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magazine

# Introspection







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## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR:

# Embrace the Plot Twist

By Sonya Abrams



Sonya is a mom to three humans and three animals and lives in Cole Valley.

I'm getting married again, a plot twist I never would have predicted if you'd asked my 20-year-old self how her life would unfold. While I learn how to be a wife again, my fiancé is learning how to be a family man, a wild ride with moments both terrifying and thrilling and an experience that has given me an opportunity to reexamine my own relationship with parenthood.

Seemingly overnight, my fiancé dove into the deep end of the parenting pool, transforming from a single 33-year-old into a stepdad-to-be for an 8-year-old, a 9-year-old, and an 11-year-old—not to mention two cats and a dog. In addition to nurturing individual relationships with four very different family members, he's had to figure out how to build on an established household and set his own boundaries, expectations, and roles with three energetic, often defiant, and highly opinionated kids. And largely, he's done it through sports and games.

We were never a sporty family. My late husband was an introverted musician who ignored team sports and was apathetic about games. My kids were not athletic or competitive. But my fiancé, a personal trainer, grew up immersed in team sports and stood out as a high school quarterback. When he came into my family's life, his enthusiasm for his teams was contagious, and my children were eager to learn from him. We now each own 49ers paraphernalia and build our weekends around football; my middle child, in particular, has become a superfan, studying rankings and statistics. Two of my children stay up to watch Golden State Warriors games,

a time when they actually seem to get along better, united by a common goal. And my fiancé has figured out that when the children fight or cause mayhem with their restless energy, he can use games and competition to redirect and tire them out, running them up hills or creating battle games in which he's the bad guy who a team of children have to defeat. His love of sports and keen awareness of the motivating forces of competition have smoothed his entry into the family and provide a powerful tool for him to manage challenging childhood behavior in a non-confrontational way.

In this issue, our writers take us on interior journeys of

**“Seemingly overnight, my fiancé dove into the deep end of the parenting pool, transforming from a single 33-year-old into a stepdad-to-be for an 8-year-old, a 9-year-old, and an 11-year-old—not to mention two cats and a dog.”**

discovery. Yuliya Patsay offers a guide on how to foster mindfulness and practice meditation. H.B. Terrell flips the narrative of “mommy brain” on its head, showing ways in which brain changes can have positive properties in new parents. And we take a fresh look at Sandy Woo's 2021 exploration of anxiety and anxiousness. Her suggestions remain as powerful now as they were during the pandemic.

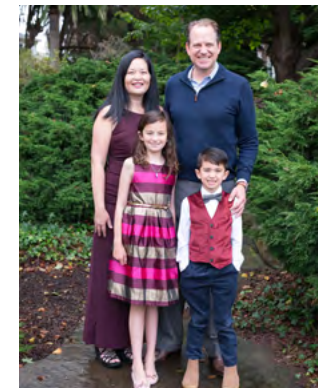
I used to assume certain aspects of our family were implacable. But the way sports have woven their way into our lives has shown me that families, like people, can grow and change. With so much change in our lives, that can be a little overwhelming, but it's also exciting. With my eye on the ball, I'm eager to find out what's ahead.

*Sonya Abrams*

## LETTER FROM THE BOARD:

# Remembering What Matters

By Connie Lin



Connie's kids are especially excited to celebrate Lunar New Year as both of them will be performing in their school celebration for the Year of the Dragon.

A few days before my in-laws and extended family descended on our house for our first Christmas as hosts, my phone rang. I picked up immediately after seeing Torrance on the caller ID, where only my Uncle John lived. A doctor quickly gave me an update on my uncle's biopsy and surgery, which was a shock as I didn't know he was ill. I immediately called Uncle John; he seemed confident about how things were going, though he spoke a little slower than usual. He told me not to worry and that we'd talk again soon.

Since his retirement several decades ago, my Uncle John has focused on one thing—relishing life with his family. His wife, my Auntie Lily, was the only one of my mom's ten siblings who moved to America. We became close as I popped by to visit her, Uncle, and their son Michael whenever I was in LA. We loved going out to eat together and catching up; I was like the daughter they never had. Uncle John often told stories about how he and my aunt met, life in the military overseas, and his work at TWA.

Uncle John became a new person during retirement, no longer quick tempered and mean spirited. Instead, he was buoyant and appreciative. He was in great health, having lost a bunch of weight, and took long walks daily. Last fall my parents and I celebrated Uncle's 80th birthday together over giant slices of Paradise Cake.

In May, Auntie Lily passed away after languishing for a year post-stroke. Both her middle-aged sons died from cancer in

recent years; she declared she was bereft and ready to go. After she passed, my uncle was devastated, but with a sad yet optimistic spirit, he cleaned up their home and hired a weekly caregiver to keep him company.

But two weeks after the hospital called, Uncle was gone. I was stunned. Sadly, I didn't get to say goodbye; he died the day after I finally tracked down his hospice team.

I couldn't believe it. It turns out that Uncle John had an aggressive late-stage melanoma. It will take a while for me to get over the shock of losing Auntie and Uncle; they're the first close relatives I've lost.

**“I spent some time reading Uncle John's old messages, which are peppered with happy emojis. His key advice? Cherish loved ones and enjoy life, as you never know what's next.”**

This fall I took a break from working. I needed a chance to step off the treadmill and catch my breath. My 2024 plan was to jump back in the fray, but losing my aunt and uncle in such a short timespan has given me pause. I spent some time reading Uncle John's old messages, which are peppered with happy emojis. His key advice? Cherish loved ones and enjoy life, as you never know what's next.

In honor of my uncle, I intend to prioritize time together with my family this year. Managing through COVID, work drama, and now the loss of my aunt and uncle has been a lot, and taking the time to prioritize my own mental health and allow myself to grieve will help me be able to better support my family.

Wishing the best for you in 2024!

*Connie Lin*

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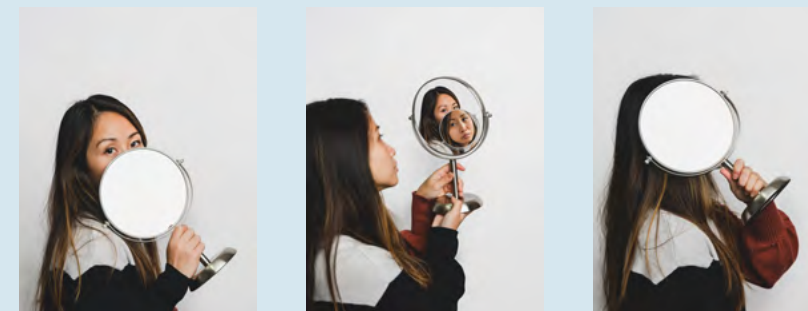
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**This issue made possible by:** Not sleeping; Staring down the barrel of two teenage boys in the house; Binge-watching “The Bear” and eating a lot of soup (and kids and work and the usual); A month-long trip to Japan and Indonesia.

## COVER OUTTAKES



**Only one shot can make it to the cover. Here are some of our other favorites.**

Cover photo by Mini Anna Photography  
Model: Anna Munandar

## Rainy Day Play

By Sonya Abrams



Is the winter gloom driving you deeper under the covers? Are you desperate to get the kids out, but want an enclosed space, safe from the rain and chill? Here are a few ideas to get you started.

### Meet the Animal Keepers, The Randall Museum

On Saturday mornings at 11:30 a.m., kids of all ages can meet some of the Randall Museum's 100 animals in this free presentation. Touch a tortoise, stare down a snake, and learn about the museum's effort to house and protect its vulnerable animals. [randallmuseum.org/meet-the-animal-keepers](http://randallmuseum.org/meet-the-animal-keepers)



### Penguins+Pajamas Sleepovers, California Academy of Sciences

Ever wanted to sleep with the fishes (and live to tell the tale)? Kids ages 4 and up, as well as adults, enjoy late-night access to exhibits, munch on snacks, and are treated to a private planetarium showing before snuggling up in sleeping bags in the exhibit rooms themselves. The sleepovers are ticketed events held on various weekend nights from winter through early summer. [calacademy.org/penguinspajamas-sleepovers](http://calacademy.org/penguinspajamas-sleepovers)

### WOW Kids Playground, 1650 Polk St.

Tired of the same old play spaces for your toddlers and young children? WOW is slated to open this spring on Polk Street and promises to offer up 12,000 feet of entertainment, including a zip rail, climbing wall, and other immersive options to tire out your little ones and nurture their growing brains and bodies. Check their website to learn more about their opening timeline. [wowkidsplay.com](http://wowkidsplay.com)



### The Church of 8 Wheels, 554 Fillmore St.

Let's get rolling in this converted house of worship in the Lower Haight. The Church of 8 Wheels offers roller disco parties, free skating, and skating lessons for all

ages. Bring your own skates or rent them. Check out their website to make sure the event you're eyeing is open to all ages. [churchof8wheels.com](http://churchof8wheels.com)

*Sonya is a Cole Valley mom to three children, two cats, and a dog. She feels fortunate to live within walking distance of Free Gold Watch, whose copious classic pinball machines have saved many a rainy day.*

### Immersive Gamebox, Stonestown Galleria

This new space in the thriving Stonestown Galleria is home to a variety of virtual reality games and interactive digital experiences for preschool-aged children to adults. Your littlest gamers can join Ryder on a "Paw Patrol"-themed hour-long adventure, and older kids can ride along with the Ghostbusters on a virtual mission to save the city. Check out the website for a full list of adventures. [immersivgamebox.com](http://immersivgamebox.com)



### Family Art Making, de Young Museum, Golden Gate Park

On select Saturdays, the de Young Museum hosts free art sessions from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Professional teaching artists will guide your family through lessons inspired by the museum's collections. Did you know that the museum's permanent collections are free for Bay Area residents on Saturdays, and always free for children under 18? [famsf.org/events/family-art-making-0](http://famsf.org/events/family-art-making-0)



### The Game Parlour, 1342 Irving St.

This Inner Sunset cafe and game space houses hundreds of games for all ages. For \$7 an hour (children 4 and under are free), you can grab your

favorite game—from Settlers of Catan to Telestrations—and order off a huge gluten-free menu specializing in sweet and savory waffles and hot beverages. The Game Parlour also offers after-school clubs and special gaming events. [thegameparlour.com](http://thegameparlour.com)

## Lil' Kid, Big City: Free San Francisco!

By Sonya Abrams

The Bay Area is undoubtedly one of the priciest parts of the country, and getting all the necessities covered doesn't always leave a lot left over for leisure and recreation. Luckily, a number of institutions and organizations offer free days and events.

If you're craving culture, but admission for a family of four feels just out of reach, you'll be delighted to know that many local museums have free days. The **Asian Art Museum** is free on the first Sunday of each month, and the **de Young Museum** is free for everyone on the first Tuesday of each month and free for ID-toting Bay Area residents every Saturday. The **SFMOMA** is always free for visitors 18 and under, and on the first Thursday of each month it's also free to Bay Area residents. On the roving Free Family Days, adults are free if accompanied by a minor and the museum hosts a special array of family-friendly events and activities.

If you're craving some fresh air, a number of outdoor organizations serve up free days throughout the year. The **San Francisco Zoo** has periodic free days (often with little notice, so stalk their website). Golden Gate Park's **Japanese Tea Garden** and **Botanical Gardens** are always free for San Francisco residents. The Gardens are free to all the second Tuesday of each month as well as many holidays, while the Tea Garden offers up free hours three mornings a week. With these institutions as with all museums and organizations, it's important to check the web before you go, as policies can and do change. For convenient aggregation of even more free offerings, be sure to check out Discover and Go, available through the San Francisco Public Library, and FunCheapSF.

*Sonya is a mom to three children and is proud to be a San Francisco resident within walking distance of Golden Gate Park and its many free offerings.*



## The Festival of Holi

By Christine Chen



Holi, the Hindu Festival of Colors, is on March 25, 2024. The festival of Holi marks the arrival of spring and the end of winter, celebrating the beginning of a good spring harvest and the victory of light over darkness. To celebrate, a tradition known as playing Holi involves people throwing brightly colored powder, called *gulal*, at each other. It's totally fun and totally messy. There are a handful of events in the Bay Area where you can participate in the fun without having to clean up the mess. The Association of Indo Americans (AIA) partners with Bolly 92.3 FM to throw **Holi Fest**, the largest Holi celebration in the Bay Area, on Saturday March 23, from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. at Discovery Meadow Park in San Jose. Paid tickets range from \$7 to \$50 (kids under 5 are free) and include color packets, live music, DJs, Indian street food, performers, shopping, and photo booths. City Center Bishop Ranch in San Ramon will host the **Holi Celebration** on April 7 from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. This family-friendly event features live music, food, and traditional dance performances in addition to the main feature of tossing colors at fellow celebrants.

*Christine has two kids who would love to have the opportunity to throw colored powder everywhere.*



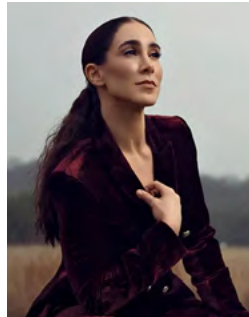




## Personal Growth

With Julie Santiago

Originally published in the October/November 2017 issue of GGMG Magazine.



Julie Santiago is a former Wall Street trader turned transformational life coach and inspirational speaker. Her coaching programs are based on over 10 years of research in neuroscience, mindfulness, positive psychology, and holistic leadership development. [wearethewomen.com](http://wearethewomen.com)

### What are the most common transformations you see in your line of work?

There are two types of transformations: inner and outer. Most of us try to reverse engineer our lives, thinking, *if I get to this point, get this job, make this much money, I'll be happy*. We constantly chase happiness, falsely thinking that when we get this thing we want, we'll get happiness or peace on the inside. However, lasting growth is about doing the inner work, which helps us be more confident, alive, present, connected to ourselves, and less overwhelmed by life. As women, we are often depleted because we do so much for others, and then we want others to fill us up. It takes the pressure off our relationships when we fill our own cup. Outer transformations include things like improved relationships, career changes, leaving partners, finding love, moving cross country, starting a business. The outer transformation is a reflection of the inner.

### What do women who experience the most dramatic growth have in common?

They're done settling. They know they're here for more. They're committed to being the best versions of themselves. It's a real commitment.

### What do women who experience the least growth have in common?

Fear. We all experience it. We're so afraid that growth means change. One of the reasons we stay in an average job or marriage is that we're afraid the change would shake things up too much. So we justify our decisions by saying, "Well, I guess it's not that bad." We talk ourselves out of having our own standards. There's a Marianne Williamson quote: "It is not our darkness but our light that scares us." We are afraid to shine our light. Fear of failure and fear of success hold us back. So we settle and end up miserable.

**"I deeply believe every woman knows who she is and what she wants but she's scared to admit it."**

### What are some important tools that women can use to support their personal growth?

1. Self-care is first and foremost. If you're depleted, you're not helping anyone. Most women fill their teacup halfway and go around offering all their tea to everyone, and then they're exhausted. The real work is learning to fill your teacup so that it overflows. And keep the teacup for yourself and give to others from the saucer. Self-care may be different things for different women, but it's probably alone time like a massage, yoga class, or at a coffee shop.
2. What other people think of you is none of your business. Nobody cares as much as you think they do, so let go of everyone's opinion.
3. Be fierce about boundaries. Sometimes you have to say "no" to others in order to say "yes" to yourself. If it doesn't light you up or fulfill you, say "no."
4. Practice gratitude. Sometimes life sucks and it's hard, but there's still stuff to be grateful for. Learning to look for the good is key to moving forward when life is difficult.
5. Find a community of women to support you. Women evolved socially to be in a tribe; we weren't supposed to go it alone. We raised families with close relatives. Now we feel like we have to go it alone and be perfect, and it's killing us. Find a group of women you can be real with, celebrate with, and fall apart with. Your partner can't do all of this for you. Having a group of women to share life with will fulfill you in ways nothing else can.

### If you could give the women you work with a superpower, what would it be?

I want them to trust themselves. I deeply believe every woman knows who she is and what she wants, but she's scared to admit it. The ability to trust the whispers in her heart, the intuitive pulls, that's learning how to trust herself. And then have the confidence and courage to act on what she hears and knows.

## Choosing a Specialist? How to Make the Right Decision

By Brian Feeley, MD, and Nirav Pandya, MD

**P**rimarily care physicians are essential to the delivery of healthcare. They provide the longitudinal experience needed for our families no matter what life may bring along the way. They also provide a valuable roadmap to navigating an increasingly complex healthcare world.

However, there will be certain times when the specific injury or illness warrants a referral to a specialist who has more in-depth training in the malady that is impacting you or your loved ones.

How do you find a specialist AND successfully secure an appointment? Let's walk you through an example.

**Scenario:** You are having a great weekend of skiing in Tahoe, but your 8-year-old takes a tumble down the ski slopes. They have immediate pain in their wrist. You head over to urgent care and your child is diagnosed with a broken wrist. Your young one is put into a splint and told to follow up with an orthopedic surgeon within a week.

**"Ask people within your community or friend group who they have received care from in the past and their experiences; they are sometimes some of the best resources at your disposal."**

**Step 1:** Contact your primary care physician, who will help you get a referral to your insurance company and present suggestions for providers. If your insurance does not require a referral, you may skip this step and make an appointment directly.

But who should you go to if given a choice?

**Step 2:** Find a provider that specializes in the type of injury that you are seeking treatment for; even within a subspecialty, not all providers treat everything. Although websites may claim a physician treats a diagnosis, note if a provider did extra training in an area (i.e., a pediatric orthopedic fellowship for a pediatric fracture, sports medicine surgery for an ACL injury, or a physical therapist with a women's health clinical speciality for postpartum-related pain).

**Step 3:** Look at the practice setting so you or your loved one has the resources to make their experience more pleasant and patient-specific. A child can have a much more comfortable and non-scary experience in a pediatric setting than within an adult hospital. On the flip side, a 22-year-old college student may not have the appropriately sized equipment, set-up, and resources necessary for them within a pediatric hospital.

**Step 4:** Ask people within your community or friend group who they have received care from in the past and their experiences; they are sometimes some of the best resources

at your disposal. Although websites such as HealthGrades, Google, and Yelp can provide some guidance to the general quality of care that you may receive by a provider, they can be easily manipulated and/or inaccurate. Negative (and positive) reviews for physicians are often not reflective of the actual care that a patient receives but rather about billing hiccups, parking difficulties, or the food in the cafeteria.

**Step 5:** Do some background research about a provider that goes beyond the first couple pages that appear on an Internet search. Is the person engaged in research in the



injury that you suffered? Have they published papers on the topic and/or presented their findings at meetings? Do they hold positions of leadership in a national organization? All these

various facets of care are important in choosing a subspecialist for your specific concern, especially if the problem is complex.

**Step 6:** When making an appointment with your chosen provider, be as specific as possible to get a timely appointment. Request the provider specifically and give the exact diagnoses when talking to the front office staff. Use the scenarios below as a guide:

**Option 1 (not specific):** "I would like to make an appointment for my child who hurt their wrist."

**Option 2 (specific):** "I would like to make an appointment with Dr. X for my child who broke their wrist. We were told to follow up in 3 to 5 days from the injury, which occurred yesterday."

With these various factors all considered, you are now ready to choose the best subspecialist for a specific injury. This not only allows the optimal care for you or your child, but also the peace of mind you need to make it through the healing process.

*Brian Feeley, M.D., is the Chief of the Sports Medicine Service at UCSF. He has five children, four in San Francisco schools and one at UCLA. Nirav Pandya, M.D., is the Chief of the Pediatric Orthopedic Surgery Service at UCSF and is a father to two children in Oakland. You can find them on Twitter or listen to their podcast, "6-8 Weeks: Perspectives on Sports Medicine."*

## Life's Greatest Teacher Is a Child

By Elizabeth Neal

No amount of baby research, social media scrolling, app subscriptions, or parental advice prepared me for the intensive round-the-clock demands of motherhood. Unaddressed childhood wounds, insecurities, and relationship weak spots have all bubbled up to the surface at lightning speed—on top of the hormonal roller coaster of postpartum recovery—all while I'm so sleep-deprived I can barely keep my eyes open.

But, I have to keep them open. Because a living, breathing human life depends on me for her survival. The weight of that still stuns me.

Motherhood has completely rewired how I show up for life. And the thing is, I like who I am now MORE. I'm more centered, stripped down, and connected to my intuition and values. My daughter

is my mirror and my greatest teacher. She's taught me the most invaluable, life-changing lessons of my life, which I'll share with you, new mama, to make your onboarding a little less jarring and lonely.

### Mama, slow down

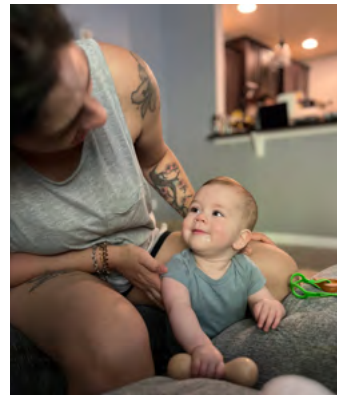
Rest is productive. Rest is crucial to your survival and that of your new child. Rest will nourish your recovering body and give you the critical energy needed to keep up with the ever-changing demands of your newborn. I think it's unfair to say "rest when the baby rests." That's crudely oversimplified and dependent on how much support you have. If you can do it, great. If you can't, sneak in rest at any given opportunity.

Embrace the slowdown. Smell your child. Study the size of their fingernails and ears. Observe their changing eye color. Feel the same heartbeat you've been listening to for months. Count their smiles while they're sleeping—it helps counter sleep deprivation. The newborn stage will be a temporary blip in your life because the pace will only pick up as your child grows.

### Mama, stand firm in your beliefs

I made the decision to contact nap with my daughter because that's what was right for our family. I choose that wording very deliberately. For some reason, as you step into motherhood, everyone surrounding you will feel compelled to share their opinion on how to parent your child. Your inner voice needs to be LOUDER.

Doubt will naturally creep in as a first-timer, but the best thing you can do is to honor what feels right. Period. You



know yourself and your child best and your needs are unique to you. Sure, listen to others' input, but take what you like and leave the rest. Clear the noise and listen to your intuition. You don't need to justify anything. Listen to yourself first, always.

### Mama, say "no" more

Exercise your right to say no to the things and people that are not serving you. Say no to visitors, to forced hugs with your baby, and to anyone who is asking more of you during a period in your life when you need to receive.

Say yes to help (that's actually helpful versus what others "think" is helpful). Say yes to showers, food deliveries, and offers to cook, clean, buy groceries, walk the dog—all of it.

You have the most important job in the world now and need more support than you've ever had in your life. Delegate, eliminate, automate, and practice

honoring the needs of you and your baby first above everything.

Set your boundaries, and remember, you are not responsible for others' reactions and feelings—that's theirs to own and process. You've got plenty on your plate.

### Mama, you are enough

How am I supposed to do this? What if I screw up?

These are the intrusive thoughts that occupy the minds of all first-time parents, regardless of how "put together" they may seem—particularly on social media. I remember seeing Instagram reels of bedtime routines with countless recommendations to do a nightly bath. Meanwhile, I hadn't showered in a week nor brushed my teeth. I remember feeling inferior and infuriated. *How the hell am I supposed to add this into our routine? It feels impossible!*

What I've learned is this: do not allow yourself to succumb to the pressures of social media. You don't need to do it all. You just need to keep your baby safe, healthy, and relatively content. How you go about that is completely up to you. My baby is perfectly healthy and happy with a bath once a week, and I can be present and engaged for a bedtime routine that works for us. That's what matters more to me. Be wary of the trap of comparing yourself to others.

You don't need to be perfect. You are perfectly what your child needs.

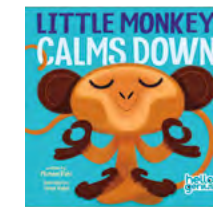
*Elizabeth Neal is a free-spirited creative, writer, nature lover, and mother.*

**"You don't need to do it all. You just need to keep your baby safe, healthy, and relatively content. How you go about that is completely up to you."**

## Introspection

By Laure Latham

Hold your horses, temper tantrums, and confused feelings! We have news for you. This selection of books will teach social life lessons and emotional skills to young children who don't know how to manage complex emotions yet.



### Little Monkey Calms Down (Hello Genius series)

Written by Michael Dahl, illustrated by Oriol Vidal

Having a tough time? Feel like crying? Toddlers will relate to

Little Monkey's sad feelings when something doesn't go as planned. It's not always easy to know how to react, and this book is great at explaining how to feel better after a crisis. The step-by-step approach will help young ones learn how to get over negative emotions. **Ages: 1 to 3 years**



### Ruby Finds a Worry (Big Bright Feelings book)

Written and illustrated by Tom Perciva

Ruby is a happy, creative, curious girl, until one day she finds something unexpected and new next to her—a Worry. At first, she dismisses the Worry and goes about her day, but the Worry stays around and gets bigger. It becomes so big that Ruby starts worrying about it, so it gets even bigger. How does

she manage to deal with her Worry? It starts with Ruby befriending a young boy, who also seems to be preoccupied with a Worry of his own. This book will help preschoolers understand anxiety and similar feelings, and teach them how they can get back to being their happy selves. **Ages: 3 to 6 years**



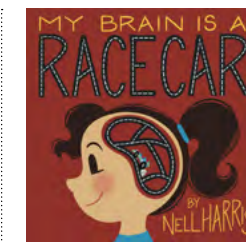
### Outside In

Written by Deborah Underwood, illustrated by Cindy Derby

Even when we are inside, Outside is patiently waiting, the perfect playmate. This book shares a message of quiet reflection and small hidden surprises

that take young ones on a journey to embrace nature. Even when we are inside, so many things around us are reminders of nature coming inside our homes. This story is also a celebration of nature as a spiritual home for readers and how nature impacts our emotions. This will be a keeper for any home library.

**Ages: 3 to 6 years**



### My Brain Is a Race Car: A Children's Guide to a Neurodivergent Brain

Written by Nell Harris

Explaining how neurodivergent brains work differently without big words is no small task. This story compares our brain to a race car and goes through all

the complexities of brains that are neurodivergent in easy-to-understand situations. Does your brain get distracted or confused? Does it get too loud being around other people? Although the book never mentions ADHD, autism, or any other neurodivergence, some young ones will recognize themselves in this race car brain and relate to how their brain works differently from others—and how they can take care of it. **Ages: 4 to 7 years**



### Train Your Dragon to Focus: A Children's Book to Help Kids Improve Focus, Pay Attention, Avoid Distractions, and Increase Concentration (My Dragon Books)

Written by Steve Herman

From the classroom disruptor or the class clown to the child who always gets distracted by the next shiny new thing, this book will show that you too, like Diggory Doo Dragon, can learn how to focus. When Diggory Doo Dragon daydreams in class and when he has trouble staying on task at home, he feels helpless and misunderstood. Fortunately, his friend Drew has a few tricks up his sleeve to keep Diggory Doo Dragon's mind from wandering, and each of these tricks might just be simple enough for the little dragon to finally learn how to concentrate—even for a short while. **Ages: 5 to 9 years**



### Extra Yarn

Written by Mac Barnett, illustrated by Jon Klassen

In a village white with snow and black with soot, young Annabelle finds a box filled with yarn in all colors. She knits a sweater for herself and finds

she still has extra yarn. So she knits a coat for her dog, Mars, and still she has extra yarn. Little by little, Annabelle's knitting kindness and generosity extends to the entire village—people, buildings, and all. Even if you aren't into fiber arts, this modern folk tale about the power of goodwill will make all little ones feel creative and self-confident. **Ages: 4 to 7 years**

*Laure writes on marathon swimming, healthy living, and adventure travel at Frog Mom (frogmom.com), and is the author of Best Hikes with Kids: San Francisco Bay Area. She is the founder of a tech startup and lives with her teenage girls in London. She swam the English Channel in 2023. You can find her on social media @frogmomblog.*

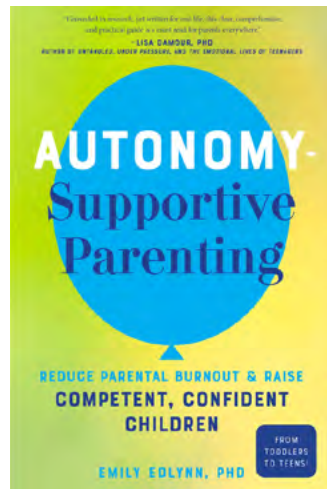




## Enough Is Enough

By Gail Cornwall

Without introspection, we remain stuck in modern society's "perfection trap," argues one new book, while another provides guidance for raising kids who won't be.



### Autonomy-Supportive Parenting: Reduce Parental Burnout and Raise Competent, Confident Children

A lot of parenting books try to take the edge off their inherently didactic nature—and offer parents empathy—by saying something like: do this, but if you don't, no worries, there are lots of ways to be a great parent, and your gut will lead you to one of them. Emily Edlynn, Ph.D., takes a more intellectually honest approach. She cites cross-cultural research and says, in my paraphrasing: this is the best way to do it, but you won't be able to swing it in every moment, and that's okay. Parenting in an autonomy-supportive way a good chunk of the time is enough.

She got there by poring over psychology and child development research as a new mom and coming to a stark conclusion: we all have controlling impulses born of fear, anxiety, or stress, and they're exacerbated by upheaval in the world. But Edlynn found another thing in the science: evidence-based strategies that enable us to restrain controlling impulses and give children the agency they need to thrive, including flexible language, giving choices, involving kids in decision-making, providing rationale for rules, following through with expectations, perspective-taking, and offering unconditional positive regard. After putting these techniques into action, she writes, "I felt like the better, butterfly version of my mom self was emerging from the cocoon of control."

"Parents may not realize that now what feels 'normal' may qualify as 'helicopter,'" parenting that undermines internal motivation, well-being, and resilience, Edlynn writes. On the other hand, kids who feel competent, autonomous, and like they belong behave in more desirable ways. In other words, autonomy-supportive parenting can produce kids who are easier to be around, which leaves their parents with more bandwidth to parent in autonomy-supportive ways. A positive feedback loop results. Edlynn summarizes, "When we stop doing so much for our children, when we can step back and evaluate where we are robbing them of opportunities to build skills while adding unnecessary stress to our to-do lists, we are building healthier and more sustainable family lives now, with the bonus of more prepared, independent adults for the future."

In prose that strives to be both readable and relatable, she demonstrates why that's all true and how to begin. I have only one bone to pick, and it's with her take on screen time. Edlynn is 100 percent astute when she writes, "Adolescents may have impulses for immediate need satisfaction, and parental support meant to help them regulate these impulses may be experienced as need frustration." In other words, autonomy-supportive parenting includes helping set limits, and that won't always be experienced by kids as a boost to their autonomy. I think screen time limits are a perfect example of when adults have to be prepared to be the bad guys to protect their kids; she suggests a more laissez-faire approach. Pretty much the whole rest of the book though, I'm belting out from the choir to which Edlynn preaches.

Gail works as a mom and writer in San Francisco. Read about parenting and education from the perspective of a former teacher and lawyer at [gailcornwall.com](http://gailcornwall.com) or by finding her on Facebook and Twitter.



### The Perfection Trap: Embracing the Power of Good Enough

Thomas Curran is a professor and a researcher, but he's also an anti-perfection evangelist. "Every last one of us in the West lives inside a culture knitted by perfectionistic fantasies," he writes, "teaching us that we'd lead a happy and successful life if only we were perfect, and that everything will come crashing down if we stray too far from that ideal." This perfectionistic mindset goes hand in hand with "a lingering and unshakable insecurity ... burnout and mental distress." We are left "drowning in discontentment, submerged in the thicket of never enough," he writes. Curran didn't always see things this way. His thinking evolved, and *The Perfection Trap* traces that journey, with autobiographical anecdotes interspersed with research on "what perfectionism really is, what it does to us, how fast it's currently rising, why it's rising, and the things we can do to escape it."

It's not a perfect book. Curran gets wordy. And while he gives genetics its due, he de-emphasizes the relational causes of perfectionism (think poor parenting and other destabilizing early life experiences) in favor of the role of culture and capitalism ("an obsession with boundless growth and unrelenting moreness at any cost"). He's not wrong when he calls perfectionism "the defining characteristic of our time ... very much the new zeitgeist." But I don't agree with Curran that "[p]erfectionism is not a personal obsession—it's a decidedly cultural one." Most of the researchers he cites say it's both. And as a recovering perfectionist myself, I think it's going too far to say "perfectionism isn't within our individual gift to remedy" and "it's not you who needs transforming." Cultural forces are real, powerful, and too often minimized, but Curran gives the pendulum too hard a shove in the opposite direction, methinks.

That said, he does a fantastic job of describing the feeling of different varieties of perfectionism. He takes the uncommon position that telling people to strive for excellence isn't any better than telling them to strive for perfection. He gets real about social media. He includes insightful, beautifully worded lines like: "Procrastination is often portrayed as a time-management problem. But in actual fact, it's an anxiety-management problem."

And *The Perfection Trap* doesn't need to be perfect. That's the whole point. Curran does enough. Enough to make me recommend his book to any parent hoping to save their child the type of anguish he describes—and that approximately a third of our kids are now experiencing.

## NEW ARRIVALS



Stephanie C.	<b>Baby Camila Alicia</b>
Jessie B.	<b>Baby Noah William</b>
Jessica S.	<b>Baby Jordan</b>
Lyndsey Lara	<b>Baby Marlowe Dakota</b>

Congratulations to **Jessica S.**! She will be getting joyful moments captured by Anna Munandar from Mini Anna Photography. Anna specializes in capturing joy and every milestone in your family, from birth to college. See her work at [minianna.com](http://minianna.com).

To announce your new arrival in the magazine and for a chance to win a \$150 gift card from **Mini Anna Photography**, fill out the form at [ggmg.org/about-us/ggmg-magazine](http://ggmg.org/about-us/ggmg-magazine).



# The Moms Are Alright: The Benefits of “Baby Brain”



**You’ve heard the cute, if patronizing, terms: “momnesia,” “mommy brain”—the least gendered of these is “baby brain.” Why is there no such thing as “daddy brain”? Spoiler alert—there is.**

By H.B. Terrell

**B**ecoming a parent can create mental clutter and overwhelm—the dreaded “mommy brain”—where you know the exact shade of your kid’s poop but can’t remember where you set down your car keys. The science supports the idea that this is less about a problem with our brains and largely a reaction to our circumstances. In fact, understanding the magnificent changes our brains go through as caregivers can be a source of reclamation of our power as parents.

The concept of “losing brain cells” is often considered to be the root of memory problems and brain fog in new mothers. And studies have shown that pregnancy causes a loss of gray matter, specifically in the brain areas involved in social cognition,

including verbal recall. But this may not be limited to a biological phenomenon. Scientists conducting studies on the brain function of pregnant and postpartum humans are finding that what we call “mommy brain” is an equal-opportunity affliction related partly to the circumstances all parents face in the early days—sleeplessness, stress, overstimulation, etc. Hormones trigger brain modifications during pregnancy, but non-birthing parents’ brains also change while caring for a newborn. A 2022 study of 20 fathers and 17 non-birthing parents showed that after the birth of their first child, new parents’ brains revealed a comparative reduction in gray matter. The “fogginess” affects them as well.

## Your amazing brain

Beginning in pregnancy and during the first two years or more after birth, the regions in a mother’s brain responsible for empathy undergo “synaptic pruning,” a phenomenon that eliminates some connections between brain cells to make space for new ones. A “loss” of brain material might seem like a bad thing, but these changes can be crucial for people facing new experiences like parenthood, a rewiring of the brain to boost our ability to understand another person’s thoughts, feelings, and needs.

In a study led by researcher Eline Hoekzema, pregnant women and new-mom brain images showed reductions in gray matter in the hippocampus, responsible for regulating memory. So instead of focusing on relatively inconsequential information—movie titles or a new co-work-

## The new you

These changes persist beyond the decades in which parents are providing direct care for their kids. A 2020 study conducted by the cognitive neuroimaging team at Monash Biomedical Imaging investigated the late-life maternal brain, finding a consistent pattern across brain structure three or more decades after women became mothers, suggesting that motherhood offers a neuroprotective effect on late-life brain function, particularly in the region related to memory. Winnie Orchard, who co-led this study, attributes the effects to the ongoing demands of motherhood—children’s needs continue to shift year by year for multiple decades, and parents are continuously learning on the job at a rapid clip to keep up with these developmental changes. “Complex and new environments result in

**“[P]regnant women and new-mom brain images showed ... the brain reallocates resources to the areas controlling theory of mind, essential to identify and respond to a pre-verbal infant’s needs, supporting the capacity to maintain calm during stressful situations, interpret what different cries mean, and focus on mitigating potential dangers.”**

er’s name—the brain reallocates resources to the areas controlling theory of mind. Theory of mind skills are essential to identify and respond to a pre-verbal infant’s needs, supporting the capacity to maintain calm during stressful situations, interpret what different cries mean, and focus on mitigating potential dangers. Reductions in maternal brain volume are associated with better attachment, more positive opinions about their babies, and more confidence in their own parenting ability.

This is neuroplasticity on overdrive, similar to what humans experience during adolescence. A 2023 *JAMA Neurology* article states that both adolescence and matrescence involve “hormonally mediated shifts in attention, motivation, cognition, and behavior necessary for adaptation to the new demands of life” and calls for a rebranding of the idea of “mommy brain” as a positive adaptation. Synaptic pruning of gray matter is not a loss, but a reorganization.

healthier, more flexible and more resilient brains,” Orchard says. “The life-long experience of motherhood provides this sort of environmental complexity, keeping mothers on their toes well into late life.”

## Behind the fog

It’s not just the hormonal and physiological aspects of pregnancy that change the brain. The lived experience of parenting plays a role as well. New parents face many

demands of this role—balancing their child’s needs with their own well-being, complicated by guilt that some parents might feel when tending to their own needs and leaving the baby to another caregiver. There are also the mental and emotional loads of learning and improvising that take place in parenting, adjusting to a child’s rapid development, making space for other relationships with a partner, family, or friends. Improvements in attention and empathy necessitate a trade-off: an intensely narrowed focus can result in a blurred peripheral view.

But do the neurochemical changes that occur during pregnancy and early parenthood tell the full story of why we “lose our minds” as new parents?

## Your brain on multitasking

Despite the persistence of the myth of hustle and grind as virtues, it has been long known that we humans were not meant to be multitasking beings. MIT neuroscientist Earl Miller says, “When people think they’re multitasking, they’re actually just switching from one task to another very rapidly. And every time they do, there’s a cognitive cost in doing so.” We may feel that we are getting a lot done, but we’re working less efficiently than if we were able to focus tightly on one task at a time. Research has found that multitasking increases cortisol (a stress hormone) and adrenaline (the fight-or-flight initiator), which can overstimulate the brain and cause what we think of as brain fog.

Additional research by Stanford neuroscientist Russ Poldrack found that learning while multitasking causes new information to go to the wrong part of the brain.





# Community Engagement and Motherhood

With Jen Nossokoff

Without distraction, information goes to the hippocampus—the “facts and ideas” part of the brain—where it is organized in several ways that make it easier to retrieve when needed. If you add in the distractions of, say, watching your newborn swat at a mobile, while simultaneously calculating when her next feeding will be, while also reading a book, the information you take in from the book goes to a different region of the brain that’s specialized for storing procedures and skills—the tactile learning part of the brain, related to what we think of as muscle memory. That information becomes encoded differently and is then harder to retrieve when it’s needed.

Neuroscientist Daniel Levitin describes a dopamine-addiction feedback loop that occurs during multitasking, rewarding the brain for losing focus and searching for external stimulation. He calls multitasking, “the ultimate empty-calorie brain candy.” Instead of delving into the depths that come from sustained, focused effort, when we multitask, we remain in the shallows, completing a thousand insignificant tasks. And isn’t this what early parenthood feels like, a succession of mundane but keenly important tasks that keep your child alive and well? It’s an essential undertaking, but one that understandably takes a mental toll. Baby brain is no more than what anyone who is multitasking 24/7 would experience, *de rigueur*.

## Surviving the in-between

How do you soothe your underslept, overworked, overwhelmed mind? One solution might be found in the emerging field of environmental neuroscience, which explores how our brains are profoundly affected by being in nature. Environmental neuroscience suggests that mitigating the effects of the constant multitasking that parenthood requires can be as simple as

intentionally immersing oneself in the natural world to help relieve our overstimulated minds. Sociobiologist E.O. Wilson popularized the biophilia hypothesis, which posits that humans function better in natural environments because our brains and bodies evolved in and with nature, and there is accumulating evidence that exposure to nature benefits perception, memory, reasoning, judgment, imagination, and problem-solving. Researchers today are studying the effects of natural settings and urban green spaces on brain function, finding that multi-tasking can break neural pathways and more focused attention can rebuild them.

The capacity to focus on a specific mental task (ignoring both external and internal distractions), or “directed attention,” is a finite resource. “The areas of the brain responsible for this kind of attention can become depleted by multitasking and high-stimulation modern environments,” explains Kathryn Williams, an environmental psychologist at the University of Melbourne. When attention is depleted, we can’t concentrate, we make mistakes, and have trouble with decision-making. “But there is something about nature that engages the brain in a way that’s very undemanding and effortless, giving these areas an opportunity to rest and recover,” says Williams. Being in nature activates the parasympathetic nervous system—the branch of the nervous system related to a resting state that fosters feelings of calm and well-being.

## Soft fascination

The kind of stimuli we see in natural settings captures attention indirectly, like the chill of a breeze on our cheeks, or spontaneously, like unexpected birdsong or the snapping of a twig underfoot. This is called “soft fascination,” a kind of gentle attention to our surroundings that allows for

restoration of directed attention. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies reveal that during nature exposure, the prefrontal cortex (crucial in executive function) is “off duty,” meaning that less mental effort is required to process environmental stimuli.

The “dose-response effect” of nature exposure posits that the more immersive the experience, the larger the benefit on cognitive functioning. A “dose” of nature encompasses the amount of time spent in the environment, the regularity of our interaction with natural areas, or how present we are and how many of our senses we’re engaging. According to cognitive neuroscientist David Strayer, 30 minutes is the minimum duration needed to attain measurable benefits on our mental states. Longer-term experiences, such as hikes or campouts, have additional benefits. While more immersive experiences are better, time and access to natural settings is a privilege that not all have at their disposal. In such a case, watching a nature documentary with your phone on silent can also improve your ability to focus.

The key is to be on the lookout for things that inspire wonder in you. For me, it might be splashing in a puddle during a downpour. For you, maybe it’s the white noise of kids at recess from the school across the street from your house, the way the words tumble off your tongue when you read a poem aloud, or the zen you get when concentrating on solving a mechanical problem under the hood of your cruiser.

What soothes you? Whether it’s going on a walk, visiting an art museum, or getting in the ring at your boxing gym, contemplate and reflect in your own way. Baby brain may be intensified by its narrative construct, but the wear and tear of early parenthood is real. Sometimes all you can get is a 15-minute walk with a napping baby strapped to your chest or an Earl Grey tea and Nutella toast while your partner soothes the baby. Know that this will pass, and your superpowered brain will get you through it just fine, doing exactly what it’s supposed to.

*H.B. is relieved to know that being bad at multitasking is not as dire a flaw as previously assumed. She vows to spend more time getting immersed in the great outdoors, which is barely a 15-minute walk from her house on the Philosopher’s Way Trail, McLaren Park..*

Jen is a District 1 Supervisor candidate, a board-certified Physician Assistant, and a passionate advocate for the Richmond District. She is a public school parent and enjoys engaging in local community activities with her two young children, Ever and Alder, and her husband, Rich.

## How do you balance your role as a mother with your community advocacy work?

I firmly believe in integrating my roles as a mother and community leader, which often involves bringing my children into the world of civic engagement. This not only helps me manage my responsibilities more effectively, but more importantly, it’s a hands-on way for me to teach my children the importance of civic responsibility and community involvement from a young age.

## “My goal was to show [my daughter] that people can shape their communities and to teach her to find and use her voice.”

Probably my most pivotal example of the intersection of motherhood and community advocacy is the Kid Petition for JFK Promenade that I created together with my daughter, Ever, who was 4 years old at the time. We made a petition video and she collected signatures from other kids and adults on her clipboard with crayons. Her involvement was both an educational and a bonding experience. My goal was to show her that people can shape their communities and to teach her to find and use her voice. Growing up, I was fortunate to have the value of community work modeled for me by my mother and I’m proud to pass that on to my children.

## What inspired you to become involved in community issues?

A combination of my professional background in medicine and my experiences as a mother. Seeing the needs of our neighborhood firsthand, and understanding the impact that policy decisions can have on families like mine, drove me to take an active role in shaping our community’s future.

## Can you share an example of how your work has positively impacted your district?

One of my most significant contributions to our district was bringing the first city-sponsored COVID-19 vaccine clinic to District 1 at the Richmond Senior Center. This initiative was crucial in ensuring accessible healthcare, particularly for our senior population.

## What do you see as the biggest challenge facing your community today?

It’s ensuring that our community remains a safe, accessible, and healthy environment for all. This means addressing issues like safety, transportation, and health equity in a holistic and inclusive manner. Health equity is looking at all of the social determinants of health, things that contribute to our health and longevity outside of healthcare, and making sure there is equitable access. Examples include housing stability, access to quality education, food security, and reliable public transportation.

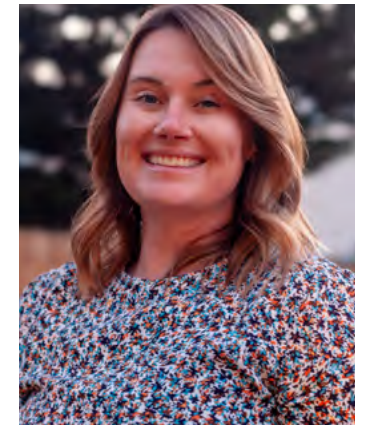
## How do you incorporate your experiences as a mother into your vision for the community?

My vision is deeply influenced by the importance of accessible public spaces and strong local schools, shaped by active civic engagement. The transformation of JFK Promenade into a permanent family-friendly area, where my daughter learned to bike, is a testament to the power of community involvement. This space was the result of dedicated civic engagement and advocacy.

In that same spirit, there are a number of passionate parents who are engaged in improving SFUSD at the school district level. It shows the community’s commitment to quality education and inclusive environments. Our neighborhood school, a short walk from our home, is a perfect example of the sense of community and belonging that small local schools provide. This involvement has been instrumental in building strong community ties and ensuring that our public schools are vibrant, welcoming, and responsive to the needs of all families. These are not just policy issues for me; they’re personal.

## As a candidate for supervisor, what are your main goals?

My main goals are to enhance community safety through collective responsibility above and beyond law enforcement, improve transportation options to cater to all residents and bring more business to our local shops, and advocate for health equity. I aim to make our district a model for others, showcasing how community involvement can shape a positive and inclusive future.





# The Power of Pause: Meditation and Mindfulness for Busy Moms

Discover ways to calm your mind and center yourself amidst the chaos of motherhood.

By Yuliya Patsay

For those of you who don't live inside the Home Edit's Instagram page (but seriously, could we petition them to let us dwell in their rainbow-colored world forever?) your life might look more like this: picture the dishes with remnants of breakfast still stuck to them lingering on the table, wadded up cotton pads thrown in the vicinity of the trash can, but not IN the actual trash can, and the sound of your offspring arguing about who ate the last of the Double Stuf Oreos so loudly that all you can do is put in your AirPods and blast some Offspring to keep your cool. Exhausting, isn't it? What if there was a way to change your perception?

Enter mindfulness and meditation. Kristen Vandivier, Bay Area instructor of Vedic Meditation and the founder of The Vedic Method and Meditation Without Borders, proposes that while meditation isn't a magic wand or a full time cleaning

staff, when you start to meditate consistently your perception can change. Though the dirty dishes are still there you can train yourself to notice how the sunlight reflects off of them just so and have a moment of peace instead of just feeling resentful of the mess.

## Mindfulness vs meditation

Even though the terms "mindfulness" and "meditation" are often used interchangeably, they are not exactly the same thing. Simply put, mindfulness is a quality (how something is) and meditation is a practice (something someone does). John Kabat-Zinn, the creator of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program (MBSR), defines mindfulness as "the awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally." In contrast, meditation can be defined as an intentional contemplative practice, in which you might use a technique (like mindfulness) to train attention and awareness in order to attain a mentally clear and emotionally calm and stable state. For extra confusion, there is a category of meditative practices that are called "mindfulness meditation," which help the practitioner live and act with mindfulness. Meditation is one method or tool through which someone may learn to live mindfully.

In the whirlwind of modern parenthood, finding time (and motivation) for mindfulness or meditation can seem like a tall order, especially since we're already trying to exercise, eat right, declutter our houses, gentle parent, and reverse climate change. But Dawn Cushing, who teaches yoga and fitness classes in Reno, Nevada, suggests that meditation can be easier than you think. She observes that people tend to overthink and overcomplicate their meditation practice. She encourages people to find meditative moments in the mundane tasks of the everyday and proposes that meditation can be as simple as taking 30 seconds to mindfully observe your surroundings when you're waiting at a stoplight or taking a couple of breaths while waiting for coffee to brew. Her advice: don't overthink it. If you put in a little bit of work, the magic will happen.

Sara Brannin-Mooser, a Bay Area fitness and meditation instructor, agrees with Dawn, and proposes that for someone who



## Meditation and mindfulness practices

**Mindfulness Meditation** involves paying attention to the present moment without judgment. This includes focusing on the breath, sensations in the body, or observing thoughts and feelings.

**Transcendental Meditation (TM) and Vedic Meditation (VM)** are techniques where practitioners silently repeat a mantra to achieve a state of relaxed awareness. They aim to transcend ordinary thought and promote a deep state of restful alertness. TM is through an organization and VM is with independent teachers.

**Loving-Kindness Meditation (Metta)** focuses on developing feelings of love and compassion toward oneself and others. Practitioners may repeat phrases or affirmations to cultivate a sense of goodwill.

**Body Scan Meditation** involves bringing attention to different parts of the body, from the toes to the head. This promotes relaxation and awareness of bodily sensations.

**Zen Meditation (Zazen)** is a form of seated meditation rooted in Zen Buddhism. Practitioners often sit in a specific posture and focus on their breath or a *kōan* (a paradoxical question or statement).

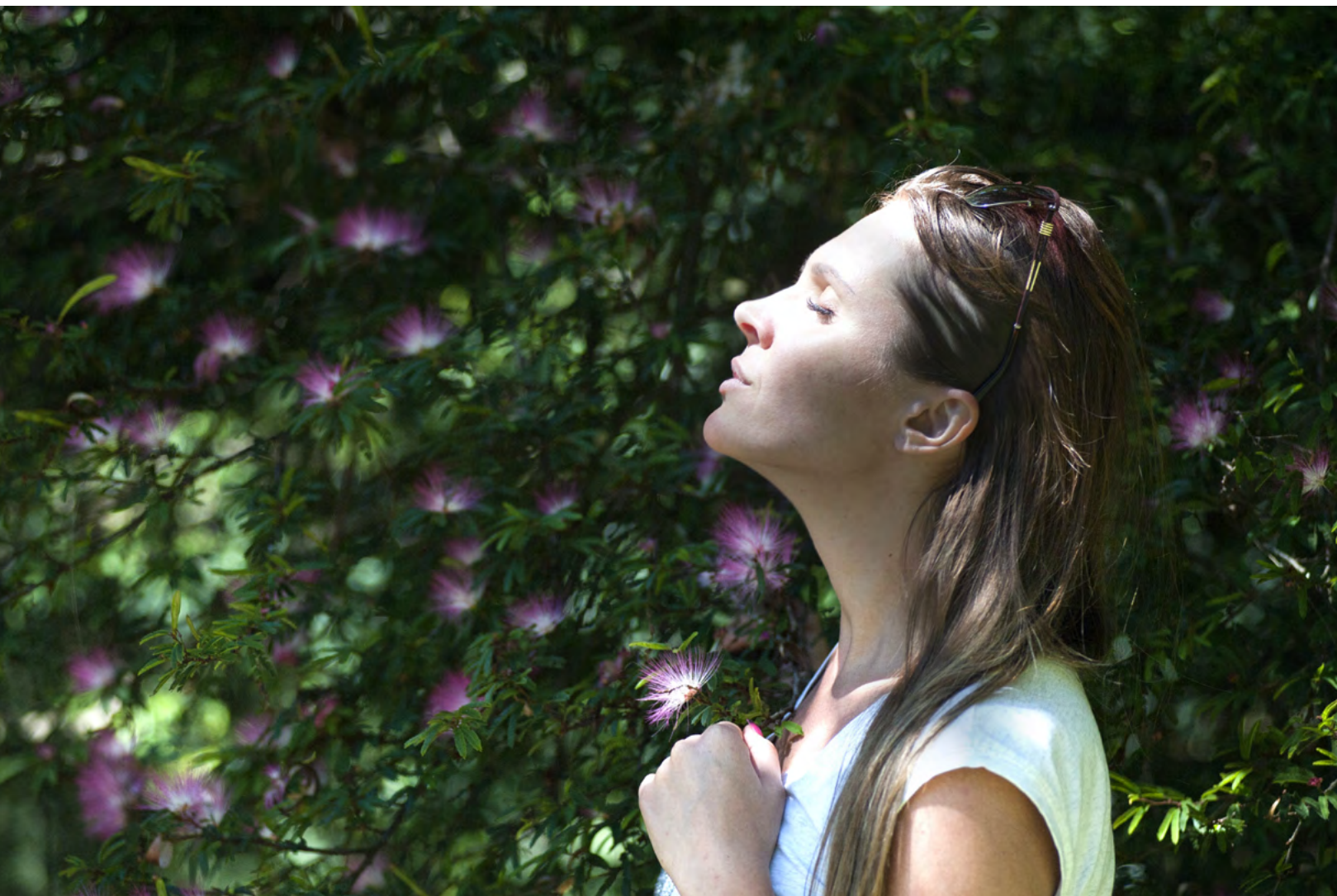
**Guided Meditation** is led by a teacher or through recorded audio, guiding participants through imagery, visualization, or a series of instructions to promote relaxation and mindfulness.

**Chakra Meditation** is based on the belief in the body's energy centers (*chakras*). Practitioners focus on each *chakra*, visualizing and balancing the energy associated with each.

**Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)** is a structured program incorporating mindfulness meditation to reduce stress and enhance well-being. It often includes a combination of mindfulness practices.

**Breath Awareness Meditation** involves bringing attention to the breath, observing its natural rhythm, and maintaining focus on the inhalation and exhalation.

**Vipassana Meditation** is an ancient form of meditation that involves observing the breath and sensations throughout the body to gain insight into the nature of reality.





## Apps

**Headspace:** The most comprehensive app from beginners to more experienced meditators. It offers solution-oriented meditations such as how to deal with writer's block or how to navigate grief. It's easy to use, but it might feel too "cutesy" for some.

**Calm** offers both guided and unguided meditations. You can even use it to track your mood over time. Plus, it has tons of content for kids. You can't beat their sleep stories—read by celebrity narrators—to help you wind down at the end of a day.

**Smiling Mind:** A free support app with a program specifically for kids and young adults.

**Healthy Minds:** A great free option that assesses your Awareness, Connection, Insight, and Purpose. Those four pillars are the framework for the rest of the course, with the goal of increasing your original scores.

**Insight Timer:** Another option with a free version and a paid version. The free option has more than 100,000 meditations. Plus it has a very popular timer feature where you can just set a time, select background music or not, and customize the sounds you want to signify the beginning and end of a session.

**Waking Up:** Author and podcast host Sam Harris will lead you through three sections: theory, practice, and life. Learn the theory behind meditation and other topics, practice a series of guided meditations, and listen to situational meditation from Sam and his guests.

## “[A] mom is the center of her solar system and when she meditates her whole community benefits.”

wants to make it part of their life, it really can be as simple as meditating for a minute or even taking three deep mindful breaths. Even if you start small, just start: it's all about having a consistent easy win, much in the way you develop any habit.

### Why do it?

While the jury is still out, the evidence so far suggests that it's just plain good for you. It can be a challenge to study the impact of mindfulness, but there's data to suggest that mindfulness affects the physical structure of our brain—specifically the parts associated with emotions, memory, and motivation (our amygdala and hippocampus). Perhaps more importantly, it increases the size of the prefrontal cortex, which results in better impulse control, planning, and problem solving.

In a 2011 study, Harvard-affiliated researchers at Massachusetts General

Hospital studied the brain MRIs of participants before and after they underwent an 8-week mindfulness-based stress-reduction program and compared it with a control group that did not. Researchers observed that after participants engaged in mindfulness training, their brains indicated visible structural changes in the hippocampus structure associated with storing memories and emotion control, and a decrease in the amygdala associated with stress, fear, and anxiety. Mindfulness techniques can also promote the body's relaxation response—the parasympathetic nervous system—which is responsible for restoring the body to base levels after a stressful event.

Even if we know meditation is good for us, we might still resist it. One reason might be that we've tried meditating, or sitting still and clearing our minds of thoughts only to find that our thoughts were racing and it

felt uncomfortable. That's one of the biggest misconceptions—people assume mindfulness is supposed to be effortless and easy. But even though the concept is simple, and the practice is relatively easy to tap into, mindfulness itself takes time and tension and effort. Kristen posits that in meditation, “you're releasing stress and trauma. It's like doing a detox and it can feel yucky.” Another misconception is that people expect instantaneous results from participating in a short mindfulness exercise. But just like you wouldn't expect to run one mile and become a marathon runner overnight, for the true benefits of meditation and mindfulness to be realized, they need to become a part of your lifestyle, one that you need to devote time to practicing. And finally, people think that if they have recurring thoughts while meditating that they are failing or doing it wrong. But it is the act of noticing your thoughts and returning to your awareness that strengthens the very muscle that you are trying to build.

### Why it's good for mom in particular

Moms are busy and meditation and mindfulness are a great way to come back to yourself. Leila Williams, who works with people of color as an executive, spiritual coach, and mentor explains, “So much pulls me away—TikTok, my business, my kids. So I do either a guided meditation or a walking meditation and I am able to reconnect with myself.” She emphasizes that it's crucial that mothers find ways of reconnecting with themselves because they give so much. Kristen agrees and says she absolutely loves getting moms as students because “a mom is the center of her solar system and when she meditates her whole community benefits.”

### Getting started

One way to dip your toe in the water is to try meditating with the help of an app. While you absolutely do not need to use an app, it can be a convenient way to support your meditation and mindfulness journey. Apps provide access to tools whenever and wherever you want, often for free. But the downside is that they live on your device, and that way lies distraction.

You can also try meditation and mindfulness with the help of online courses. Kristen recommends finding a teacher, particularly “if someone has a lot of trauma or addictive behaviors” because “apps are good for dabbling and dipping your toes, but if you want to really dive in, you need a teacher to guide you.”

### Family meditation

Finally, if you've already committed to mindfulness and meditation, you might be wondering—how can I get my kids on board?

Despite being a yoga teacher, Dawn Cushing laments that she can't get her husband or her teenage daughter to meditate. Her advice for those with young kids is to lead by example, let them see you meditating or practicing mindfulness or even deep breathing. You can also check out kid-friendly apps or initiate a tradition of family meditation sessions. Advocate for your school to introduce meditation to kids, partnering with organizations like Bay Area program Mindful Littles.

And remember, if all of this sounds like too much, just put the magazine down, close your eyes (or not) and just breathe.

*Yuliya (it rhymes with Goo-lia) Patsay is Soviet-born and San Francisco-raised. She is a storyteller and voice actor. Her debut memoir, Until the Last Pickle, is available now!*



### Meditation Centers

**The Vedic Method**  
[thevedicmethod.com](http://thevedicmethod.com)

**Shambhala Meditation Center of SF**  
[sf.shambhala.org](http://sf.shambhala.org)

**Kadampa Meditation Center**  
[meditateinsanfrancisco.org](http://meditateinsanfrancisco.org)

**San Francisco Zen Center**  
[sfzc.org](http://sfzc.org)

**Mission Dharma**  
[missiondharma.org](http://missiondharma.org)



# Where the Unknown Things Are: How to Approach Discussions About Uncertainty with Children



Anxiety is on the rise. We can help children and ourselves deal with uncertainty more optimistically and perhaps reduce anxiety.

By Sandy Woo      Photographs by Jill Baker Photography

Originally published in the August/September 2021 *Beauty in Uncertainty* issue.

**“Uncertainty is the refuge of hope.”**

— Henri Frederic Amiel

Starting down this quote on a boarded-up storefront in the midst of the COVID pandemic, I paused mid-smile, both rueful and hopeful, a swirl of mixed emotions. I imagined bestowing such words of inspiration onto my child after a year pockmarked by uncertainty and saw a big middle finger at best. (My middle

finger also itched to salute after seeing this beautifully painted mural, to be honest). To him, and most humans, uncertainty is the root of anxiety, fear, and anger.

The past four years sent me back to school with a steep learning curve and hard knocks: learning to parent a child with severe obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). The uncertainty of it all has been maddening—even though as a genetic counselor, I am no stranger to ambiguity.

The inability to tolerate uncertainty is the hallmark of anxiety disorders, and the bogeyman of OCD. At its root, the OCD brain feeds off uncertainty. It tortures the sufferer with questions like: *Are you \*sure\* you washed/disinfected everything? What is that spot on the apple? Maybe you haven't moved enough today yet; maybe you ate too much? What if you need that? What if your fears all came true?* There can never be enough certainty in OCD,

and all the reassurance in the world will only make the condition worse. The brain's response to uncertainty has, in effect, gone haywire.

## Uncertainty begets anxiety

From a psychological perspective, uncertainty is when we are unable to use past experiences and information to predict a particular outcome or future. Uncertainty reduces our ability to prepare for the future, is threatening, and contributes to anxiety.

Unsurprisingly, the pandemic spawned one of the worst mental health crises in recent years despite anxiety rates consistently being on the rise for the past decade. According to the CDC, from April to October 2020, the proportion of mental-health-related emergency department visits for children aged 5 to 11 and 12 to 17 years increased 24 and 31 percent, respectively.

## Our amazing brains

Our cavemen ancestors' survival depended on their brains to scan the environment for stability, to make judgments about what was safe and what was not. If their brains could not know what lurked behind a corner or what might happen in the next few moments, how could it keep them safe? In a fight-or-flight world, where one could be eaten at any time, it made sense for their brains to jump to the worst possible conclusions, overestimating threats and underestimating their ability to overcome them. This type of thinking ensured our species' survival. We are hardwired to crave certainty; our brains will do almost anything to have it. One might say that avoiding uncertainty serves an important evolutionary function.

Perhaps natural selection endowed descendants of the first humans (us) with an outsized intolerance for uncertainty. It makes waiting for certainty akin to medieval torture. Often we prefer to know an outcome—whatever it is, just so we can take the edge off (which is why I sometimes read the end of the books first and then can calmly read how the plot unfolds). Scientists have long studied that anticipating pain causes more stress than simply knowing pain is certain (i.e., worse health outcomes with job uncertainty

versus actually losing a job). British researchers at the United College of London showed that participants exhibited the most stress at a 50 percent chance of electric shock and the least stress at 0 and 100 percent shock.

## A perspective shift

As parents, our natural tendency is to inoculate our children against life's difficulties, and eliminating uncertainty seems logical enough.

Reassurance is what parents do. After all, predictability is a stabilizing force for children and adolescents. How counterintuitive is it to learn that reassurance and accommodation reinforce anxiety, implicitly telling kids they can't cope with life's challenges? Though we have come a long way from being eaten by a saber tooth tiger, we must face the widespread effects of an “unprecedented” pandemic, school shootings, crazy weather patterns, and extreme academic pressures, while social media documents every gory detail. These unfortunate events may in part explain why anxiety increased 20 percent among children from 2007 to 2012



based on data collected from the National Survey of Children's Health.

What if we reframed this discussion? Instead of giving reassurance or eliminating uncertainty, for example, we focus on the message that our children can cope with it.

Emily Berner, licensed marriage and family therapist at the San Francisco Bay Area for Cognitive Therapy recommends decreasing a child's dependence on reassurance to reduce their fears. When

**“We forget that uncertainty also brings with it the opportunity for joyful surprise. How boring and small our lives would be if the events of our lives were confined to the things we could anticipate!”**

children are hyper-aware of a feared event, she advises parents to ask a question such as how they made it to breakfast without tripping or getting a concussion, that they couldn't 100 percent know they could when they started the day. Though silly, the question shows how we tolerate uncertainty all the time, without missing a beat. “If we can accept uncertainty in one area, we can accept it in another area. The goal is to help your child start to think of themselves as someone who can handle the feeling of not knowing what will happen and keep living their life anyway,” says Berner.

Of course, Berner also views uncertainty as sort of “exciting” while acknowledging it can be annoying to someone who is afraid of it. “Most of the time, when we think about uncertainty, we think about the difficult side of it—what might go wrong or what painful experience might be lurking. But think for a moment about three of the most wonderful, lovely, or amazing things that have happened in your life. Were they all planned, predicted, and expected? That person you met by chance, the amazing restaurant you stumbled upon, or the job you fell into that ended up being the perfect fit? We forget that uncertainty also brings with it the opportunity for joyful surprise. How boring and small our lives would be if the events of our lives were confined to the things we could anticipate! Yes, hard and painful and scary things happen. But that's only one side of the coin. We should spend more time appreciating the other side of the coin, too.”

In a 2018 study from Yale funded by



the National Institutes of Health (NIH), researchers revealed this flip side of the coin. Using monkeys and a reward system payoff, they demonstrated that the brain only learns when there is uncertainty. Monkeys were given tasks where outcome probability was either constant or fluctuating, and then their brain activity was tracked. Once stability was introduced, learning in the frontal cortex was dramatically reduced.

**The nitty-gritty**

Sometimes, however, a parent still needs concrete advice when it comes to talking to kids.

Mom of two and clinical social worker and therapist, Catherine Reid, LCSW recommends defining uncertainty with a child by being honest, that “we don’t know everything, not everything is in a box.” Give a framework of what you don’t know and that it’s okay not to know, and to always balance between protection and exposure. In other words, do not provide so much information that it paralyzes the child with fear but also be honest about your limitations. Say something like, “I also don’t know, but I’m sure we can figure this out.”

Identify feelings and emotions by noticing and naming behaviors in children. Put words around what is happening in their body. “Behavior is driven by feelings,” Reid says. “The first language in children is behavior.” Monitor physical sensations and what emotion is attached so that we can manage them. Normalize feelings and emotions and what they do to our bodies. This recognition is requisite to emotional intelligence and children can eventually figure out ways to keep calm.

Model being calm when dealing with uncertainty. “It’s okay we mess up. The best gift we can give our kids is to acknowledge freakouts. We are going to have freakouts. And the uncertainty will get you sometimes,” adds Reid.

Or as another mom, Zarah Gulamhusein, puts it, “You can take care of yourself, that’s the best you can do” and “to try to give certainty (structure) within uncertainty.”

We also provide a supportive statement such as, “I know it’s hard but I know you can deal with it” when our son is scared or worried about something that we think is silly.



**Practice makes better**

As the adage goes, the only certainty in life is uncertainty. Perhaps we should “accept it, tolerate it, welcome it, lean into it, move toward it, make friends with it,” as Berner recommends. Before you scratch that middle finger itch, consider being okay with uncertainty—sometimes permission to do so is enough. For others, it will be a struggle to give up the quest for certainty. Even Berner doesn’t have all the right words to articulate what it means to be at “peace with it” unless you feel it.

One way to arrive at this peace is to practice not acting on the feeling of uncertainty. “For most of us, when we are feeling uncertain and we’re anxious about that feeling, we try to solve it by polling our friends, asking Google, asking our neighbor, or trying to worry our way out of it. But if we practice not doing those things (even though that’s hard), we get better at making peace,” says Berner. While we practice how to not do away with uncertainty, she also recommends “moving forward and taking action on the things that are important to you, while you are feeling uncertain.”

Let your children make mistakes, face their fears, do the hard things, so they learn to be independent and resilient. Encourage them to sit with the unknown; the more they do so, the less scary it becomes—for them and you.

**Yay for neuroplasticity**

For my family, this business of tolerating uncertainty is still a work in progress. It is difficult to rewire the brain but it can be done. The brain is primed to signal an alarm when it senses a threat. Every time we respond in kind to avoid or mitigate such a fear (and survive), it creates a feedback loop to the brain telling it to create an even bigger signal the next time, thereby increasing anxiety. This vicious cycle continues until we ignore the brain’s commands. When we choose to sit with uncertainty and the anxiety it causes, neuroscientists can measure the changes in brain chemistry. My son is proof enough for me. We went from being uncertain he would survive childhood to watching in amazement as he continues to resist his compulsions and sit with uncertainty. Will it last? We don’t know, but we know we’ll get through it.

So is uncertainty a refuge of hope? For us, it is the difficult and only alternative.

*Sandy is humbled by the brain’s capacity for learning and adapting, and hopes that she can help others struggling with uncertainty.*

**NEIGHBORHOOD MEETUPS**

**Monthly Queer Family Hike**

Join queer families for a walk/hike, which includes casually mingling/chatting, discussions on agreed-upon topics, and just sharing unique experiences and issues we have encountered as queer families. All queer families are welcome!

- Date:** First Saturday or Sunday of each month
- Time:** Typically 10 a.m. to noon
- Place:** TBD
- Cost:** Free for members
- Contact:** Email Dy Nguyen for details ([dy.nguyen@gmail.com](mailto:dy.nguyen@gmail.com))

**Moms Supper Club**

Explore new restaurants in the city, enjoy dinner and drinks, and meet new moms in your community! Details for each venue will be announced through [ggmg.org](http://ggmg.org).

- Date:** Quarterly on Thursdays
- Time:** 7 p.m. to 9 p.m.
- Place:** TBD
- Cost:** \$10 for members, \$20 for non-members
- Contact:** Email Lydia Weiss for details ([Weiss.lydiab@gmail.com](mailto:Weiss.lydiab@gmail.com))

**Glen Park Coffee + Stroller Walk for Mommies (and Babies)**

Would you like to meet neighborhood moms, grab a coffee and enjoy a stroller walk together? We’re organizing this Coffee + Stroller walk for you! We’ll meet at a coffee shop before we go for an hour of fresh air, light exercise, and great conversation!

- Date:** The first Wednesday of every month
- Time:** 9 a.m. to 11 a.m.
- Place:** Bosworth and Diamond Street side lot by Pono Skincare in Glen Park. We can figure out which coffee shop to stroll to.
- Cost:** Free for members

**South of Glen Park and Bernal Monthly Moms Night Out**

Each month we will visit a different venue in our neighborhood, moms only! After kiddo bedtime, enjoy a drink and some appetizers with other mothers.

- Date:** The second Thursday of every month
- Time:** 8 p.m. to 10 p.m.
- Place:** TBD (different place each month)
- Cost:** Free for members

**Little Oceanauts \$7 Playdate**

Looking for an afternoon playdate for your kiddos? Little Oceanauts in Ingleside is open and is the perfect place for children to run off their energy before dinner time! Meet fellow GGMG moms and enjoy a fun afternoon together.

- Date:** The third Friday of every month
- Time:** 3 p.m. to 5 p.m.
- Place:** 1917 Ocean Ave.
- Cost:** GGMG members pay a special rate of \$7 per child. Infants 6 months and under are free. Parents/caretakers are free. Limited spots available. Must prepay at [ggmg.org](http://ggmg.org).



**Monthly Moms Happy Hour**

Join us for drinks and appetizers at a local restaurant to meet and connect with other moms in San Francisco. There will be a different venue in neighborhoods all around the city each month. Info will be announced two weeks before the event.

- Date:** The third Thursday of every month
- Time:** 5:30 p.m. to 7 p.m.
- Place:** TBD
- Cost:** \$5 for members, \$10 for non-members
- Contact:** Text or email Jessie Lee for details ([Leejessief@gmail.com](mailto:Leejessief@gmail.com)) or 415.518.6402

**Marina/Pac Heights/North Beach Monthly Moms Happy Hour**

Drop in anytime for drinks and appetizers with other moms!

- Date:** First Thursday of every month
- Time:** 5 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.
- Place:** Wildseed, 2000 Union St.
- Cost:** \$5 for members, \$10 for non-members

Register for events at [ggmg.org/calendar](http://ggmg.org/calendar) unless otherwise noted.



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DIVERSITY, EQUITY, & INCLUSION

The DEI Committee Needs Volunteers!

The mission of GGMG’s Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI) Committee is to build a safe and supportive atmosphere for all GGMG members through education and community outreach. We organize events and share resources that enhance equity and inclusion within the organization. **We are currently seeking a new Co-chair as well as Committee Members.**

Examples of Co-chair and Committee Member duties include:

- Write and/or edit articles for GGMG magazine 6 times per year (every 2 months).
- Plan and execute webinars, including speaker outreach, that enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion within the organization. Past examples of themes have included: talking to your kids about race, land acknowledgement, and a spotlight on diverse kids entertainment.
- Coordinate and execute drives for non-profit organizations that bring awareness to diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Represent the DEI Committee at GGMG events, such as Spring Fling and Fall Fest.
- Additionally, for the Co-chair role only:
  - Serve as a liaison with the GGMG Board and Committees
  - Coordinate allocation of tasks among DEI Committee members
  - Recruit and onboard new DEI volunteers

Please contact us at [diversity@gmg.org](mailto:diversity@gmg.org) if you are interested in volunteering.

MAGAZINE

Are you seeking a rewarding volunteer opportunity that helps you connect with other moms?

Come join the Golden Gate Mothers Group Magazine staff!

We currently have open positions for copy editors, designers, photographers, and writers. No formal experience is required.

All staff members are invited to join the monthly magazine planning meeting, where we flesh out and problem-solve the current issue and brainstorm for the upcoming issue. Brainstorming includes collaborating on the upcoming issue’s theme, cover art, and articles.

**Copy Editor:** Edits and proofreads articles and helps finalize content. Reviews design proofs.

**Designer:** Designs articles and helps lay out the magazine. Must know Adobe InDesign and have a Creative Cloud subscription.

**Photographer:** Holds photo shoots for magazine cover and feature articles as needed. Photographers need to provide their own high-quality DSLR camera.

**Writers:** Compose feature-length articles and/or shorter columns.

Have questions? Contact us at [editor@gmg.org](mailto:editor@gmg.org).

PARTNERSHIPS

The Friends branch of the Partnerships Committee collaborates with local organizations and businesses to provide substantial discounts and resources for our members. We aim to develop mutually beneficial relationships with businesses in the Bay Area that provide useful services to mothers. Our goal is to work preferentially with small local businesses run by women and/or people of color in an effort to promote their professional advancements in our society.

The Partners branch of the Partnerships Committee manages our relationships with our large Partners including the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco (JCCSF) and UrbanSitter.

Committee duties in Friends:

- Input new offers by local businesses (Friends) looking to provide substantial (20 percent or more) discounts to GGMG members
- Maintain our relationships with our current Friends
- Seek out potential new Friends who provide services useful to our members
- Negotiate new business discounts
- Update members on new discounts

Committee duties in Partners:

- Maintain relationships with current Partners and seek out new Partners
- Negotiate new business discounts to expand the discount offerings for GGMG members
- Outreach for new Partners of interest with preference to small local businesses run by women and/or people of color

Open Roles:

- Committee Co-chair in Friends (1 hour per week)
- Committee Co-chair in Partnerships (1 to 2 hours per week)

To volunteer, email [partnerships@gmg.org](mailto:partnerships@gmg.org).

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## The Long Goodbye

By Vi Huynh-Dvorak

On January 11, 2024, my 105-year-old grandmother, lucid until her last days, passed in her sleep. She moved into a hospice care facility about 6 months ago when she started to fall. Up until then, she was taking MUNI, gambling away her monthly rent in Mahjong halls, and generally acting ungovernable. She caught and beat COVID at 103 years old. She chewed raw ginger every day. She may as well have been bulletproof.

At first, I was flippant. "Well, if she can't take care of herself, it's the best thing for her." I had zero desire to see her, citing the fact that she's not really my grandmother, but a step-grandmother.

This gross over-simplification was my shield. My anger kept the sadness at bay. When I finally went to see her, after a month, she was unrecognizable, frail and diminutive. When she recognized me and her face lit up, my shield shattered. Confused, she immediately packed her things, thinking I was there to take her home. Guilt consumed my ability to parse out any nuance in my emotions.

**"Sometimes, [Grandma] would tell me about something she regretted, going way back into my dad's childhood. She would apologize over and over. It was as if she were running her movie from the beginning and reconciling all the jagged parts."**

I saw her every day. My new eyes on the facility didn't show me a place of genuine warmth and care, but rather a depressing shithole designed to suck any and all dignity out of end-of-life care. My body screamed in response to my discomfort. I was on edge, and because I set a difficult schedule of seeing her every day, the seemingly endless driving and laundry (I took her laundry home with me)—on top of caring for my kids—drained me. If I didn't see her, I would feel a shadow nagging at me. It would not go away until I saw her again.

I told my therapist all about my grandmother. He suggested I withdraw the self-directed anger and invalidation. Such a small suggestion and yet, profound. It's as if hearing that allowed me to give myself permission to remember—and remember I did.



The details are mine, but I will say that I and countless generations before me share a culture steeped in patriarchy, misogyny, and silencing. This emotional provenance was fodder for my grandmother's mistreatment of me and probably those around her. She told me inappropriate things about my grandfather and our family. Even all these years later, I invalidated myself but I put my children in my shoes as I thought about how I would feel if what happened to me, happened to them and then I understood. This was the

shadow. It demanded recognition.

My visits and care moved from a compensatory place to something more authentic. She would cry when she saw her great-grandkids. Sometimes, she would tell me about something she regretted, going way back into my dad's childhood. She would apologize over and over, crying. It was as if she were running her movie from the beginning and reconciling all the jagged parts.

She didn't see beauty as I would define it: nature, museums, sunrise. Living through two wars and fleeing two countries must change how one sees beauty. What she saw was the beauty in my sister's and my dedication to her. If we weren't seeing her together, we'd tag-team. Those small, beautiful moments when we would just sit with her through her tears. She'd take both our hands in hers and kiss them; she would hug her great-grandchildren deeply.

I'm glad she's gone. Her quality of life diminished every day. I wish that we had more time, which seems silly to say about a centenarian. When I feel myself fall into regret, I remember her final journey that brought us back together. In the end, life did not punish her for her misdeeds, perceived and real. Life showed her two adoring and dedicated granddaughters. Life gave her six great-grandchildren who were not only unafraid of a frail old woman with few teeth, but would in turn, approach, hug, kiss, and adore her. It gave me a chance to invite all the emotions, icky and loving, allowing them to move through me and leave something honest and genuine in their place. Her last endurance was the universe giving her and us a gift.

*Vi lives in SF with her family, dog, and guinea pig. In her spare time, she sources banned books for her children, and collects rare houseplants. She is antisocial and strives to be ungovernable.*





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