

It Takes a Carpool To Raise a Child By Jeanne Supin

The moment my daughter was born I knew I'd need help raising her. Oh, I figured out the basics well enough – bathing her gently, easing her toothaches, soothing her tears. But in those first post-partum moments when the timeless air still shimmered, I saw my real limits: Maddy was a way bigger presence than I, and I could only offer her so much. I realized that my job – in addition to unconditional love and sure-footed guidance – would be finding others who could love her almost as much. And give her far more.

Oh great. *There's an easy job ...*

Once parenting life began, it became immediately, glaringly apparent just how tough this would be. First, we didn't live near extended family. Grandparents, aunts, and uncles were loving and doting, but too far away to share more than an occasional visit. More disturbing, I felt this underlying expectation that her dad and I were supposed to be the only ones in charge of raising our daughter. If we were good parents we would know or learn everything necessary to do it Right. And do it all by ourselves.

Where did that ridiculous rule come from? Is it some extension of the bizarre myth that I can do and have it all? Enough diligence and discipline and I can be completely self-

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sufficient and self-contained? With a solid plan and the right skills I can execute everything perfectly, including parenting?

There's tremendous debate about the best family for raising great children. About 20% of Americans live in the nuclear version: mom, dad, kids all sharing a home, an SUV, and an annual two-week vacation. Whether you think it's ideal or oppressive, it's not very common. Many more American families are single-parent, blended, childless, gay, lesbian, and other configurations that suggest unlimited options for that portrait above the mantle. Regardless, the pictures show a family unit, people who actually share a home or biological and legal lineage. I have lots of those photos, biological relatives I truly love and depend on enormously. But those pictures exclude the other people who help raise my daughter day-to-day.

At six weeks we hired a nanny who's résumé looked nothing like a nanny's, but who absolutely loved – and still loves -- my daughter with every ounce of her being. Forget the structured activities her dad and I eagerly envisioned -- Suzanne introduced our child to rowdy music, French fries, and daily episodes of "Designing Women," all of which Maddy still remembers blissfully. She swept Maddy into her large, boisterous extended southern family, who adopted her outright, fed her outrageous amounts of delicious sweets, and still invites her to every single family gathering.

In preschool Maddy met the girls who remain her best friends. And I met Maddy's other moms and dads. Their reach extends far beyond carpool duty -- these are adults who know aspects of my daughter far better than I do. Maddy told Debbie, not me, about her artistic obsession with trees. When Maddy feels misunderstood and frustrated she calls Carrington or Elise, who invariably understand her and explain it to me later. Tired of awkward holidays with divorced parents, Maddy invited herself to Mark's Norman Rockwell Thanksgivings – one year she even appeared in their Christmas picture, among a throng of biological siblings and cousins. And she goes straight to Linda's when she craves peace, quiet, beauty, and fabulous homemade pizza.

Over the years these other parents have taken Maddy hiking and biking, to dinners and plays, on boating trips. They've taken her shopping for the weekend,

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beaches in the summer, trips to Disney, Jamaica, and the heart of New Orleans. Lovely, generous, amazing excursions. But more importantly, they offer what I cannot. Novel advice about high school drama. Different perspectives in a fight. Another shoulder to cry on. A new expression of love. Genes and legal rights aside, they are family in every sense of the word. They know my daughter through & through, they love her dearly, and they tell me new things about her all the time. Which, in turn, makes me a better parent.

I love their children the same way, and, yet, loving someone else's child remains a weird thing. Discrete families, whether nuclear or some variation, are sacred in our culture. We fiercely protect their autonomy and respect their boundaries, mostly for good reasons. I can't be true to myself and my family if others drown out my own inner voice. And I sure as hell don't want others imposing their will on me and mine. So, in turn, I'm paranoid about intruding too far.

I have insecurities, too. That little failure voice pops up every time my only child prefers someone else's comfort and wisdom. I just can't escape the urge to do it All, do it all Right, and feel like a loser if I don't.

But these other people have blessed my daughter's life in ways unimaginable, just as meaningful as her relationships with me, her dad and her biological relatives. I go back to those transcendent moments in the delivery room, when I was briefly smart enough to know I couldn't do it all. When I realized there should be no limit to the number of people who love my child. And that maybe the best thing I can do is help her find as many as possible.