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do I matter? importance

The deepest principle in the human nature is the craving to be appreciated.

— William James, author

Erica handed the food stamps to the grocery store clerk. She tried to appear natural, as if it didn't bother her that the government, not she, supported her child. Two-month-old Kayla lay fastened in the shopping-cart baby seat. The clerk had smiled at the baby but didn't ask Erica any of the friendly questions new mothers typically get. Instead, Erica spotted something else in the woman's gaze. Disapproval, with a hint of accusation.

Erica tucked her change into her jacket pocket and loaded her few bags of groceries into the cart. Before reaching the exit Erica noticed an elderly woman approaching. The woman's eyes fastened intently on Kayla. *At least someone's interested in giving my baby some well-deserved attention*, Erica thought.

Kayla's pacifier wiggled up and down with each suck. Erica started to smile as the woman's frail hand reached toward Kayla's face. But instead of stroking the baby's cheek, the woman plucked the pacifier from her mouth.

"That thing's nasty." She dropped it into Erica's trembling hand. "Don't you know not to use those things?" The woman stalked

away before Erica could respond. Heat crept up Erica's neck to her face. Ignoring the customers who had witnessed the scene, she hurried to her small, blue hatchback.

Erica struggled to hold back the tears. Did they think she was a bad mother? That she was a failure because of her age?

Erica fastened Kayla in her car seat with a peck on her forehead. She then plopped the groceries into the trunk and slid into the driver's seat.

It was always the same. The looks. The comments. The lack of respect. Even a few weeks ago at the doctor's office, her valid concerns for her daughter had been ignored.

"It's just colic," the doctor had claimed, rushing off to visit the next low-income patient. It was only Erica's persistence, days later, which brought more tests and a better diagnosis. Having a baby at her age was difficult enough, but the reactions of those around her made being a mother all that much harder.

What if they're right? she wondered. *What if I can't do this? What if they know something I don't?*

Erica thought back to just one year ago. She'd worked hard at school and her report card reflected those efforts. She'd trained her body to perform on the soccer field. The stellar plays and winning season were her rewards.

What about this motherhood thing? She tried to do it right. Erica gave her baby plenty of time, attention, and love. She even practiced the baby massage techniques she'd learned in her Teen MOPS group. But was her hard work paying off? How could she know when there was no report card or scoreboard to judge her efforts?

Erica's hands gripped the steering wheel as she thought back to the question she'd heard many times. "Just how old are you?" She always told the truth, and she always received the same look of disapproval. Perhaps these people at the grocery store, at the doctor's office, knew something she didn't.

Erica glanced back at Kayla, now asleep in her car seat. Could she do it? This mom thing? Or was she just a kid playing dress up, fooling no one except herself?

Life as I See It

I do feel inadequate. I cry sometimes and have even had a few anxiety attacks, but therapy is a luxury for us working poor.

— Travis, Michigan

Some people have given me dirty looks when they see me with my baby. Others look at me and sigh. But some people are very nice when they see what a good mom I am.

— Diana, Washington

Life Interrupted

I'm finding it very overrated, all of this growing up, taking responsibility, becoming an adult.

— Brandon, 90210

These were supposed to be years of parties, football games, and fun. Dances with handsome dates and sleepovers with friends. You've gone from chatting with friends in the hall to changing dirty diapers. Not long ago, the only runny nose you wiped was your own. Colic wasn't an issue. Your clothes were spit-up free. Now you wonder where your importance is.

When your baby came into the picture you not only lost your old life, but you gained a new one—literally. Many of us know, without a doubt, that having our babies was the right choice. We want to be good moms. We want to give our babies the love that we, perhaps, never had. But if we're honest, we can't help but think how our lives have changed. Sometimes we wonder if it's worth it.

Life as I See It

When I found out I was pregnant, I was incredibly scared and didn't know how to tell my parents. They'd always said they'd kill me if I ever ended up pregnant.

— Desiree, Texas

Before my pregnancy, I was in four clubs and had a meeting almost every night. Most of my friends have completely left the picture. I figured they would, but I feel very alone. Having a baby has really helped me to see who my real friends are.

— Amanda, Ontario, Canada

Tell Me I'm Important

Young moms want to be good moms. We try our best, we really do. Yet there are negative reactions we can't seem to escape. We've decided to carry and keep our babies (not an easy decision!). But often the people we encounter make it clear, both in words and with body language, that they disapprove. Sometimes we feel like we have no importance.

But I'm here to tell you that what you do is *important*. Can you think of anyone who loves your child more than you do? I doubt that you can! You're the exact person your child needs to love him, support him, and be his biggest fan.

Did Ya Know?

Importance means having meaning. There are many things that people feel are important for young people: school, good grades, sports, and clubs.

What things were important to you one or two years ago? What things are important now?

Parenting comes with big obstacles. Yet as you'll see in a story often told, sometimes human beings can do the impossible when it comes to their child.

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Moving Mountains

“There were two warring tribes in the Andes, one that lived in the lowlands and the other high in the mountains. The mountain people invaded the lowlanders one day, and as part of their plundering of the people, they kidnapped a baby from one of the lowlander families and took the infant back with them up into the mountains.

“The lowlanders didn't know how to climb a mountain. They didn't know any of the trails the mountain people used, and they didn't know where to find the mountain people or how to track them on the steep terrain.

“Even so, they sent out their best party of fighting men to climb the mountain and bring the baby home.

“The men tried first one method of climbing and then another. They tried one trail and then another. After several days of effort, however, they had climbed only a couple of hundred feet.

“Feeling hopeless and helpless, the lowlander men decided that the case was lost, and they prepared to return to their village below.

“As they were packing their gear for the descent, they saw the baby's mother walking toward them. They realized that she was coming down the mountain that they hadn't figured out how to climb.

“And then they saw that she had the baby strapped to her back. How could that be?

“One man greeted her and said, ‘We couldn't climb this mountain. How did you do this when we, the strongest and most able men in the village, couldn't do it?’

“She shrugged her shoulders and said, ‘It wasn't your baby.’”¹

You're a mom now, and the obstacles you face may seem as big and insurmountable as that mountain. But there's one thing that's even more powerful than your challenges. That's your love. Love is the most important ingredient when it comes to parenting. Love, as you will discover, can help you to achieve the impossible.

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Help! My Life Is Slipping Away

If you bungle raising your children, I don't think whatever else you do well matters very much.

— Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis²

Just because a mom's willing to do *anything* for her child, doesn't mean it's easy. Motherhood can be illustrated by an image of a woman wearing a tower of hats. There is the nurse's hat, the teacher's hat, the maid's hat, the cook's hat, the playmate's hat—the list goes on. As a young mom, your problem may be the many hats you haven't discarded: the student hat, employee hat, girlfriend hat, even the daughter-at-home hat. How can you—one person—balance so much responsibility?

Life as I See It

I get so tired of people asking, "How old are you?" We even had to change pediatricians once because the doctor wouldn't speak to me as an adult. I wanted to yell, "Hey, I am her mother. I'm responsible for her welfare!" I used to cry at night, not because I didn't want this, but because I had no idea how much my life would change.

— Marjie, Montana

When I went into the hospital for my non-stress test the nurse told me that she wanted my baby, and that she would prepare the adoption papers if it was a boy.

— Amanda, Ontario, Canada

Some people haven't treated me any different since I've become a mom. Others talk to me as though I'm stupid, like we're all alcoholic-induced, unplanned mothers, sitting on our butts, contemplating how we can scam the welfare system for more money as we blast our stereo and fill our screaming children with second hand smoke, Kool-Aid, and Doritos.

— Travis, Michigan

Of course, your balancing act will change over time. The hat of high school student may change to that of college student. The playground-mom hat may change to soccer mom. Still, the flow of your responsibilities will never end. From the moment you discover you're pregnant, you're Mom, hats and all, for life.

The reality of being a mom may not hit until you come home from the hospital. The feedings, the schedule, the up-all-nights. Then, as one stage passes, there are more challenges: teething, climbing, the terrible twos, and on.

The worst part is doing it alone. Some young moms have a husband or boyfriend. Perhaps your family helps. Friends may come around now and then. But there are always days when it feels like it's *you and this kid against the world*.

Life as I See It

How do you keep your endurance for mothering alive? How do you stay in mom-mode and stay out of the life your peers are living? How do you stay who you are inside even as parenting takes over your life? Don't get me wrong, I love being a mom. Goodness knows I should have the answers to these questions by now, as my boy is almost two. But lately, I have those feelings where it seems I'm 'left out' again. Like the rest of the world is passing me by while I change a diaper.

— Leanne

Stereotyped by Society

All the girls drink but I'm the one that gets caught. That's the story of my life. I always get the fuzzy end of the lollipop.

— Marilyn Monroe, *Some Like It Hot*

So, as we've discussed, it's hard being a good mom and worse when people judge you because of your age. As if they think you sleep around with just anyone. They assume you're doomed to fail.

We all, at times, worry what others think. I remember the first time I stood in a welfare line. I needed help with medical costs, food, living expenses—you name it. But before going, I made sure I looked my best. I didn't want to be stereotyped as someone uneducated and unmotivated. I wanted others to respect me, despite the situation I was in.

Hear Me Out

Ponderings from a Young Mom

Is there a magical age that makes mothering okay? Can I hold my head high at twenty? Twenty-five? Thirty? What makes a good mom? A nice paycheck? A house in the suburbs? Will people respect me if I enrolled my child in a private preschool? Or dressed him in designer clothes?

Or is it enough just to love him? To read stories at bedtime? To kiss baby toes and tickle baby bellies? It may not be enough for society. But it will be enough for me. For my child.

When I faced the reality of being a young mother, I could have given up. I could have accepted that many young moms never graduate from high school and live at poverty level for the rest of their lives. But inside, I knew I wasn't someone the world could write off.

I simply had found myself in a situation way over my head. I wanted the world to know I was a smart young woman who would love this child completely.

Because of this, I decided to believe in myself and take distasteful looks in stride. I strove to be an anti-stereotype and show the world what a young mom could accomplish.

I realized my importance came from within me. I couldn't please everyone all the time. I couldn't change my situation overnight, but I could take steps to improve. I could work at becoming a great mom. And it worked!

As I believed in myself, and trusted in my importance as a mother, my confidence grew. Like a small snowball kicked over the side of a steep hill, I picked up speed, and grew as a person. Soon I became unstoppable!

Home Life: The Bad, the Good

Have you noticed that the only people who truly welcome change are wet babies?

—Anonymous

The Bad

It's hard enough that "the world" looks down on you. But what if you face negative attitudes at home? Many young moms who still live with their parents may feel like the cream in the middle of an Oreo cookie. They're sandwiched between their parents and their child. (Only this situation is not sweet.) These young moms are parents, *and* they still live by their parents' rules. These moms get advice from all directions and may feel like they're "mothering by committee."

I hear it all the time from the young moms I know. *Their* mothers want to make all the rules—to tell them how to dress their kids and

what to feed their child. Sometimes these young moms feel they've been left out of the decision making.

If this is your case, be sure to try to see your parents' point of view, but also get them to understand yours. It's key that you realize *your importance* as a mother. Once *you* accept your importance, and take responsibility in your new role, hopefully your parents will realize it too.

The Good

For others, becoming a young parent can strengthen family bonds. This was true in my case. Right away my "friends" ditched me. But my family stayed and cared. They stuck by me and believed in me.

My parents and grandparents helped me to realize my importance . . . even on days when I wanted to sleep in and hide from the world! They helped by letting me make my own decisions when it came to parenting. And I soon learned my decisions mattered.

Life as I See It

My mother constantly says, "I love you and the baby, but I wish you had waited until you were done with school." My friends have said "You're amazing! I can't imagine doing this!" They also say, "I wouldn't want to have a baby right now." Some comments are positive, and others not.

— Amanda, Ontario, Canada

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Your God-Given Role

We can be the mothers our children need because God divinely chose us for the job. Don't doubt it. He knows what he is doing.

— Elisa Morgan, president of MOPS International³

Faced with work and school responsibilities, most young moms don't have the luxury of staying home with their children. But even if your child is in the daily care of someone else for one hour or ten hours, you're still the mom.

Although you can never list "good mother" on a job resume, this role should not be diminished. Mothering isn't rewarded with a big paycheck or your name on the dean's list, but you're the only mother your child will have. Or as author Kate Douglas Wiggin put it, "Most of all the other beautiful things in life come by twos and threes, by dozens and hundreds. Plenty of roses, stars, sunsets, rainbows, brothers and sisters, aunts and cousins, but only one mother in the whole world."

God chose you to be that "one mother in the whole world" for your child. And if that doesn't show your importance, I don't know what does!

One cool thing about being "chosen" is that you were picked to be this child's mom for a reason. And while others can only see your exterior, God has a unique ability to see the heart. He can also see your potential to be a great mom!

Positive Parenting

Another reason why your role is important is because the better mother you become, the better person your child will be for life.

As you may know, the first three years of a child's life are critical for the learning process. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, "The ways in which parents interact with their children will set the stage for an infant's growth and development for life."⁴

This is the time when you, as a mom, play a huge part in deciding who your child will be in the future. Here are just a few key areas.

- The food you provide helps your child's body to grow strong.
- Your hugs, kisses, and kind words build your child's sense of worth.

- Your love shows him the importance of loving others.
- Interactive play shapes his physical and mental abilities.

What you provide during these early years is the foundation a life is built upon. Just as a skyscraper needs concrete and steel for stability, your child needs solid love and steadfast commitment.

To be a good mother you don't need a nice car, a huge house, or a successful career. You don't need access to expensive toys. What's needed most is *you*.

"Mothering isn't about tasks," says Cheri Fuller, author of *Being the Mom You're Meant to Be*. "It's about building a relationship that lasts a lifetime."

Did you catch that? What you do today will last a lifetime!

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Changes in Your Life

We could go on all day about the importance of mothering in the life of a child, but have you considered how mothering has affected you?

Life as I See It

Having a baby pretty much grounded me. Before I had a baby I guess you could say I was a wild teen. I was rude, inconsiderate, not caring about anything. But when I had a baby, I realized I was going to have to grow up really fast. I needed to set an example.

— Diana, Washington

Becoming a mother has helped some young moms stop to consider what they want from life. It's helped them get on track.

Before I got pregnant, I didn't think much about my future. When I was in elementary school, I used to dream about life as an adult, but when high school rolled around "future thinking" took a back

seat to “having fun today.” What mattered most was who was playing in the football game Friday night, where the party was Saturday night, and what could I do so my hangover wouldn’t give me away on Sunday morning.

Once I became pregnant, though, I realized that my plans for a good future were not only vital for me, they were also important for my child. My thought process changed. I now wondered, What should I do about schooling? What classes can I take at the community college to help me in a future career? What job would I enjoy that will still allow me to spend quality time with my son?

Right now, your major decisions may center on your schooling options. Or they may concern where you should work or live. No matter what choices you’re facing, mothering provides an opportunity to become a better person. A better person for yourself. For your future. For your child.

Your Turn

4U2 Try 1

Have you ever felt scared and alone? Read the following poem and circle any of the feelings you’ve experienced. When you’re finished, consider who or what has helped you overcome these feelings. Then consider how you can help other moms who might feel the same.

Yes, I Am Young

People staring
 staring at me
 I want to scream
 scream, yes, i am young
 yes, i can do it alone
 i hate having to try so hard
 so hard to fit in
 why do you look at me that way

like i need your pity
i am strong
i am her mom
i am me
you can't take that away
you can't make me change
i don't need your acceptance
i don't need you to like me
but then why do i feel so alone?
why do i feel like i was left to die?
why don't you like me?
is it because i look young?
is it because you are afraid i will do a better job than you?
i don't want to feel alone anymore.

— one young mom⁵

4U2 Try 2

Moving Beyond Stereotypes

An attitude adjustment begins with you. Take a minute and quickly list some negative things you've heard, read, or thought about young parents. Across from each negative statement, write two positive statements to reflect your experience. Here's an example.

Stereotype	Reality
Young moms are too immature to raise a child.	Young parents have energy and know how to have fun!

4U2 Try 3

Messages for Baby

Check out the messages your baby needs most:

"I belong." Those hours in your arms give your baby the message, "I am loved. Somebody's there for me."

"I'm special." It is never too early to begin affirming your baby and letting him know how valuable he is in God's eyes and in your heart.

"I trust." Because in his distress you comfort him, your baby learns . . . that you will respond and are worthy of his trust.

"I can." Applaud your baby's milestones. Show your joy as he stretches his little body and his mind.⁶

Your Turn. Here's your assignment. Look at yourself in the mirror and tell yourself the same things you just told your baby. Finish these sentences:

"I belong because . . ."

"I'm special because . . ."

"I trust when . . ."

"I can . . ."

Live and Learn

My love today will mold my child's tomorrows!