Tenderness under pressure

I want to be a gentle parent. In our culture, this often feels out of reach.

by Liz Tichenor in the August 2025 issue
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Century illustration (Source image: Getty)

At 7:34 a.m. on a Wednesday, I begin to lose my calm. This is early last fall, with the school year still young and my family not yet settled into a routine. I am cajoling my son, trying to instill in him the kind of responsibility I hope he can live out. He's in fourth grade now—old enough, we've decided, to be making his own breakfast and lunch. Surely he could have done this sooner; surely I could keep doing it for him. But his dad and I are now more strapped at work, and I'm hoping he can rise to the occasion.

We need to leave for school in 11 minutes. Despite my frequent reminders-turned-nagging, Sam has been focusing on snuggling our beloved dog and reading *Calvin and Hobbes*. His lunch is not made. I feel my jaw clench, my eyes tighten, and I can hear my tone of voice before I open my mouth. I know it will not be kind. But just then, my husband calls out that his first client of the day has canceled. “Fantastic,” I bark. “I need you to get Sam across the finish line and to school. I’m out.” It’s less a passing of the baton than a desperate chucking of it. I am not proud of myself in this moment, but I know I need to leave with the dog before I yell at my son. He is not actually the problem here, not at all.

By 7:46, I am on the trail. Mabel is our pandemic puppy, ostensibly adopted for the good of our very lonely children in the fall of 2020, but it didn’t take long to come clear that I needed her emotional support as much as, or perhaps well more than, they did. She slows to sniff acorns; I help her dodge poison oak. I’m soon on the phone with a friend, Nikky, who, like me, is both a mom and an Episcopal priest. Most weeks we find time to wrestle with the scripture for the coming Sunday together, bouncing ideas around in the hope of finding the sermons we’ll each write in the days ahead. Today, though, I need to wrestle with the text that is my life. I tell her how everything feels untenable, how often I’m dropping balls, how I feel the primal urge to yell. She listens, ratifies my overwhelm, shares her own. We agree that something needs to change; we struggle to identify what or how.

Just after 10 a.m., I arrive at a funky local coffee shop to meet another friend. They serve only plant-based milk alternatives, and their outdoor seating is a hodgepodge of sticky wooden picnic tables and stools along a narrow bar. I see my friend, we hug, I order my decaf vanilla mint latte—their specialty—and we find a spot in the shade. Niels was called a couple months ago to be the pastor at the church just across the street from the one I lead. We’ve fallen into a fast and easy kinship, and I find myself feeling not just gratitude but also relief that he is the one who has arrived to be my nearest colleague. In the short time we’ve known each other, he’s been quick to share his heart generously and to make room for mine. It does not always happen this way.

Over the course of our meandering conversation, I ask him about the Netherlands, where he grew up. He’s been in the United States for 25 years, but he still goes back to visit every year or two. What does he miss, I wonder? He pauses, thoughtful as the patrons of the bustling coffee shop carry on around us, then answers simply and decisively. “The parents are so kind and patient there,” he says. It’s beautiful, he

explains, recounting the tenderness he witnesses as commonplace there. It may be hard to quantify, but it is palpable.

As I listen to him, tears prick behind my eyes. I want to live that way, and it often feels out of reach. It is elusive because I am spread thin, often exhausted, with a joke of a short fuse remaining within me. And this sort of patient kindness also feels daunting because it tends to seem like a countercultural slog here in the United States. My mind flashes to a moment in the checkout line at the grocery store, and the story comes tumbling out of my mouth as Niels listens and nods, his eyes soft.

I was unloading my groceries onto the conveyor belt when my son, then three years old, spied the jar of honey sticks on the counter and asked for one. Sam always found them, and I always said no. I felt the knee-jerk response of “no” welling up in me. But then I slowed down to notice how sweetly he had asked, and I remembered that I was in the middle of an experiment of trying to say yes to my kids more often. I closed my eyes, switched gears, and said, “Yes, yes, you can have one today,” thinking, *For goodness’ sake, it’s a silly honey stick!* He was elated.

As I turned back to unloading my produce, I heard the man ahead of me mumble something in my direction. I looked up and asked him what he had said. Speaking up this time, he repeated himself: “You’re a pushover!” I laughed, but then I realized that it wasn’t a joke, it was a dig. He had scorn in his eyes.

It’s hard to be a kind and patient parent here, I tell Niels, my eyes still wet. Even when I gather the presence and tenderness and gumption to try to offer it to my kids, it feels like the forces of the world are stacked against me, pushing me along toward competitive parenting, endless striving, raising kids to withstand the pressure cooker rather than helping them to step out of it. He hears me, and I feel a little less alone in the struggle.

At 4:10 that afternoon, I read the headline: Vivek Murthy, the US surgeon general at the time, has just released “Parents Under Pressure,” a new advisory that addresses the mental health and well-being of parents. I see that he’s also published a related essay in *The New York Times*, the headline of which declares “Parents Are at Their Wits’ End.” I feel seen—and also darkly amused. *No kidding*, I think. *Of course we are. Thanks for noticing*.

In the days that follow, I talk with other parents and hear a similar response, a combination of feigned shock—bemused sarcasm at the “breaking news” that us

parents are desperately trying to keep our heads above the water—and, more quietly, heartfelt gratitude that someone so high up sees us.

Much of Murthy's advisory is necessary, spot on, and not especially revelatory. It names what many of us have been experiencing for a long time: There is not enough childcare; the childcare that does exist is far too expensive; parenting is often isolating. There is also a glimmer of something else that catches my attention. In the midst of getting his arms around this tangled mess that is child-rearing in the 21st century, Murthy holds out a bid for radiance. He beckons us forward, asserting that "raising children is sacred work. It should matter to all of us."

Reading that, my mind returns to the grocery store, my pushover self, and the stickiness of reaching for tenderness in our cutthroat world. I've been mulling over what strikes me as a particular conundrum for Christian parents attempting to navigate this gauntlet. Here's what I mean: Jesus does not call us—or our children—to endless striving or the success that rides atop countless extracurriculars and shiny resumes. He does not want us to amass wealth or to worry about how secure our futures are. He doesn't seem to care a whole lot about how productive we are, where our children go to school, or how much any of us climbs the ladder in our respective fields.

I read the gospels and hear Jesus urging us to give a glass of water to a little one. Did he know how often kids ask for a glass of water? It's not a small request of us, honestly. They need glasses of water constantly, at all hours of the day and night. He insists that the little ones be allowed to come to him—these young children, deemed unimportant in his time, at the center receiving his full attention. He drops what he's doing to heal daughters and sons, restoring them to life and to their communities. Jesus is not always docile, of course. He flips tables and takes religious leaders to task. But I struggle to think of a time when we see him offer anything but tenderness to the children around him.

The promises I made at my children's baptisms were extensive. In my home in the Episcopal Church, there is much we renounce: Satan, spiritual forces of wickedness, evil powers of the world, sinful desires that draw us from the love of God. If I slow down to ponder these commitments of resistance, the enormity of them could bowl me over. And then there is all we promise to actively do. There are more abstract vows, like promising to turn to Jesus, put our whole trust in his grace and love, follow and obey him. And more practical promises: breaking bread and praying,

proclaiming the Good News, serving Christ in everyone, loving our neighbor as ourselves, striving for justice and peace, respecting the dignity of every human being. It may not be an exhaustive list, but lifting up the weight of all that hope feels exhausting.

Then again, perhaps the exhaustion comes through the loneliness I often feel when I reach for this way with and for my children. Truth be told, I know almost nothing of Dutch culture, let alone how or why people parent the way they do there. But I can't stop turning my friend Niels's words over in my mind, looking at them from different angles. As I take in the tenderness, the patience, the attention, I hear the stranger's snarl that I am a pushover. I remember the rancor of parents swearing at their kids from the sidelines of the soccer field; I sense the widespread angst about whether our kids are doing enough to make it in this world. It seems there is a chasm between all this jockeying strife and the sweet, gentle love that Jesus taught us to offer our little ones.

If I pause long enough, I begin to realize that this conundrum weighs on me as much as the lack of affordable childcare or the way there always seem to be too few hours in the day, leaving me raw and spinning and trying not to yell. But it's this bigger piece—the longing to follow Jesus not just as a person generally but as a parent specifically—that hangs heavy around my shoulders. Parenting is sacred work, I want to call out in passionate agreement with Murthy. I would argue that it is sacred work for all people, of every faith and no faith. And I feel these words land as a core part of how we regard and raise up our young people as Christians, whether we are their parents or not.

Part of our call as adult Christians tending to little ones is to welcome them close, as Jesus taught, and then serve as a hedge of protection around them. Affording them their full dignity, assuring them again and again that their belovedness is not contingent on anything they do, no matter what the world tells them. Seeing Christ in them, serving them, loving them deeply. Not just tending scraped knees but also working to heal some of the trauma that has been passed from one generation to the next for ages. Rooting ourselves, together with our kids, in the grace and love of Jesus.

I recognize that saying anything about different approaches to parenting is fraught. I do not doubt that most parents have their kids' best interest in mind most of the time. Scripture is complex enough that we can take the same set of stories and

unpack them to different conclusions. What I offer here, then, is simply my take, my interpretation of what we've received, what I've discerned I want to reach for. My hunch is that I'm not alone.

More than anything, this—the belief that maybe I'm not alone—is what I want to hold onto. Not because reaching for this patience and tenderness (that may get me labeled as a pushover) is the one right and holy way to parent as a Christian. Surely I am not that clever. Rather, it's because this feels like what God is calling *me* to practice, and I long to learn and practice this way with other followers. If I'm being truthful, it feels terrifying to relax my death grip on my big plans for my kids' future. I want them to get into that Ivy League school as much as the next person does, even though I'm not convinced Jesus cares about that much at all. I feel some twisting combination of shame and embarrassment when I try to be generous with my children in earshot of others, for fear of being called out again for spoiling them. But what if there's another way to do this, together?

Can Christian parents join one another not just in tackling the paucity of childcare or the torment of ubiquitous, anxiety-inducing screens, as Murthy wisely highlights, but also in the joy and struggle of living out our faith as parents? Can we unpack these sacred stories together, both biblical stories and the stories God is now writing through our lives? What if that place where our fears and hopes for our children swirl together could also be the place where we decide once again to place our whole trust in the grace and love of Jesus? My hope is that living this way, discerning the path forward alongside one another, we will find that we are no longer at our wits' end but rather in the midst of something truly beautiful. It's the place where we live out this sacred work of parenting.