

insights

Mum's the work

by Michael Grose



Watching my own children become parents is an unexpected parenting joy.

Not in the light-hearted 'your-turn-has-come' way where older generations delight in watching their own children endure the same sleepless nights, naughty toddler behaviour and teenage rebelliousness that they experienced as parents.

The joy for me lies in watching my adult kids protect, teach, nurture and support their children, in the time-honored way that parents have done for generations. This work, also known as generative parenting, was outlined by American psychologists and researchers Dollahite, Hawkins and Brotherson in the 1990's.

Also known as mother work (and father work), generative parenting refers to the instinctive activities of parents that enable the next generation to survive and thrive. These activities range from providing kids with food and shelter and other basic needs through to developing more complex skills in their kids such as working with others, adapting to change and developing the resourcefulness needed for full independence.

Like most parents my daughters want to be the best parents they can be so they both devour parenting books, attend courses when they can and join online chat groups for support and ideas.

But it's their mother work, their instinctive work, that's their most potent parenting force. Here's why.

Mother work is protective

When my eldest daughter visits our house she does a quick reconnaissance trip through each room, lifting errant blind cords and removing heavy objects, to make our house safe for her two boys to move around. The protective side is strong.

Mother work is educative

When my youngest daughter patiently explains to her exuberant young three year old that she needs to allow other children to share her toys, she is doing important teaching work. That requires super patience.

Mother work is nurturant

The safety my daughters provide when they wrap their arms around their children when they've fallen and hurt themselves comes naturally to them.

Mother work is supportive

The emotional support these young women provide to their children when they've been upset by the thoughtless or rough behaviours of siblings and friends is often hard work. But they are up to the task.

My daughters' mother work will continue well into their children's teen years and beyond. The nature of the work will change with each developmental stage but the intent of the work –to nurture, protect, teach and support – will stay the same.

Men can do this work too, but they do it differently. When a mother instinctively protects she generally draws her child closer before searching out the source of fear. There'll be lots of cuddles before she puts a nightlight on to ease a child's fear of the dark.

When a father instinctively protects he's more likely to eliminate the source of fear, and skill his child up to fend for themselves. He'll prove there's nothing to be scared of when the light goes out, and show his child how to turn on the light when needed. Both are valid approaches, and are indicative of the gender differences in child-rearing.

This Mother's Day, it's my daughters' instinctive mother work that I'll celebrate, as that is real magic of parenting.

Happy Mother's Day.



Michael Grose

Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's the author of 12 books for parents including *Spoonfed Generation* and the best-selling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. His latest release *Anxious Kids*, was co-authored with Dr Jodi Richardson.