

Joanne Kraft

The Mean Mows Guide to Raising Great Kids

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THE MEAN MOM'S GUIDE TO RAISING GREAT KIDS



Copyright © 2015 by Joanne Kraft | ISBN 978-0-89112-442-9 | LCCN 2014045345

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Kraft, Joanne.

The mean mom's guide to raising great kids / Joanne Kraft.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-89112-442-9 (alk. paper)

- 1. Mother and child--Religious aspects--Christianity. 2. Child rearing--Religious aspects--Christianity.
- 3. Parenting--Religious aspects--Christianity. I. Title.

BV4529.18.K73 2015

248.8'431--dc23

2014045345

Cover design by Beca Clifton and Morgan Bortz | Interior text design by Sandy Armstrong

For information contact:

Abilene Christian University Press, ACU Box 29138, Abilene, Texas 79699

1-877-816-4455 | www.leafwoodpublishers.com

15 16 17 18 19 20 / 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Grandma Cusumano

Aka: Granny Goose, Gramma Cuckoo, Cuckoo Bird How did I get the best Grandma in the whole wide world? Makes me sad for everyone else.

I love you,

Joey

P.S. You were never mean.

Acknowledgments

The idea for *The Mean Mom's Guide to Raising Great Kids* came to light in a police communications center in Folsom, California. (I love you ladies and miss you like crazy). If the world only knew how many parents call the police department in need of a little *mean mom* wisdom.

Much thanks to the best Mean Mom Team around and their unofficial captain, Katie Chaney. When I asked for help, you immediately raised your hands. You're wise beyond your years, and humble enough to share. Many moms will be encouraged by your words woven throughout this book—they bring the sparkle. Your prayers for each reader will give this book wings.

Jennifer Sienes—thank you, friend. You allowed me to throw chapters your way when your life was so busy. Chris Pedersen and Elizabeth Thompson—my Inspire (InspireWriters.com) girls and the best author-writer-editor friends a gal can have. So glad I joined Inspire Christian Writers so many years ago.

Gary Myers—thank you for believing in this project. Mary Hardegree and the Leafwood publishing team—I'm so grateful for your supernatural patience and helping hands. I promise, no more edits.

Angela Mackey, Julie Sanders, Marci Seither, Jessica Wolstenholm, Tara Dovenbarger, and Melissa Mashburn—you selflessly shared your words, and I'm so grateful.

Celia—thank you for believing in me from the very beginning. Meghan, David, Grace, and Samuel—you four are the biggest pieces of my heart. Thank you for giving me much to write about. I'm proud to be your mom and I think you're great kids. My next book's dedication page is up for grabs. No pressure.

Paul—my husband and best friend, how do I thank you for so much? Your hard work allows me to stay home with the kids, garden, bake, clean the house (sometimes), and write. I love you so. Let's grab a coffee and take a long country drive.

To my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, because of you I live and love. My words fall painfully short. Thank you, Father. I love you.

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Prologue

Does the phrase *mean mom* make you a little nervous? Are memories of an unhappy childhood rushing back? Or are you slightly intrigued? Are you envisioning a few "Mommy Dearest" lessons with wire hangers or torturous time-outs? Oh my! Then you're way off base.

First things first. The *Mean Mom's Guide* is not about discouraging children's hearts, stifling their creativity, or controlling their God-given gifts.

The *Mean Mom's Guide* is written from one mom to another. It's about encouraging a few of us overly sweet *marshmallow moms* to instill much-needed boundaries in the lives of our children. It's about enabling confidence in your God-given inner voice and learning to be okay on those occasions when your kids don't like you.

Mean moms look like any other mom. They don't conform to nice parenting because their friends are doing it. They don't live for the moment but use every moment for the bigger picture—to raise children who will become emotionally strong, responsible, independent, and productive God-honoring adults.

Every child is different, which means parenting styles are different, too. This book was written with the help of more than one hundred and fifty women who have walked in your shoes. Their words of wisdom and encouragement will inspire you to stick with it even when it's hard. While reading each chapter, you need to remember one thing: the word *mean* isn't always the "mean" you think it means.

Go and pour yourself a cup of tea, or bring your nonfat vanilla latte to the couch, and kick off your shoes. Let's have ourselves a little chat about our kids.

PART ONE

The Making of a Mean Mom

Are You a Mean Mom?

I'm always entertained by the use of the word "mean." Kids who use it are often the ones least likely to have any idea what "mean" truly means.

-Michelle McDonald, sportswriter for ESPN

all me crazy, but moms are becoming nicer. There used to be a time when kids could spend hours regaling one another with mean mom stories. I know it used to be a favorite pastime of mine.

"My mom is the meanest. Listen to this..." I brush aside my big '80s feathered hair for emphasis. "She wouldn't let me come over today until *after* my homework was finished and *after* I cleaned the kitchen," I complained to my girlfriend.

"If you think your mom is mean, Joanne, listen to this one..."

Legendary stories have gathered over time—too many to recount. My parenting style has been molded and shaped by them. As far as I was concerned, my mom was the meanest of all. She wanted to know who my friends were and what I was watching on

TV. She upheld curfews, expected me to do well in school, and paid close attention to what I wore.

Mean Mom Flashback

I was hoping to slip out the front door before my parents caught a glimpse of my outfit. I was a typical sixteen-year-old, and I just knew they wouldn't be able to hear the whisper of "cool" announcing my presence. Nor would they understand that my black stretch pants made a statement.

Unfortunately, I had never learned the art of Navy Seal stealth operations, and my mom intercepted my exit. "Sweetheart, what are you wearing?"

Questions asking the obvious are the bane of every teenager's existence. "Black pants," I blurted, searching for an escape route.

"Those are not black pants. Those are skintight." She called for backup. "George!"

Dad is a former U.S. Marine, so I knew he would be up for a battle. I would lose this skirmish. Mom would make sure of it.

"What in the world are those?" He looked down at my legs, his face scrunched up as if he were in the presence of something extraterrestrial.

My earlier confidence squeaked out as a pathetic question hoping for approval. "Black pants?"

With Dad as her wingman, my one-and-only "mean mom" began her rant: "No daughter of mine. . . ."

Yep, here we go. The "no daughter of mine" speech.

As you can imagine, my response was predictable. I was angry with my mean mom. I stomped off to my room and whimpered over my shoulder, "Mom. You are so *mean!*" Needless to say, I never left the house in those skintight stretch pants.

Fast-forward thirty years. Yesterday, while at church, this memory came rushing back. The beautiful young singer on stage

seemed to have discovered my thigh-strangling pants from my teen years. Her parents are apparently much nicer than mine and let her leave the house.

I debated with myself. Poor thing. Does she realize how skintight those are? Is that what I looked like thirty years ago? Stop it, Joanne, you're being old-fashioned. Those pants are in style again.

My thoughts were interrupted by my extremely cool seventeenyear-old son. Right in the middle of a worship song, he leaned down and whispered in my ear, "That girl should *not* be wearing those pants." Once again, confirmation that my very own mean mom had been right.

What Does "Mean" Really Mean?

The definition of the word *mean* is to be unkind or malicious. Though you might cringe at being defined this way, it's exactly how your children feel you're behaving when you keep them from what they want, enforce daily chores, or thwart their Friday night plans.

This is the moment the parent-child language barrier begins. You see, a mean mom defines the word *mean* quite a bit differently.

- A mean mom keeps her word when it's hard.
- A mean mom gives, models, and expects respect.
- A mean mom knows her child's friends and where they live.
- A mean mom instills dinner times, bedtimes, and curfews.
- A mean mom treads water longer than her child can make it rain.
- A mean mom never makes excuses for her child's strengths or weaknesses.
- A mean mom doesn't let her own fears overrule her child's freedoms.

A mean mom sees the adult her child can be and inspires until he or she catches the vision.

A mean mom asks forgiveness for her mistakes.

A mean mom loves passionately, encourages openly, and behaves righteously.

And if she's married, a mean mom puts her husband *before* her child.

My friend and I use "mean mom" as hind of a code for being a parent when it's hard.—carrieschmeck

In the context of mean mom, the word *mean* can be defined much differently between mom and child. So begins the expansion of that communication gap you've heard about. What a son or daughter sees as malicious or unkind, a mean mom sees as keeping protective boundaries and inspiring good character traits, so she makes no excuses for uncomfortable situations that are fueled by a loving boundary.

Children don't understand boundaries as being helpful or for their lasting good. Their minds can't wrap around anything more than their immediate wants and needs at this very nanosecond. This is where mean moms dig in and remember they are training each little one to overcome obstacles, never quit, and never, ever give up.

A mean mom's mission statement is this: I'm not raising a child. I'm raising an adult. This mission statement becomes her mantra and reminds her of the ultimate goal: to work herself out of a job.

Marshmallow Mom

When I shared my idea of a mean mom book with a friend, she expressed her concern. "My mom was incredibly mean. Not the *mean* you're talking about. She was so disciplined and hurtful. The

scars she's left affect me still. She's the reason I'm such a pushover with my girls today. I tend to be a marshmallow, that's what my kids call me—marshmallow mom. I know I need to be better at keeping boundaries, but I'm so afraid I'll become like my mother that I cave in every time. I don't want my kids to hate me like I hated my mom."

It's sadly true. There are moms who have a genetic mean streak. Oftentimes victims of their own parents' physical or emotional abuse, they pass on discouragement and warped parenting disciplines that mold their children in painful ways.

Let me be very clear here. This is *not* the kind of mean I'm talking about in this book. The mean mom I'm talking about loves her children more than she disciplines them. Joy is what permeates

her home, and faith is the foundation and the groundwork she is laying.

Even when a mother is kind, caring, and understanding, she looks mean to her children when she lays down a boundary or rule. What is considered mean in the eyes of a four-year-old is considered wise in the eyes of a forty-four-year-old. This is the kind of mean I mean.

A mean mom's mission statement is this: I'm not raising a child. I'm raising an adult.

"She should've been meaner."

Ask most adults over the age of thirty if their parents were mean, and you'll get lots of different answers. I posed this very question to my girlfriend.

"Yes. I thought my mom was very mean." Gina, a mother of two, answered the question as she cut my hair. "She wouldn't let me stay out late at night and needed to know my friends' first and last names. But, to tell you the truth . . ." She stopped snipping and held her scissors midair. "I don't think she was mean enough." A tiny smile etched her face. "She was actually pretty naïve. She should've been meaner."

New York Times best-selling author Amy Chua, a self-proclaimed Chinese mean mom, wrote her book *The Battle Hymn of* the Tiger Mother to share her take on Asian mothering and why it works. What she didn't bargain for was the western world's curiosity and national media backlash. Even with the news reports and innumerable articles chiming in their dislike of her parenting methods, this book shot to the number one biography/memoir ranking and was in the top one hundred books sold on Amazon for quite a while.

Negative press or not, millions of moms bought her book. They want to know how to stand their ground, what parenting hills are worth dying on, and how they too can raise children to become responsible adults who stand a better chance at success. Whether you agree with Chua's parenting style or not, her daughters have played piano at Carnegie Hall, and they are straight-A students. As my husband likes to say, "The proof is in the pudding."

I'm no tiger mom, but I am a self-proclaimed mean mom. I guess you could call me a Christ-Following Bald-Eagle Mom. My children haven't played at Carnegie Hall or won the Nobel Peace Prize, but they have made it to adulthood in one piece. They're responsible and respectful and still call on my birthday and visit on Mother's Day. They've grown up to be productive adults who respect and care for others, and that's even after years of daily chores and paying for their first cars and a big chunk of their college tuition. I'd call that a mean-mom success story.

As you read through each chapter, you'll learn ways to encourage your kids so that together you can build your child's foundation for a successful and God-honoring future. You may laugh out loud about what I share, but silently I think you'll agree. You may believe a few of my parenting techniques are insanity, but secretly I know you'll use them. And, by the time you finish this book, you'll discover what quite a few parents have known for a long, long time—Mean Moms Raise Great Kids.

Mom to Mom

How do you define a mean mom?

- A mean mom is a good mom. When a kid calls their mom mean, it confirms Mom has made a rule and stuck to it.—MALEA BAER
- A mean mom stands by what she says (no means no) regardless of any whiny manipulation by children. She sticks to her guns even when a child screams "I hate you," and most importantly, she doesn't rescue her children from every bad situation they get themselves into.
- —EVA CHRISTIAN
- A mean mom cares enough to give her kids boundaries that guide them wisely through life.
- —LARA VAN HULZEN
- A mean mom means not giving in to every whim of a child who lacks wisdom to know what is best for them. It means not surrendering when they pout, cry, threaten, or withdraw. If the parent waffles in the face of such a challenge, "It's nothing but work, work, work" (to quote the movie *The Princess Bride*). A mean mom must set the foundation and let her children know she won't be manipulated or coerced. Once that's established, parenting is fun! When I was growing up, I could manipulate my parents pretty easily. I know all the tricks and I don't fall for them!—ELIZABETH THOMPSON

Mean Moms Were Marshmallow Moms

Each of us has a story behind our behavior.

-Valerie E. Hess and Marti Watson Garlett, Habits of a Child's Heart

ean moms come in all shapes and sizes. Did you know marshmallow moms have many different characteristics, too? Most are known to be sugary sweet with a heart as soft as fluffy whipped cream. Think about it. A marshmallow's biggest ingredient is processed sugar. I mean, c'mon . . . who doesn't love a little sugar? You have to admit it's easy to be a pushover in the boundaries department when it comes to our kids.

A mother's love is superhuman. Made up of impenetrable strength, it's miraculously unconditional and lasts longer than life. Yet, this titanium powerhouse of heartfelt emotion is known to melt under nothing more than a child's wants and desires.

Our son, Samuel, was around six years old when he perfected his "boo-boo lip." A few years later, when the Disney movie *Tangled* came out, he discovered another look: "the smolder." Thus,

the infamous "smabooboo" was born. A cross between a boo-boo face and a smoldering gaze, it gets me to surrender every time. He's thirteen now, and when he looks at me this way, I'd hand over the car keys if he asked.

Would you like to know a secret? The majority of mean moms are recovering marshmallow moms. Unfortunately, not enough of us are in rehab. Lately, no matter who I meet, I'm surrounded by marshmallows. Maybe you know a few.

A jumbo-sized marshmallow mom is fueled by love, codependence, and a dash of mom-guilt for good measure. She sacrifices her life hourly for her child. Usually a pushover, she takes the shape of the parent her child wants her to be.

Her default answer is *yes* because, after all, she hates to see her child sad. Instead of making tough decisions, she looks to see what her friends are doing and leaves the rest up to her husband. *Go ask your father* are the four most common words you'll hear when she is wrestling with a decision. She boasts, "The children know me so

A jumbo-sized marshmallow mom is fueled by love, codependence, and a dash of mom-guilt for good measure.

well. I struggle to follow through with discipline. I just can't. I mean, look at those adorable faces!"

As far as good health is concerned, a marshmallow has no redeeming qualities. Google it, people. Sugar feeds cancer and bad bacteria and is as addictive as any street drug. Being soft and sickly sweet as a mom can affect a child in detrimental ways, too. A mom with a gooey, soft center breeds entitlement, disrespect, laziness, and selfishness, among other unflattering character traits.

The result? This sweet mama fueled by heartfelt intentions is so blinded by love she unknowingly enables unhealthy habits and overlooks bad manners. A sweet marshmallow mom would

argue, "There's no limit to what I will do to help my children." This jumbo-sized marshmallow-mommy mission statement, meant to help, cripples her child instead. Her children become idols, and with each passing year, she's that much closer to throwing her own marriage under the bus.

Have I explained you at all? Or maybe you're thinking, *goodness*, *I'm not jumbo-sized*, and maybe you're not. Maybe you're a mini marshmallow instead. You're one of those cute tiny marshmallows we plop into our kids' cocoa mugs when the first cold weather blows in. I mean, who doesn't love mini marshmallows?

Mini-Marshmallow Moms

Personally, I've always battled my inner mini marshmallow. My biggest struggle is codependency. I come from a long line of codependents who taught me well. If my child can do something, I can do it better and faster—to save them time and lend a helping hand, of course. My intentions are always good.

Most of us fall into the camp of cocoa-sized marshmallows. Tying a child's shoes for far too long, or giving a teenager the summer off instead of encouraging that first job sure seem like kind and tender ways to mother them, but we have to ask ourselves, "Are we helping them in the long run?" A mini-marshmallow mom thinks she is.

There's an area of weakness in a mini-marshmallow mom's parenting skill set. Never a bold or glaring issue, it's the teeny-tiny day-to-day decisions that add up and stunt our child's adult development. Most mini-marshmallow moms encourage their kids to remain kids and soak up every precious moment. I know I did. But what I was really doing was smothering their future independence and hard work lessons in sugary goodness.

The truth is, it's sometimes hard to see where I make mistakes as a mom. But once they're exposed, I can make positive steps

forward. Whether you're a jumbo or a mini, maybe you'll see yourself in a few famous marshmallow moms below.

Marshmallow Moms

Maria Mykidcantdothat—She's the grammar-school mom who still ties her son's shoes and the high-school mom who makes her daughter's bed. She sets and clears the dishes each night so her kids can watch TV before bed, and she does the laundry for her teenagers because they just don't understand how to use a washer and dryer like she does. This woman lives by the words, "He can't do that," and "She's still too young." Her greatest complaint? Having her son still living at home after college. Because, after all, at twenty-six years old, he "just can't" find a job in this economy.

Emma Emptythreats—Do you know her? She's a close friend of Robin Repeatsherself50times. These moms stick together. A playdate isn't over until Robin repeats "Put that away. Put that away. Put that away." Emma has her friend's back and follows up with a couple dozen of these: "If you don't put that away... if you don't put that away." How does their one-two parenting punch work? Their children hear only white noise and are trained to ignore every word.

Holly Hasafavorite—"Did you hear about Dillon?" You receive moment-by-moment updates about her golden child: who his friends are, what teacher he has this year, or what he's struggling with this week. She calls you if he makes the football team and texts you if he doesn't. Her mini-marshmallow weakness is encouragement heaped in large doses. Her primary focus is her one child. Except, she has two others she never mentions.

Polly Protector—Second cousin to Hillary Helicopter, Polly corners the market in protective gear. Her daughter wears a bike helmet, knee pads, and floaties in the bathtub. She tries to keep her child safe and thwart any harm that might come her way. She

mistakenly believes she stands guard out of parental love when it's really fear that fuels her. Her protective, mama-bear instinct to shield and insulate will teach her child to become an adult who fears, too.

Delia Doestoomuch—Delia just wants to help. Carpool, team mom, PTA, classroom volunteer, Cub Scout leader—the list is long and her day is longer. A pleaser extraordinaire, she raises her hand for any request, big or small. She hasn't puckered up and said the word *no* since 2008. Her soft and gooey center couldn't whisper that word if her life depended on it. She's training her kids to be busy adults, and when they are old they may never depart from it.

Evelyn Everythingisfunny—Evelyn giggles when her toddler calls her by her first name. She laughs harder when her four-year-old shouts the same word her husband used when he stubbed his toe. She takes nothing her child does very seriously because, after all, "He's only two." Evelyn doesn't believe respect is a hill to die on. She thinks this is a lesson her child will learn in time. From the outside world, she seems the most joyful, but the disrespectful adult she's encouraging her child to be will wipe the smile right off her face.

Donna Doasisaynotasido—This mom confuses her kids when it comes to modeling good character and behavior. She uses profanity and shakes her fist when someone cuts her off on the road but reminds her kids that watching movies with foul language isn't okay. She calls in sick to work when she's as healthy as a horse but puts her foot down when her kids want to do the same to work on a school project. She's a hot mess at living a healthy lifestyle but believes her words will override her actions. Donna makes sure to remind them, "Cigarettes can kill you," as she hacks up a lung and blows smoke rings in the air.

Penny Putsthekidsfirst-Everytime—She's a woman who hyphenated her name because she doesn't want to lose her female identity. Ironically, it's her husband who disappears instead.

Motherhood is now her first priority, and she prides herself on raising great kids. Her husband? He moved out three weeks ago. Penny didn't notice until today.

Nancy Notmykid—This is the patron parent of bullies. She's too consumed with her own life to pay attention to what her kid is doing. Never holding her little angel accountable, she raises her child with more freedom than the Liberty Bell. When her son craves a loving boundary or two and acts out for a bit of her attention, she blames the "other kid" every time.

Lucy Lookdownyournose—"Why aren't you breastfeeding? It's been nine years and I still pump and freeze my milk. It's a shame you gave up so soon." Lucy's son was born potty trained. She reminds you of your failings as a mom. Her marshmallow tendency is to allow her child to make his own bedtime and nutrition choices. You'll find her most often around new parents. After all, she's a new mom, too, but she's obviously a lot smarter than you.

Patricia Pinterest—You struggle a lot with Patty. Her home is Pinterest-perfect, created with nothing more than chalkboard paint, sparklers, burlap, and pink cupcakes. When the mere sight of a Mason jar at Walmart makes you break out in a cold sweat, you realize your loathing might need medical attention. It's true, Patty's heart is wrapped up in her home, but it's her kids who desire to be wrapped in her arms instead. With her time and focus on pillows and paints, her kids wish they were one of her projects.

Do you recognize a few of these marshmallow mamas? You might be wondering, *How does she know my friends?* They were easy to introduce because quite a few of them have been me. I'm a recovering old softy and I've struggled with prioritizing marriage and family life. I understand how difficult it is to change, especially if you've been leaning on poor parenting examples around you, but it's still possible. After all, how do you eat an elephant? One small bite at a time.

Parental Employment

At the height of diapers and Desitin, I remember quite a few overwhelming years. As a new mom, I underestimated the colossal life change a baby brings. There was a time I mistakenly believed a child would be a pretty accessory to the life I was already living—a tiny, dimpled mom-bling to wear with my favorite outfit and make my life whole.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

My rock bottom came one morning as the odiferous scent of spit-up and sweet potatoes permeated the air—the organic body spray of motherhood. Exhausted after changing the fortieth diaper that day, I slumped down at my kitchen table and dropped my face into my hands.

Tears welled as I prayed silently. Really, Lord, is this my lot in life? Teaching children to put away their toys? Reminding them over and over to say kind words? Disciplining them when they don't share? Everything I seem to do is wrong and if you haven't noticed, they are the problem, not me. Father, aren't you aware I'm wiping tiny bums and tinier noses—seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day? Lord, surely you must have something bigger and, well, maybe more important for me to be doing with my life.

God's holy message came from a woman in our church. After I whined to her about yet another frustrating day, she gently said, "Don't despise the days of small beginnings."

Do not despise these small beginnings, for the LORD rejoices to see the work begin, to see the plumb line in Zerubbabel's hand. (Zech. 4:10 NLT)

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The same words can be said of changing our parenting style. I'll be the first to admit, her words both stung and encouraged me. I knew the Scripture. In this Bible story, Zechariah encourages Zerubbabel to finish rebuilding the temple—a gargantuan task that had its

beginnings in less monumental ways.

Charles Spurgeon gives hope to parents everywhere: "God accepts your little works if they are done in faith in his dear Son. God will give success to your little works: God will educate you by your little works to do greater works; and your little works may call out others who shall do greater works by far than ever you shall be able to accomplish."2 On one hand, I felt bad complaining about my children. Apparently, I was more of the problem than they were. On the other hand, my friend gave me the ability to start looking at small things in light of the bigger picture. Each tiny opportunity was meant for God's purpose. Zechariah was encouraging Zerubbabel's holy work, too. God's work has the power to transform all involved. These child-rearing years would be sanctification in my life. I began to see my parenting role as a God-honoring employment opportunity.

This conversation opened my eyes to needed changes and gave me confidence that I was given a job to accomplish. Which made tweaking a few of my marshmallow-mom tendencies much easier. Author and missionary Elisabeth Elliot says in her book *Passion and Purity*, "The God who created names and numbers the stars in the heavens also numbers the hairs of my head. He

pays attention to very big things and to very small ones. What matters to me matters to Him, and that changes my life."

Small Beginnings—Bigger End Results

Marshmallow moms don't change overnight. It's the small things, the tiny beginnings that mold and shape us to be the parents our children need most. Charles Spurgeon gives hope to parents everywhere: "God accepts your little works if they are done in faith in his dear Son. God will give success to your little works: God will educate you by your little works to do greater works; and your little works may call out others who shall do greater works by far than ever you shall be able to accomplish."

Teach your child to pick up her toys and you raise a responsible adult.

Teach your child to share and you raise a kind adult.

Teach your child to choose words carefully and you raise an encouraging adult.

Teach your child to serve and you raise a sacrificial adult.

Teach your child patience and you raise an adult who knows peace.

Teach your child about hard work by experiencing hard work and you raise an adult who won't go hungry.

Teach your child about heartache and you raise an adult who has joy in any storm.

Teach your child not to fear and you raise an adult who can face any adventure life brings.

Teach your child to value differences and you raise an adult who respects all people.

Teach your child to be happy with little and you raise an adult who is content.

Teach your child all the reasons *you* love God and you raise an adult who may desire to love God, too.

Even if you're known by your friends as *Nancy Notmykid* or *Donna Doasisaynotasido*, each small step away from a bad habit is one big

step toward a good one. Be strong and courageous, mom. Whether you are a mini marshmallow or the squishiest jumbo-sized marshmallow mom on the planet, today is the beginning of your mean mom journey.

No matter what small thing you are doing, no matter what itty-bitty something you do for the umpteenth time this week, stand strong and remember—small beginnings are holy work in your children's lives. As you change, you are building an immovable foundation for their change and the plans God has for your adult children one day.

Mom to Mom

Do you struggle with your inner "marshmallow mom"?

- enim a peacemaker by nature, which is the source of my inner marshmallow mom. I. Just. Want. Peace—NO MATTER WHAT. So, I often fight the tendency to give in or be soft for the sake of sanity. When I think of my mom friends who are more vigilant about certain aspects of motherhood like discipline, healthy eating, teaching responsibility, etc., I'm inspired to abandon my desire for 'peace' for the sake of raising great kids.
- -JESSICA WOLSTENHOLM
- ☐ I fight being a marshmallow because what my kids don't understand is giving in that one time puts us back to square one. So I have to stand firm, even if I don't really want to. —егіка наліску

As my daughter has gotten older, I find it harder and harder not to soften when she's angry with me. When she was a toddler it was easy. But now that she's thirteen years old and we're closer, I find myself second guessing myself and wondering, *Am being too harsh?* I really soften if she self-criticizes. While I don't want to reward her with attention when she's critical of herself, I also want to keep her self-esteem up. My hope is this is a small phase and we will grow together. —KRISTINE MOUL

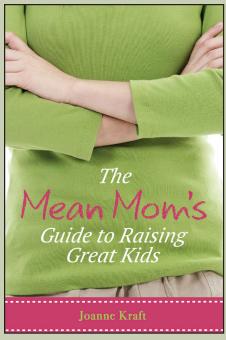
Notes

¹Elisabeth Elliot, *Passion and Purity* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1984).

² Charles Spurgeon, quoted in David Guzik, "Zechariah 4 – By My Spirit, Says the Lord," Enduring Word Media Online Commentary, www. enduringword.com/commentaries/3804.htm.

The Mean Mom's

Guide to Raising Great Kids



ISBN 978-0-89112-442-9 \$14.99



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