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PERSPECTIVES

You Can't Eat for Them.

On conscious parenting, raising independent human beings, and learning to stay in your own life while guiding someone through theirs.

CONSCIOUS PARENTING · NOVEMBER 2026

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By Micaela Redmond, LMT, CMP, PMP · November 2026

I've come to believe that the first person we have to become conscious of when we're raising children is ourselves.[12]

And I don't mean becoming a perfect parent. Good luck with that.

I mean becoming aware of who we are, what we believe, what we're carrying, what sets us off, and how much of that we're bringing into our relationships with our children.

Because here's something we can forget in the middle of trying to raise responsible, capable, decent human beings:

Our children came here to have their own experience of life.

We get to participate in it. We get to guide them, protect them, teach them, love them, and provide the structure they need to grow.

But we cannot live it for them.

And we certainly cannot control every part of it.

You Can't Eat for Them

I use this example because it's so simple.

If I tell you I'm starving, you can make me a sandwich. You can buy my groceries. You can sit with me while I eat.

But you cannot eat for me.

You can eat an entire Thanksgiving dinner on my behalf, and I'm still going to be hungry.

My hunger requires my participation.

And life works much the same way.

We can give our children access to opportunities, share what we've learned, establish expectations, and offer all the wisdom we have available.

But they're the ones who have to experience their lives.

They're the ones who will make decisions, develop relationships, experience disappointment, discover what interests them, and learn what they're capable of.

Even when we would very much prefer to handle the situation ourselves.

Especially then.

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As parents, we can become so invested in protecting our children from discomfort that we begin trying to manage every outcome.

We want them to make the right choices. Have the right friends. Avoid the mistakes we made. Develop the interests we think will serve them best.

And beneath all of that may be a very understandable desire to spare them pain.

But experience is part of how human beings develop.

The question becomes whether we're giving our children the guidance and support they need to navigate those experiences, or whether we're trying to have the experiences for them.

There is a difference.

You Have One Job

I often say we have one job: keep them on the rails.

And I don't mean that quite as literally as it sounds.

I'm talking about giving children a foundation. Helping them understand safety, responsibility, kindness, accountability, and the consequences of their choices.

The rails are the structure that helps them navigate the journey.

They aren't a predetermined destination.

My son, Alex, affectionately known as "Dude", is an aspiring scientist and a trombone player. He has interests and ideas that belong entirely to him.

My job isn't to turn him into some particular version of a successful adult that I've imagined.

My job is to help him develop the skills, judgment, confidence, and character he'll need to become himself.

And yes, that involves rules.

We have expectations. We have agreements. There are responsibilities and consequences.

I'm raising a human being who needs guidance, not running a household where everybody votes on whether bedtime is a suggestion.

But structure and control aren't the same thing.

Structure helps someone learn how to make decisions.

Control attempts to make all the decisions for them.

I want him to understand why something matters, recognize the choices available to him, and eventually navigate those choices without needing me to stand beside him.

That's the point.

The Child Is Having an Experience. So Are You.

Here's where parenting gets particularly interesting.

Your child does something you don't like.

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Maybe they forgot an assignment. Maybe they spoke to you in a tone that required a little conversation. Maybe they made a decision that you know will create an unnecessary complication.

Now something is happening in your body.

Your shoulders tense. Your stomach tightens. Your patience gets very thin, very quickly.

And before you've really considered what's going on with your child, your own nervous system has already joined the meeting.

There are now two experiences happening.

Your child's experience of the situation.

And your experience of your child's experience.

This is where consciousness matters.

Can I recognize what's happening inside me before I decide what to do about what's happening outside me?

Can I notice when I'm reacting to fear, embarrassment, frustration, or an old expectation?

Can I distinguish between what my child actually needs and what would make me feel more comfortable?

Because those aren't always the same thing.

Sometimes a child needs immediate intervention.

Sometimes they need a clear boundary.

Sometimes they need help solving a problem.

And sometimes they need the opportunity to discover that a choice has a consequence.

The more aware I am of my own reaction, the better chance I have of recognizing the difference.

Your Nervous System Is Part of the Conversation

Children learn a great deal about emotion through their relationships with the adults who care for them.

From infancy, they depend on caregivers for comfort, safety, and help managing experiences they cannot yet navigate on their own.

As children develop, they gradually build more capacity to recognize and manage their emotions, but that doesn't happen all at once.

Even teenagers need connection, guidance, and emotional support.

Developmental researchers call part of this process *co-regulation*.[34]

In ordinary language, it means that our ability to stay present, respond with care, establish predictable expectations, and help children move through difficult moments can support their developing ability to do those things themselves.

It doesn't require a parent to be calm every second of every day.

And it certainly doesn't mean that a child's emotions are entirely determined by a parent's state of mind.

Children have their own temperaments, experiences, needs, and developing capacities.

But the way we respond matters.

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If I'm overwhelmed, I can acknowledge that.

If I need a minute before continuing a conversation, I can take one.

If I respond in a way I don't feel good about, I can repair it.[5]

There's an important lesson in allowing our children to see us practice the very things we're asking them to learn.

They don't need a performance of perfect emotional control.

They need real examples of what it looks like to be human, take responsibility, and keep learning.

Stop Making Your Child Responsible for Your Unfinished Business

I think this is one of the more challenging parts of conscious parenting.

Our children can activate things in us that have very little to do with them.

We may find ourselves reacting to an experience from our own childhood, a fear about the future, or an expectation we never consciously examined.

Maybe we grew up believing that achievement was the only acceptable measure of success.

Maybe we learned that obedience was the same thing as respect.

Maybe we were raised to believe that children should never question adults.

Maybe we missed an opportunity when we were younger, and now we're very invested in making sure our children don't miss it, too.

Without awareness, those experiences can become instructions we unconsciously hand to the next generation.

And our children may end up carrying expectations that were never theirs to begin with.

I believe part of our responsibility as parents is to examine that.

Not to blame ourselves for everything.

Not to spend the rest of our lives dissecting our childhoods.

But to recognize when we're trying to resolve something through our children that belongs to us.

Your child is not your second opportunity to live your own life.

You already have one.

Go live it.

Have a Life They'll Want to Learn From

I've never been particularly interested in building a character called Mom and then disappearing into the role.

I'm a parent. I'm also a person.

I have interests, relationships, work that lights me up, spiritual questions, creative pursuits, and an entire life I'm here to experience.

And I believe that's something valuable for my son to witness.

I want him to know what it looks like to care deeply about something.

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To be curious.

To pursue an idea.

To make a mistake and figure out what to do next.

To rest when I'm tired.

To say that I've reached my limit for the day.

To have a full human experience.

Children learn from what we say, but they also observe what we do.

If I spend my entire life telling my son to follow his interests while abandoning all of mine, I'm teaching two different lessons.

If I tell him that rest is important while treating my own exhaustion as a badge of honor, there's a contradiction worth examining.

And if I want him to recognize that he is a complete human being, it makes sense to let him see that I am one, too.

There is no requirement to erase ourselves in order to love our children.

We can be deeply devoted parents and remain fully alive in our own lives.

In fact, I think those two things can support one another.

Guidance Requires Letting Go

There is a beautiful tension in parenting.

Our children need us to protect them, and they also need opportunities to become independent.

They need expectations, and they need room to develop their own judgment.

They need us to teach them, and eventually they need us to step back enough to see what they've learned.

The amount of support will change with age, developmental needs, circumstances, and individual readiness.

But the direction is toward increasing capacity.

We're teaching people how to participate in their own lives.

And sometimes that means allowing an experience to unfold differently from how we would have chosen.

That can be uncomfortable.

There's a particular kind of spiritual practice involved in loving another human being while recognizing that their life belongs to them.

It asks us to loosen our grip without withdrawing our care.

To remain available without taking over.

To establish boundaries without confusing those boundaries with ownership.

And to recognize that our children are becoming people we have the privilege of getting to know, not projects we're responsible for perfecting.

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Conscious Parenting Begins With Consciousness

When I talk about conscious parenting, I'm talking about awareness.

The willingness to notice ourselves while we're participating in the relationship.

To recognize our fears and expectations.

To understand the difference between guidance and control.

To pause when our bodies are responding more strongly than the moment requires.

To own our mistakes.

To repair what needs repairing.

And to respect the individuality of the human being in front of us.

None of that requires spiritual perfection.

It's a practice.

There will be days when you handle a difficult moment beautifully.

And there will be days when you realize halfway through a conversation that the issue isn't nearly as large as your reaction to it.

That's information.

You can use it.

Your child is having their experience of life. You're having yours. And for a while, you have the extraordinary opportunity to share part of that journey.

You can guide them.

You can love them.

You can keep the rails in place while they develop the judgment to navigate more of the track themselves.

But you cannot eat for them.

And you don't have to stop living your own life to help them live theirs.

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Something to Consider

The next time your child does something that creates a strong reaction in you, notice what happens before you respond.

What actually happened?

What am I feeling?

What does my child need from me right now?

And what part of this reaction belongs to my own experience?

You may discover that the situation still requires a boundary, a consequence, or a difficult conversation.

That's fine.

The difference is that you can respond to the child who's actually in front of you, rather than the fear, memory, or expectation that arrived with you.

That's a practice worth developing.

And it begins with you.

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Research findings are cited above. Reflections on consciousness, parenting, and the spiritual life are the author's own perspective. This essay is not a substitute for medical, psychological, or family counseling.

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Micaela writes about consciousness, presence, somatic experience, and the ways we influence one another through our work and everyday lives. Her interdisciplinary perspective brings together decades of professional leadership, spiritual study, and doctoral study in Somatic Psychology.

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