they were talking about different emotions of yourself and your children, looking at how to navigate that stuff. And I remember I had a tear in my eye and I thought, "Oh my gosh, I don't even have common sense." It was due to my past traumatic path. It was a survival instinct at first to shut down emotionally. Then it became a pattern so ingrained in me that I didn't even know I was doing it to the point that I wasn't even showing these emotions or speaking about these emotions. I had to then educate myself around human emotions, naming them and understanding what they are and what they look like. I could see that within myself and my children.

'The other defining moments were being in a 12-step program and listening to other parents talk about the different types of neglect that they did to their children while using drugs or alcohol. Because what I had to realise was, you know, yes, my children were fed and they were bathed and off to school, but there was more to it than that. There was different ways I was neglecting my children that I didn't understand. I wasn't hearing them, I wasn't meeting their emotional needs because I was emotionally disconnected.

'So I had to again, get into therapy and work out and find a way – how do I emotionally connect to my own emotions so I could be emotionally available for my children? I had to look out for what my children were lacking from me. If that was a routine of me cooking homemade meals instead of buying takeout, if it was actually me sitting down and watching a movie with my children.'

Some things we think might be helpful for other families to know

What we'd like to share

Rachael's advice

'We parent as best as we can with what we know at the time, but that doesn't mean we can't learn more. We're always learning. If you need help, ask for it. Don't be scared to ask people stuff, no question is a dumb question.

'I think parents get really scared to admit that they're not doing so well. Scared of that shame or whatever. Reach out, ask for help. There is help

out there, you just gotta sort of dig through and find it. There's so much stuff available online, it's easier for us to access information and access services than it was 20 years ago. So I would always start online and go from there.'

Fiona's advice

'Just know that you're not alone. Keep going. It does get better. It does get easier.'

Flick's advice

'Ask yourself: "Am I OK with this? Am I OK with my parenting? Am I OK with the way I'm living?" Because there's always this gut thing that something's not right, but we go against that, right?

'Who can I trust with talking to? 'Cause we can be given a list, but we need to look inside to work out who we actually trust. And if I can't trust anyone, where's that gonna lead me to?

'The other question I ask myself is: "Even though this is going to be painful, are you going to do this?" When I have changed it's always quite painful. I go, "Are you gonna change this and deal with the pain or are you just going to continue on and the end result's going to be extreme pain anyways? Are you prepared to do this?" Change is painful, it's uncomfortable, there's a lot of guilt, shame, anxiety attached to this. And the fear. Fear is normally the reason why we don't do something. And that's way before the change comes and the magic happens and you're happy and you're content and you're relaxed. But you know, no one talks about them hard yards first.'



A young person's story: Reconnecting with family after being returned home

This story is from 17-year-old Michaela, one of Flick's children, reflecting back on when she was 10 years old and returned to her mum's care after being removed by Child Protection at five years and having had around 13 placements in that time.

'Reunification for me and my family was about spending time with our elderly relatives, new family members and knowing who and where we came from. It was being able to finally have my own mum tuck me in at night and tell me she loves me, not somebody who had to play that role when all I wanted and cried for at the end of the day was a family just like everyone else's that had their mum and dad at the end of each and every day.

'It was finally being able to have my mum at school cross-country [running meets] and packing my bag for the school excursion.

'We were able to finally have conversations without having the whole world know that I missed and wanted to be with my mum, and the embarrassment I had talking through a phone about how I disliked most of my carers, and saying things about them or having to hide the fact that I want to talk to and know my family.

'It was more about being able to finally be knowledgeable that I am allowed to know my family and I have a right to have that connection if I wanted it.

'It made me feel happy and safe knowing I had my mum. I am happy and grateful that my life turned out how it did.

'I am grateful for everyone in the process of helping my family reunify.

'If there was one thing I could change about the reunification process with my family is that my mum was trusted a little more than she was given, and the fact that I waited almost a whole year to go home when my mum had already showed she had self-improved and for the better.

'Trust is a very big factor, but we can never be certain of another's motivations, intentions, character or future actions. We simply have to choose between trust or distrust, so it's completely difficult when making decisions on behalf of a family you have only seen the past side of.'

Take a moment to think about...



- What kind of parent would you like to be?
- What is getting in the way of being the parent you want to be?
- What steps could you take next?
- Who or what might support you?

Support for moving towards good enough parenting

If you could use some more support, check out the following resources.

Urgent support

- [Crisis, counselling and support services](#)

Helpful parenting resources

- [Parent helplines and hotlines](#)
- [Parent and family support and services](#)
- If your children were removed from your care, or they may be at risk of being removed, check out [FISH](#) (Family Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter). You can [talk to a peer worker by calling 1300 942 598](#).
- Bringing Up Great Kids is a resource for all parents with [information that can help you to raise your children](#).

- Circle of Security International has a video that explains about the [Circle of Security parenting program](#). If you are interested in the program then try searching the internet for 'free Circle of Security near me' or [Relationships Australia](#) might be able to connect you – [call Relationships Australia on 1300 364 277](#).
- The Triple P Program offers [free parenting courses and resources](#) to help build your understanding and extend the skills and knowledge you already have, with simple tips and techniques.

Dive deeper into Emerging Minds podcasts

- The Emerging Minds podcast episode [Learning how to parent when you weren't parented well yourself](#) is a conversation with Flick about how she learnt to parent when she wasn't parented well herself.

More connection and belonging resources

Have a look at the following options and choose what feels right for you and your family.

- [Why are connection and belonging important?](#)
- [Connecting and caring for each other in tough times](#)
- [Supporting children's social connections in tough times](#)
- [Feeling connection and belonging outside our families](#)
- [Finding connection beyond family, friends and community](#)
- [See all resources on connection and belonging](#)

Are you a practitioner wanting to share this resource with a person or family?
[First check out our practitioner guide.](#)

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